



From the Adama Journals:

It has now been two sections, since the events surrounding the escape of Chakra, and his attempt to kill several people in Life Station, in a terroristic action, over the reconstructive surgery performed upon Lieutenant Bojay. While no further evidence has come to light, that would stand up in any court, despite a surreptitious search of her billet, I remain convinced that Siress Lydia, who had arranged for Chakra's work-release from the Prison Barge, as part of her much-vaunted work-rehabilitation program, was behind the affair. Her repeated hints and insinuations, that Chakra's actions were somehow the result of a lack of leadership on my part, while not unexpected, were nonetheless more vociferous than I had anticipated. It was only the counterarguments, of Shires Shanbour and Clement, as well as Siress Tinia, in my defense, that saved the day. Lydia's hateful, almost murderous glare, and the odd, almost voyeuristic fashion in which she observed me throughout the hearings, tell me that she is indeed involved, and perhaps far more deeply, than I had at first suspected. Fortunately, at least for the present, the Council has found no grounds for any sort of censure of myself, though the prisoner release program has been cancelled, until further notice. Lydia herself received a mild rebuke, but no more. And with the benefit of much needed hindsight, I will admit that the one mistake I can claim for myself in this affair, is my failure to put Chakra with the bulk of violent criminals who elected to go with the Il Fadim on that planet we marooned them on. Perhaps if that had happened, Lydia wouldn't have had a target to utilize for her machinations.

If there is one advantage from this, I think may be that Lydia is more apt to go back to lying low for the time being, looking for any further incident to exploit. She only has to remember what happened to her ex-lover Sire Antipas, and how he ended up in the Prison Barge with a twenty yahren sentence for termination before he chose to be marooned with the Il Fadim since Antipas represented the danger of crossing the line too far. If anything, I expect Lydia to be more openly supportive of any actions I decide on in the near-term, because that will re-establish her credentials with the people of the Fleet as a whole that she is not motivated by any blind partisan opposition to my leadership. And when she does, I will, in the interests of politics and statesmanship, give her a fake smile and thank her for her support. Because I know that I can not appear to be needlessly antagonistic towards her in return. That's how the game works. Dirty as it is, but it's required of all who choose to become involved in politics. I may even find myself, in the interests of good diplomacy, admonishing Commander Byrne not to constantly bad-mouth Lydia to the rest of his fellow Earth natives. However

sincerely and justifiably such sentiments are, they don't make my job any easier.

As for Chakra himself, it is possible, indeed probable, that he will never stand tribunal for his crimes. While his guilt would easily be proven, his mental state is another matter. Whatever drugs, and or conditioning he was given, have left him with serious brain damage, his mind a near-total wreck. He babbles endlessly, and incoherently, about virtually anything and everything, from his childhood to Siress Lydia's hair color. Some of his ramblings about her sexual encounters with him, while graphic and detailed, can hardly be admitted into evidence, given his mental state. Therapist Tarnia, as well as Doctors Paye and Wilker, have thoroughly examined him, both neurologically as well as psychologically, and hold out little hope that the man will ever regain his sanity. He is currently being housed aboard the mental ship, along with the tragedy that is Sergeant Mattoon, who has remained in a catatonic state ever since he attempted something similar, but without any outside assistance other than his own personal demons.

As for Lieutenant Bojay, whose injuries, and now bodily reconstruction, with Cylon-manufactured limbs, set this whole episode in motion, he continues to make great strides in his recovery. Not only has his vision been restored to flight status standards, but the prosthetic left arm with which he was fitted has performed well, indeed surpassing the expectations of the medical staff. Since then, he has undergone additional surgeries, and his new legs are being fitted today. Once he is clear of LifeStation, it is the desire of both he, his fiancé Agro Tech Gayla, and several fellow Warriors, to proceed with his long-interrupted sealing ceremony. My grudging thanks to Baltar, and his wife, for the both the Cylon units, as well as the idea...

No, strike that. I cannot continue to speak of Baltar in such terms by sheer instinct when after nearly one yahren, the Détente continues to be a total success for us, and I must be willing to recognize, and respect, that Baltar, enigma that he is and always will be, has been kept in check thanks to the presence of Ayesha. I noticed recently that when Starbuck returned from his most recent inspection of the BaseShip as liaison officer, how his attitude toward the woman who might have been his stepmother was noticeably... ..different. As though perhaps he has come to an understanding in his heart as to why she was compelled to a path in life that she never intended or asked for. But... .which has to be acknowledged, has served a purpose for the greater good of us all. If that continues... ..then why must I begrudge the good that has come from Baltar?

If I struggle still with the enigma of Baltar, I can not say the same of our new and unlooked-for surgeon, the former BaseShip Commander and IL Series Cylon,

Septimus. His rebuilding and reactivation, accompanied by the assimilation of our medical data with Cylon technology, made possible the rebuilding of Bojay's savaged body, and with far greater facility than could have been achieved, even back home in the Colonies. This fusion, of Human and Cylon, has, I am told by Doctor Salik, opened new avenues of research, into several areas of reconstructive medicine. I hope that it proves to be so, as the détente with the renegade Cylons seems to have once more born fruit. Were he Human, Septimus would certainly warrant a commendation at the very least. But, as a Cylon, that is without precedent. However, he does deserve to be rewarded, in some fashion, having shown not only his considerable abilities, never thought of in a Cylon, but for his acceptance of the Colonial Nation. Well, we shall see.

