

# Ridin' Out the Storm

## A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 5

Douglas Neman

### Weather Report: 3500-05

Rex opened a channel and said, “Hey, there. We’re from the empire Benevolence, Ltd. Don’t laugh, we didn’t pick the name. Who are you, and do you wanna hang?”

There was no reply for a few moments. When it came, it was in the form of a stilted computer voice, like one of those first-generation phones that tried to read text messages to you. “We are from the great and glorious Heart of Fire. Surrender now and your deaths will be painless.”

Rex and I gave each other a quizzical look. Rex triggered the comm link and said, “We have beer and cards.”

The computerized voice said, “Okay.”

As the ship approached, we saw that it had no armaments, and it was about the same size as our ship.

“What if these guys have guns and really do kill us?” Rex asked.

I shrugged. “Then CC can demote us for dying on the job.”

What amazed me was how much I actually meant that. I suddenly realized that I just didn’t give a damn. Partying with strangers is just who I am. I’ll live life on my terms or not at all.

The other ship docked, and Rex opened the hatch. The look of astonishment on his face at what he saw inside the airlock made me think, for a moment, that we really were about to die.

Rex picked his jaw up from the ground and stammered, “Uh...um...hi! Come on in. I’m Rex. That’s Jake.”

And in walked two of the most gorgeous women I’ve ever seen.

“Hi,” I squeaked.

“I’m Janice,” one of them said.

“I’m Veronica,” said the other.

Rex and I looked around our ship, suddenly realizing what a pig sty it was. Empty beer bottles in one corner, unwashed laundry in the other, crumbs all over the console. Shame washed over both of us.

Graciously, our guests didn’t say anything about it.

Janice said, “So, anyway, sorry about the surrender demand. That was an automated message. We forgot about that.”

“Uh, hey, no problem,” Rex said.

“And, uh...sorry about the mess in here,” I said.

They just laughed and waved me off. “Our ship doesn’t look any better!” Veronica said.

I laughed, too, trying not to get lost in her eyes. I must have looked like a doofus about ten ways from Sunday.

“You wanna beer?” Rex asked.

“Sure,” they both said.

So Rex told the dispenser to produce four beers, passed them around, and sat on the floor. Janice sat on the cushion Vance had

been using, and Veronica somehow ended up in the copilot's seat next to me.

"So what was that other ship you guys were with?" Janice asked.

We told them about Vance, and what we had learned from him about his homeworld.

"Ours isn't any better," Veronica said. "Every town has mandatory rallies and military parades at noon. Everyone adores our emperor. They have to. The ones who don't disappear in the middle of the night."

"That's awful," I said. "What happened to the galaxy? Why did it go mad all of a sudden?"

"I wish I knew," Janice said. "It's like this is all some kind of bizarre game to someone."

"Yeah," we all said in agreement. There was silence for a moment.

"Hey, you guys play blindsides?" Rex asked.

"Uh...not for money, we don't!" Janice said.

"That's okay, we don't have any money, anyway," I said. "We play for real estate."

So we spent another evening playing blindsides, and Veronica ended up winning the galaxy. Our guests were just as witty as Rex, and almost as witty as me.

And I've been to parties and played cards with strangers before, but this was different, somehow. Special. The four of us played and laughed for hours, there in our little corner of space. It was actually one of the best times I've had in a long, long time.

Their CC and our CC contacted our ships at almost the same time, with almost the same message: "Why haven't you reported in, you lazy, good-for-nothing pondscum privates?" I'm paraphrasing. I think. Janice rolled her eyes, and Veronica just looked peeved.

"Nice to know some things are consistent throughout the galaxy," I said.

"No, it really isn't," Veronica said, and I had to laugh at that.

So, just like with Vance, we all had to report the other empire's presence in the system back to our respective homeworlds. Neither ship could chart the system while the other was there.

Janice and Veronica got a reply first. They were ordered to stay in this system until we left, no matter how long it took. They were to chart the system as soon as we were gone.

*Oh, please, give us the same orders,* I thought desperately. That would be truly awesome if Rex and I were stuck here with Alice and Veronica, with our empires both too stubborn to budge. We could all wait out the entire freakin' war right here together!

But when our orders came through, it felt like getting punched in the gut and then stepped on by an elephant. We were to give up on this system and proceed to another.

Damn. Damn damn damn damn damn.

We reluctantly said good-bye to Janice and Veronica. I'd like to think they were reluctant to say to good-bye to us, too, but that may just be wishful thinking on my part. I'll choose to believe it.

The only silver lining – and it was a slim one – is that CC was getting skittish, so they told us to slip into the next system in stealth mode. Somehow, it doesn't make us feel any safer.

Neither Rex nor I said a word as we set the coordinates and hit the hyperdrive.