As I shall, with Lydia. This cannot continue.

Adama set the microphone backing it's place, then after a moment, switched it back on.

Final items. Dr. Wilker, Technician Hummer and Sergeant Komma continue to study the matter of that computer virus program that caused such havoc with our systems recently. Despite their best efforts, the root cause of why that happened remains unknown. I will not be completely at peace in my mind until we have a firm answer on why that happened, because this is the kind of situation which we are always least prepared for. It is easier for the Galactica to be able to defend herself against the attack forces of enemy vessels than it is from some unknown internal danger, that may not even be the result of an enemy intelligence.

And finally... there is the matter I hesitate to talk of even to myself in this journal that concerns... dreams. Dreams of an identical nature that have been experienced by myself and Sheba. Of seeing...

Abruptly, Adama stopped. For the first time in his memory, he found himself unable to continue with a journal entry as he set his microphone down once more, and switched the recorder off. Even now, more than a section since it had happened, and despite the outward calm he had demonstrated to Apollo and Sheba at the dinner gathering that night, it was still hard for him inside to grasp what the dream... or was it a vision could possibly mean. Being on the Pegasus and suddenly seeing somehow inside a shuttle...

"Her name is Ila."

As a man of the deepest faith and trust in the Lords and how they could work

their power, he wanted to believe there was something to it. And yet... ...how could it be? It was simply too staggering for his mind to contemplate. Not when he had walked through the ruins of their house that night and instinctively seemed to know, and feel, in his heart that this was where she would have been. He hadn't needed to see a body. If he had been wrong... ...

Enough, he thought. He couldn't dwell on this endlessly. It could only make him look weak. The last thing he could let his friends... ...and especially his enemies like Lydia ever see.

## Chapter One

"And... there," said Septimus, former Base Commander and IL Series Cylon, as the prosthetic leg was snapped into place. Snap went the junction, and almost at once Bojay could "feel" the new limb. "How does it feel?"

"It feels... it feels real," said Bojay. He flexed the metal toes of his new right leg. "I mean it feels like the real deal, Septimus."

"It should," replied the IL. "According to the medical sensors, your nerves are receiving impulses virtually identical to those from an organic limb." The IL touched the limb with a small probe, and Bojay pulled back with an "ow!" "Your reflex arc is also responding according to your medically-defined Human norms."

"Sure felt real!"

"For all intents and purposes, it was. The nerve impulse made it's normal circuit, through your spinal column and back to the leg, and the new leg moved, as if it were organic."

"Well, I don't pretend to understand it," said the Viper pilot, "but it sure feels great to know I'm functional." He looked at his left arm, now sheathed in the artificial skin. It looked and moved much like his old one. Even the pattern of "blood vessels" under the skin, as well as the variation in skin tones and feelings of warmth, had been duplicated, making the restoration even more perfect.

"Are you ready to try your weight, now?" asked Cassiopeia, checking the instruments.

"Sure am," said Bojay, looking up as his fiancé, Gayla, entered the ward.

"Sorry I'm late," she breathed. "Bo?"

"Just in time, Gay," he said, and with no help but his own, he turned on the bed, and lowered his new feet to the floor. "Chilly. Funny, I never noticed that, before." He slid off the edge of the bed, and tested his new feet. All seemed well, so he leaned forward, till he was entirely supported by the Cylon limbs. They seemed to wobble a bit, but Septimus told him that this was merely the inner mechanisms coming on-line, and adjusting to what their sensors told them. Given some time, they would self-calibrate, and he would be able to walk without difficulty.

"It's... it's great, to see you back on your feet again, Bo," she said, sniffing back a tear. "I mean, really."

"Why are you secreting lacerable fluid from your eyes, may I ask?" asked Septimus, noticing her tears. "That, and I detect that your breathing has altered, since entering. How is this... "

"Hey, Bojay!" said a loud voice, and they turned to see Starbuck make a grand entrance. "Good to see you back to normal." He looked down at Bojay's new, as yet exposed legs. "Lords, you really need to get some sun on those, Bojay!"

"Starbuck!" sighed Cassie, loudly. "Just once. Just once!"

"We're getting things all set up, Bo," said Starbuck, tossing her a sly grin. "Boomer and Giles are out, getting a few last-centon things. We'll be ready. Just as soon as you are."

"Great, Starbuck." Bojay looked at his doctors. "What about it, Docs? Will I be ready?"

"I would say yes," replied Septimus, running another diagnostic on the prosthetics. "Everything is well within nominal readings, Lieutenant. You will need periodic checks, as well as physical therapy, for as long as your physician deems it needful. But, you are in all essentials, well again."

"When do I get my new skin?" Bojay asked.

"It should be ready, tomorrow, Lieutenant," said Salik. "As soon as you are cleared one-hundred percent, we can begin the application."

"Great, Doc." He looked at Gayla. "Can't get sealed without my skin, now can I?"

"No, hardly," finished Gayla, planting a kiss on his nose. The Humans all laughed.

Septimus just shook his head.

Humans!

Aboard the Yarborough, 02:43 centars during the ship's night cycle.

Technician Zel had just logged off his shift, and was looking forward to getting back to his billet. It had been a long day, performing maintenance, checking maintenance logs, and generally keeping this old bucket running at something resembling the way she had when she had first come out of the shipyard. He was tired.

Zel moved along the maintenance corridor that ran under the main deck of the Yarborough, heading back towards the turboshaft, leading back up the living quarters. It would be good to get a last bite, and crawl into his bunk. After all, tomorrow was another day, and there were checks aplenty to be performed, both here, and on the Tip Barge. And Lords of Kobol help whomever the Commander's wrath fell on if they were late! He had reached the lift doors, when he heard something. A cry, and a loud thud, off to his left, down the other companionway. He headed that way, brows furrowed.

"Hello?" he called, shining his light down the corridor. "Anyone there?" He took out his scanner, and pointed it ahead. No life forms registering. At least... "Ahh!" cried a voice, and he rounded a corner, to see someone, a woman, rising from the deck. He looked at his scanner. "Are you alright?" he asked. She was trim and attractive, and dressed in civilian clothes. Brunette, tall, and with oddly piercing eyes. "Oh yes," she said, though her accent was unfamiliar to him. "I am... alright." "You're not hurt?" he asked, moving closer. You're sure? You had a fall." "I shall be fine, soon," she said, and looked hard at him. Almost without thinking, Zel felt a deep attraction to this woman. Not that this was anything unusual. He was sometimes, though never to his face, referred to as "ship's stud". The sort of man who never found female companionship hard to get. He at once felt an almost magnetic pull from this woman. "How in... " he tried to say, but the woman, smiling a smile that could have won her prizes, moved closer, and put her arms around him, pressing her lips to his. He at once felt as if he were enveloped in chains of sweet desire. Chains he could not, and after a few microns, did not want to escape. Some last niggling thought about the scanner readings still made itself felt, but soon, he forgot all that. Forgot about work, forgot about getting back to

his billet, forgot about everything. It was a tough job, Zel's, but he did it well, and he took pride in it. Zel was a good tech, a good worker, and a loyal friend, to those who knew him well. At least that is what several friends and acquaintances would say about him at his funeral. "Wait a centon! You're..." A truly blood-chilling scream ripped through the quiet of the ship. A shriek, followed by a horrified scream. "Noooooooooooo!!!" The crawlway was silent, once more.

"What do we have?" asked Adama, standing over the corpse, aboard the Yarborough. Or rather, corpses. "This is Zel," said Paulson, from Security. He consulted his data pad. "According to his file, he was the Second Junior Technician, here aboard the Yarborough. He logged off his shift last night, at 02:40 centars, and that was the last anyone heard from him, Commander." "He didn't log in for shift, this morning," said Wallach, the ship's Captain. "There was a meeting scheduled, for all ship's maintenance and engineering staff. When he didn't show up, I sent one of the other techs to find him." "He wasn't in his quarters, sir," said Musa, the ship's Chief Engineer. "I checked, and he had never logged back into the crew section, so I put out a call. We found him down here." "Who found the body?" asked Adama. "I did, sir," replied Musa. "This was after all the last place we knew he'd been." "Doctor?" the Commander asked Cassiopeia. "It's strange, Commander. According to his medical history, Zel was in top physical shape. No indications of disability or disease, no injuries or trauma. No drugs in his system from what I can tell, here." "But?" "But..." she sighed. "His heart stopped. Just stopped cold. I won't know why, until we get him back for autopsy." "And her?" Adama asked, looking down at the second body. "That's where this gets very weird, sir. We have a female, approximate age about thirty yahrens. Seemingly healthy when she died, as well. Time of death, though..." "What about it?" "From the body temperature and degree of rigor, I'd say she died about twenty centars ago. That's just an estimate, until we get her back to LifeStation." She saw his next question coming. "But Zel... he's only been dead less than ten, sir." She saw the question cross his face. "Yes. And, to make it even stranger, Commander, she died of a fractured skull." She lifted the woman's head gently, and indicated the spot. "A sharp blow, I'd say. Depressed fracture, bone chip right into the brain. She would have died within a centon or less." "Any identification on her?" Adama asked Paulson. "Not yet, Commander. She had nothing on her, except her dress. No ID ducat or purse. No personalized jewelry. Nothing. Once we get her biometrics, we'll run them through Security." "And no sign of sexual contact, either," said Cassie. "Nothing." "Very well, get them back to the Galactica, and keep me informed. I'll be in session with the Council, much of the morning." "Yes, Commander." "And try and keep this quiet. No talking about it." "Yes, sir."

"How is it going?" asked Academician Herodotus, former head of the Libran

State Antiquities Museon, in the small study room aboard the Akrabi. Built on, and operated out of, Libra, the ship had served in numerous capacities over the course of her hundred or so yahren lifetime, until her refurbishment as a mid-priced passenger ship a few sectars before the Holocaust. Now, she housed the bulk of the Libran survivors, as well as what remained of the treasures, salvaged from the Museon, as well as other, mostly private, collections, in the mad rush to escape the Destruction of the Colonies. "Slow, Professor," replied Hesiod, his old student, "research assistant", and friend. Since the recovery of every possible item of Libran heritage, both men had been plodding along, re-cataloguing, restoring, and translating what remained of Libran material culture, from the earliest days of Settlement, after the Exodus from Kobol, until the unification of the planet, under the Khonshu Hegemony, at the beginning of the Fourth Millenium. It was slow, tedious work, but both men loved it, being deep into their element. Herodotus moved to the java dispenser, and got a cup. Yes, Hesiod would have one as well, thank you. He took it, never looking up from his work. "The Naqena Scroll?" asked the middle-aged academic, leaning over to get a better look at his one-time graduate student's work. "Yes, sir. What remains of it." "Yes, it was in pretty sad shape," replied Herodotus. "It's a miracle it was even found." "Or survived, after all the things that Jabez stole, and managed to lose forever." "An incalculable loss, yes. It grieves me just to think about it" Herodotus shook his head sadly. The Naqena Scroll had been part of a vast collection of artifacts stolen several years before the Destruction in a theft masterminded by the now-disgraced Sire Antipas. The underlings who had carried out the theft had kept their portions safely hidden for yahrens until slowly, the conspiracy had unraveled. In this case, the Scroll had been part of the stash taken by an underling named Jabez. As the conspiracy had collapsed, Sire Antipas had used his bodyguard to sabotage Jabez's quarters and destroy all traces of what his underling had kept hidden. In the end, very little was left from the "Jabez stash" as Herodotus referred to it to keep things properly inventoried. "So, how goes the translation?" "Well, even with the multi-spectral imaging, a few of the symbols are questionable, sir. And the dialect is quite unusual. I'm having trouble making full sense of some of these ideograms." "All Pre-Neferite?" "Yes. But at least whoever wrote it wasn't sloppy. It's almost copy-book perfect, what I can get of it. Every symbol. That helps, some." "Hhmm... let's see what you have, Hesiod." Herodotus peered closer, adjusting his antique pince-nez glasses. "Shall... well, that's an auspicious beginning," he teased. "Uh...abyss... withhold... terror... from their flesh..." "Yes." "Sounds suitably horrible," smiled Herodotus. "Like something from the IFB." "I hope we're not quite that bad, Professor," chuckled Hesiod. "This is all, so far?" "Yes, aside from that it seems to describe some sort of ritual. Not sure, though. The grammatical structure is very difficult. The pronouns and verb tenses are unlike anything I have ever seen in ancient Libran literature, Professor." "Well, keep at it, Hesiod. Not that there is any



rush, really." "Hardly," yawned Hesiod. "If it stays stubborn, maybe we can tap Pliny or Horace for help." "They're both off, recording the Earth refugee languages. I checked." "That will probably take some good while. You look all in," said Herodotus. "Yeah. I'm beat," Hesiod yawned, rubbing his eyes. "I think I'll turn in. I'll get back to things fresh, tomorrow." "You going to your friend's funeral?" "Zel? Yes. We were students together, before I discovered that I had absolutely no talent for engineering. Anything you'd like me to bring you back, from the Rising Star?" "Any more examples of Earth languages, from those refugees, if you can." "Sure," said Hesiod, taking the ancient scroll, and slipping its frame back into the cabinet. "Good night Professor."

Bojay's sealing, aboard the Rising Star, was to be held there since the liner had a more festive aire than the militarily austere Battlestar, and the happy couple were more attune to it than the starker environs of the Galactica. So, it was not to be wondered at that two people were working late to set up for it. Zed, from the IFB, making sure the camera and sound system was set up properly, giving instructions to Jona, one of his technicians. The two spoke little, as they worked, and for her part, Jona was ready to get out of here, and into a hot turbowash. She would never make it. "What in..." exclaimed Zed, as a sudden gust of cold air blew through the room. At first, he wondered if one of the ship's airlocks had blown, but no. The alarms would have sounded. He coughed, as the air momentarily turned foul. He coughed again, then heard a scream. On the other side of the room, Jona had fallen under one of the stage lights. She screamed again, as the light smashed, and raw electrical current coursed through her. Zed ran for the switch, but it was too late. He looked down, then felt for her pulse. Nothing. He tried CPR, and mouth to mouth, but no results. He hit the alarm, then went to try and find a MedTech. "I tried CPR," he was explaining to the fellow in tow, as he ran back into the room. "But she just..." "Where is she?" asked the MedTech. "I... what the Hades Hole? I... she was right here!" said Zed, looking down at the floor. Jona was gone.

## Chapter Two

"Give that to me again," said Commander Adama, in his quarters, brows furrowed. Doctors Salik, Cassie, and Security Deputy Paulson were with him. "That doesn't make any sense whatsoever, Doctor. Doctors." "None of this does, so far, Commander," replied Salik. "We conducted a full autopsy on both Zel, and the young woman. She died, as we thought, of a depressed skull fracture. Zel, however, had no fractures, punctures, laser, or any other sort of wounds. No disease, signs of radion or poison, and he was well-nourished and seemingly healthy. What he did have were the most elevated cardiac enzymes I have ever seen. That, and ruptured arteries in both his heart, and brain. The cells of his heart

were, literally, exhausted, and his electrolytes were badly depleted. Our best estimates are that his pulse reached well over two-hundred beats per centon, and his blood pressure went into lethal levels." "That expression on his face," said Adama, looking at one of the security photos of the body. "Like pure terror." "So, Commander," said Salik, "as unscientific as it may sound, pending any additional information, I would have to say that Zel was, essentially, frightened to death." "By what, though?" asked Adama. "The only other person there was this woman." He looked to Paulson. "Anything on her?" "Finally, sir. She is... was, Makhrina, a server in one of the crew lounges on the Yarborough. She went missing late yesterday afternoon, ship's time." "Why the delay in identifying her?" "Well, she had no identification on her, as you know. And no one reported her missing." "Her duty station?" "They got busy, and the proprietor decided to put it off till later. It wasn't until after her picture went out across the Fleet that someone thought to say anything." "Unconscionable," said Adama. "That's not the worst of it, sir," continued Paulson. "Or the strangest. We know exactly when she died. Just after 0900 centars." "How can a dead woman still be moving about, centars after she died?" asked Adama, a bit heatedly. "I have no idea. But, we found her roommate, on the Yarborough. A cook, named Iris. She said that Makhrina fell, and hit her head. She didn't seem to be breathing, she said. She ran for the telecom in the corridor, to call for medical aid, but it was out of order. Again. She ran back into their cabin, but Makhrina was gone." "Gone?" said Adama. "Yes sir. Gone. Nowhere to be found." "Then she can't have been dead, Sergeant." "I wouldn't disagree, Commander. But gone she was, according to Iris. She assumed that her friend must have had some kind of miraculous recovery, or just been stunned, and gone off somewhere, possibly to seek medical attention. After all, dead people don't generally wander off. But she was late for her shift herself, and there it lay. The next we see of her, she's lying on the deck, next to a dead man." "This is becoming... I don't know what," said Adama, shaking his head. He leaned back in his chair. "None of this is making any sense. It's starting to sound like some sort of old-fashioned cheap holovid." "That's not all," said Cassiopeia. "We did swabs and such, of both bodies. Zel and Makhrina had been kissing." "Kissing a dead woman?" Adama's lips curled slightly. "According to the saliva traces on him, yes. And, no, I do not know how a woman, dead for several centars, could be moving around, much less kissing someone." "This is incredible," said Adama. He looked to Paulson. "Something obviously is not right, here. Everyone is to be re-questioned. Go over every bit of evidence, again. There is something, some vital piece of information, which we are missing, here." "Yes, sir. Security Chief Castor is setting up the new interviews right now, Commander." "Very good. Anything else?" "Yes, sir, there is, but I don't see how it fits into any of this." "What is it?" "When Iris came back, and found her friend gone, she said it stank." "Stank? What did?" "The cabin, sir. She said that the whole cabin was filled with a horrible

stench."

Aboard the Akrabi, next morning, Hesiod jerked awake, suddenly. He felt a sudden chill run through him, as sleep fled. He looked around him, eyes falling on his desk chrono. Damn. Gonna miss Bojay's sealing, if I don't hurry up! Rubbing his eyes, he straightened up, popped his back, and looked back down at his desktop. The ancient scroll he had been working on was still there. He folded it up, gently, and slid it back into its cover. As he put it back into the vault, another chill seemed to run through him, only this time, it was the air. The air in the room suddenly seemed cold, indeed almost arctic. Papers and styli on the desk fluttered, and there was, for a moment, a horrid stench. He wrinkled his nose, wondering if one of the recyclers below decks had malfunctioned. He reached for the comm... . Then it was gone. The air smelled fine, and the temperature was normal. He pondered this, wondering if he needed to call engineering, when Herodotus poked his head in. "You fall asleep, again?" "Yeah, I guess I did, Professor. I was up, early. Couldn't sleep, so..." "Well, we'll miss the shuttle, if you don't hurry. We're late as it is." "Coming, Professor," said Hesiod, pulling on his jacket. He gave the room a final backwards glance, then shrugged, and followed his chief out.

"Pretty well attended," said Starbuck, looking out across the assembled sealing guests. Warriors from all the Fleet's squadrons, plus as many as could make it from other details, had the room packed. Kalysha, wife of the Earth Captain, Allen, would provide some lovely warbling, and the ambrosia was, of course, flowing freely. Many of the recently liberated refugees from Earth were here as well, and Starbuck felt right at home. Once the reception had begun, that is. The actual Sealing itself made him fidget. Cassie's jab to the ribs, notwithstanding. "I should think so," said Athena, Starbuck's one-time love interest, and now wife of Boomer. "It's not often we get to celebrate something this good." "You mean a sealing? Hey, we've had a good share of them. First Apollo and Sheba, then you and Boomer. Bojay and Gayla makes this a record for me!" "It's not just that. There's that, but also Bojay's recovery, Gayla finally getting over Twilly, and all the Earth folks to be welcomed and woven into the fabric of our society." She popped a mushie into her mouth. "It's all good, Starbuck." "Athena, my dear, you are becoming a philosopher in your old age," smiled the other. "If I'm old, Starbuck," she said, turning to glare at him, "then you are positively ancient." "Ha!" laughed Chameleon, behind Starbuck. "Me?" he asked, all surprise and innocence. "Ancient? Well, I'm..." "Right up there with the Lords of Kobol," said Boomer, suddenly behind him. "Every last mummified one of them." "Oh, you guys are just sweet," said Starbuck. "Sweet, I tell you." "Aren't they just?" said Apollo, next to Boomer. "And you deserve every word of it, Starbuck." "Twist, Apollo. Just twist as you pull the dagger out." "Oh I will, Starbuck," smiled Apollo.

"I will." "That I can believe." He looked up at the stage. "Oh hey, she's starting." They looked towards the stage, where Kalysha was getting into her next number. "What is it?" asked Athena. "Not sure. Some tune from Earth, I think," said Chameleon. "She sure sings well."

Somewhere there's music How faint the tune Somewhere there's heaven How high the Moon There is no moon above When love is far away too Till it comes true That you love me as I love you

"She could sell out the entire clientele at The Eruption, on Cordugo Pit," said Athena. "I told her that," said Starbuck. "And she turned down your offer to be her manager," said Apollo. "Yeah. How'd you know I..." "You're Starbuck," said Apollo. "Told ya, son," smiled Chameleon, with a grin.

Somewhere there's music How near, how far Somewhere there's Heaven It's where you are The darkest night would shine If you would come to me soon Until you will, how still my heart How high the Moon

"You know," said Gayla, coming over, newly-minted husband at her side, "I never thought of non-Humans as being musical." "Well, Kalysha's species is actually an amalgam of Human and alien DNA," said Cassie. "Really?" said Bojay, perusing the available bakemeats. "What aliens?" "No one knows, not even her people," replied Cassie. "In fact, it isn't just the Harkaelians, but the Z..." She was cut off by a piercing scream, from somewhere above them. She looked up, and saw movement overhead, in the ceiling of the lounge. Then, there was another scream, a closer one, as something fell from above, to crash onto the buffet table. A moment later, there was another, and people ran scattering from the impact zone. "What the Lords... !" said Bojay, as they got a good look. Before them, face down in the mushie paste, was a body. A man's, contorted and twitching. Athwart him was a woman's body, face up, eyes staring into oblivion. Cassie went into "doctor" mode, and looked for signs of life. "Here," said Starbuck, tossing her a scanner from the lounge's First Aid kit. She swept both, and they watched as she determinedly tried to resuscitate both victims with a defibrillator. But, after several centons, it was obvious they were beyond help. She shook her head, and handed the unit back to Starbuck. She looked up, as Commander Adama came over. "Both dead, sir," she reported, as his eyes took in the sight. "Massive cranial trauma, and multiple fractures. Unresponsive to cardio-stimulation." "Who are they?" he asked. "I..." she began. "Holy Lords!" said a voice and they all turned around. It was Zed, from the IFB. "It's..." "Yes?" said Adama, all Commander now. "You know them?" "It's my technician. Jona!"

## Chapter Three

"Same as before, Commander," said Salik, in the LifeStation autopsy room. "He died of the same thing as Zel. Massive coronary and cerebral arterial ruptures, accompanied by hugely elevated cardiac enzymes. Coagulation of protein. Massive brain damage. Also multiple fractures and internal injuries, from the fall." "Meaning he was... scared to death?" "Basically," said Salik, clearly uncomfortable with so... unfocused a result. "And yes, as with the others, there are saliva traces on him." "Identity?" asked Adama, of the man. "Neron, one of the techs working the lounge, for the Sealing and reception," replied Security Chief Castor. "I'm waiting for a full background on him. So far, except that he has been a member of the Rising Star's crew for the last nine yahrens, there's nothing that stands out." "Find out if he knew her. And what about her, Doctor?" asked Adama, indicating the dead woman. "Jona, one of the IFB technicians," replied Salik. "As with Neron, multiple fractures and internal injuries, sustained in the fall." "But?" "But," sighed the CMO, "She was dead, already." He indicated scorched areas of clothing, and burns on her face and hands. "She died by electrocution, Commander. See the burns, here? Huge amounts of raw current ripped through her." "When and where?" asked the Commander.

"Last night," said Zed, of IFB. They were in the Galactica's security office, along with Cassie, Salik, and Security Chief Castor. "We were setting up, for the ceremony, when I heard a crash. One of the stage lights had fallen on her, and she was screaming." He related the entire incident, and Adama shook his head. "What about a security report?" "Ships security on the Rising Star was contacted, sir," said Castor. "But when they couldn't find a body, they didn't pursue it." Adama withheld comment, and Castor continued. "But we have a video scan of the incident, sir. The lounge security cameras were undergoing automated diagnostic tests, prior to the Sealing, and we have it on tape." "Let's see it," said the Commander. Castor slid the recording into the computer, and they watched. Jona was working on setting up the sound system, and Zed was out of the shot. There was a burst of static on the screen, then it cleared, as one of overhead light arrays suddenly fell, directly on Jona. She screamed, as the power ripped through her, thrashing madly. Zed rushed to her, after cutting the power, and pulled the light away. He felt for her pulse and tried to revive her. Unsuccessful, he left, returning a couple of centons later, with the Medtech. But not before... "What by all the Lords of Kobol?" he exclaimed, as they watched the scan. As soon as Zed was gone, Jona rose up off the floor, slowly straightening up. More static and snow filled the screen, and the electrocuted woman began to walk, but unsteadily, as if the action was difficult, or unfamiliar. She looked around the room, then looked up, directly at the camera. She slowly raised one hand, finger pointed at the pickup, then turned

suddenly, towards the hatchway. With a speed utterly unbelievable, she blurred, and was gone. Zed and the Medtech rushed in... "I tried CPR. But she just..." "Where is she?" "That's it, Commander," said Castor. "We only have this, because the computer reported one of the cameras had failed." "What in God's name did I just see?" asked Adama. "A woman, dead from massive electrical shock, gets up, and leaves?" "I saw it too, sir," said Castor, "and I don't get it, either." "I want that scan analyzed, Castor," said Adama. "Every test imaginable. That way she just seemed to... vanish." "I'll send it to Doctor Wilker's lab at once, sir." "Very well," said Adama. "Dismissed." He watched Castor go, recording in hand, then turned to the medical staff. "What else?" "I honestly don't understand it, sir," said Cassie. "Now, we need to do more tests, but that woman... she was dead before she fell." "Go on." "Yet... well, electrocution leaves unmistakable traces in the tissues, Commander. Changes in blood chemistry, protein coagulation, rupturing of cell membranes. All the classic signs. Yet, after she was dead, there was some sort of brain activity." "Brain activity? How can you know that?" "She got up, and walked. She raised an arm. She rotated her eyes, to look at that camera. Muscles don't do that without impulses from the brain. Yet, with all that damage, that should be impossible. Is impossible". She shook her head again. "This is ghoulish," said Adama. "Four deaths, and two of the victims already dead when it happened. This is insane." "Insane it is," said Cassie. "And totally outside every law of science and biology known to me, Commander." "What do we do when it happens again?" asked Salik. "How could we even prepare for it, if it does?" asked Adama. Neither medico had any answer.

For the next two days, though, there were no further deaths. The Fleet continued along the Epsilon Vector 22 course given it by the mysterious Beings of Light, without incident. Patrols were launched and returned, no space vehicles of any sort were encountered, especially none thankfully from their most recent adversary, the Risik. Two primitive civilizations were detected (and left alone), and maintenance on the Fleet's vessels went on apace (though to the irritation of Adama, Wilker, Hummer and Komma still couldn't offer an answer on the matter of the recent virus problem that had affected the Galactica). In short, life continued for the survivors of the Colonies, much as it had since fleeing known space. While Adama had filled Tigh and certain select officers in on recent events, and Security was on the alert for any disappearances or other unusual happenings, it seemed as if whatever it was had run its course, and that the bizarre and ghoulish deaths were at an end. But they were no closer to solving the deaths of Zel, and the others. The funerals were held, eulogies said, but nothing more was forthcoming. Adama held his breath.

"How are things?" asked Hesiod, relaxing a bit in one of the Rising Star's less

top-shelf lounges. "Oh, about the same," said Pliny, the linguist who had worked on "The Silent One's" journal. Of their somewhat rarified calling, there were few among the refugees, and they formed a tight-knit group. "Wading in to the Earth languages. It's turning out to be quite a diverse field." "Descended from the basic Kobollian roots, surely," said Hesiod. "Like our own language families." "You'd have thought so," said Pliny, as the waiter brought their drinks, one of the lesser brands of Skorpionian ale. "But some of what I'm getting shows absolutely no connection with the Kobollian mother tongue. At least none that I can find. Earth's linguistic terrain is divided into several language families, some showing no connection whatsoever with each other. But so far, no link that I can indisputably show with Kobol." "Weird." "Very." "Too bad you don't have any written material to work with," said his friend. "Actually, we do. One of the refugees, a spiritual practitioner named... uh, Father Fisher, had a small printed book that he somehow managed to keep hold of during his captivity. He's allowed me to scan it, and we're working on the language." "Well, send it on, and I'll have a look at it. Once I'm through with our current project." "I will. You know, it seems really odd, if Earth is descended from the Thirteenth Tribe, that their languages don't reflect that. There isn't a sub-culture from the Colonies that can't trace its tongue back, at least to some degree." "Yet, there it is." Pliny took a pull on his drink. His face wrinkled a bit. "You know, I swear Starbuck somehow manages to keep the good brews for himself." "He and his father sure seem to know where the good stuff can be found, and no mistake." "And the best pyramid cards, as well. I've learned my lesson, never to play cards with that man." "Or his father!" "You, too?" They both laughed. "So, what about your little project?" "Those old manuscripts and inscriptions? What's left, you mean, after Jabez and his antics. Yeah, I'm plugging away. When we do finally settle and start to rebuild, the Librans will have at least some of their cultural heritage remaining to call their own." "Anything new? Any surprises?" asked Pliny. "Well, I've been trying to crack this one scroll. The Naqada Scroll. It's very old, and in lousy shape." "How old?" "At least the beginning of the Khonshu Hegemony, on Libra. Possibly even earlier." "Lords, you don't pick the simple ones, do you?" smiled Pliny. "No guts, no glory." "Hey, no Starbuck impressions." They both chuckled. "So, what do you have so far? Or do you?" Hesiod launched into his researches, explaining the state of the manuscript, what he had so far, and the difficulties he was encountering, in making full sense of the document. "In fact, if you can ever spare some time, I wouldn't mind an extra pair of eyes, Plin," Hesiod told him. "I really want to getbthos fully done. I feel kind of... well, pressed, almost, to work on it." "Tough spot?" "Well, I've never encountered examples of Libran textual material, from any period, quite like this. It has had quite a while to develop from the ancestral dialect on Kobol. It seems to fit in with the Western Khenet sub-family, at least on the surface, but whoever wrote this was either semi-illiterate, since some of the characters I have never seen before, or we've encountered a

previously unknown Libran variant." "Well, I'll try, sure. Any clue as to what it says?" "Some sort of ceremony, I think. Whether it's worship, or a sealing, or even a funeral, I'm not certain yet. It keeps referring to 'she', and 'her chosen'." He shrugged. "I'm kind of at an impasse." "Which word is the problem?" "Hetep", he said. "Chosen, or good thing in Ancient Libran. But I'm missing something." "Huh," said Pliny. "I remember something a bit like that, in an old tomb inscription, from Phaistos, on Cancera. There was a similar word. Eteph." "Sounds like it could be linked," nodded Hesiod. "A cognate. What did you get?" "Aside from chosen, or desired, it had another meaning. Sacrifice."

Paulson was at an impasse. Everyone involved in the recent deaths had been re-questioned, evidence gone over again, time-lines reviewed. Each and every piece of forensic evidence was compared, and compared again. It all came out the same. Each and every victim met their end... Only they didn't! Dead people do not just get up, and wander off to be found with other dead people. And certainly not electrocuted ones! Yet, here, despite every bit of logic and experience he had, along with every member of the Security Section, that is precisely what happened to the women. Curious, he told himself. In each case so far, it was the woman who had died, sometimes centars, before the man had. Was this just happenstance, or did it betoken something else? The key to the mystery. The key... "They were lured to their deaths," he said aloud. "Private places. No witnesses. Lured into... into what?" He rubbed his eyes, and raised his java cup to his lips. It was empty. "Aw, Lords of Kobol. None of this makes a damned bit of sense."

"Ama?" said a voice. It did not at first penetrate, and the girl had to call again. "Yes, Dear Heart?" said the Emyrean Eldress and Wise Woman. "Forgive me, I was lost in contemplation." It was late in the "night" aboard the Emyrean ship, Malocchio, and an endless sea of candles lit her chambers. "Is something wrong?" "Wrong, Lia?" Ama's eyebrows arched as she had been sensing just that. "Whatever do you mean?" Oh I wish you wouldn't do that! "I'm not sure. But something feels... wrong." "Wrong? How, Lia?" asked the older woman. She rose, and made space for the girl next to her. "Here. Sit, and tell me." "I had a terrible dream, Ama. It woke me." She placed an arm around the girl, drawing her closer. "Tell me your dream, Lia." "I... I saw a book." "A book? Books are not frightening, Lia." "This one was." "Tell me more," Ama said gently. She placed an arm around the girl, pouring a cup of cold water for her acolyte, and goddaughter. She held her open hand over it palm down, rotating it deosil, to the right, to heat the contents. Then she added her favorite concoction of dried herbs and roots to help ease the girl's anxiety. "It was dark, and I saw a book." Lia took a small sip of the herbal tea, closing her eyes briefly and savoring the taste. "Like the old books we had on Emyrean. Paper, and bound with hides. It was dark, and rotted, and it had



a voice." "A voice? You mean it spoke to you?" "No. Well, not really. I don't know," the girl said, still unsettled and confused. She took another sip as she thought about it. "It was as if it had a voice, but in my mind, not my ears. A voice, like out of a pit, or in torment." "What did it say?" asked Ama. "I'm not sure. It seemed as if it said 'give... give', but I do not know what. It felt evil, Ama. Dark and cold, and... and it hungered. Like... like it wanted to consume me." The girl leaned close, and Ama could feel her shudder. She put her arm around her again, smoothing her long hair. "Then?" "Then there was a horrid stench from it, and for a moment, I could feel hands on me. Evil, icy hands. Then it was gone. There was only darkness, and a terrible cold. Then I awoke." "Do not let it worry you, Lia," said Ama, putting down the tea cup, embracing the girl, and patting her on the shoulder tenderly. "It was just a dream. It cannot harm you." "But it felt so... so real. It..." "Relax, Lia. Calm yourself." She pulled back slightly, touching their foreheads together. Through this physical connection she lent the child her strength and confidence even as she probed the recesses of her essence, searching for any filthy trace of this being that had touched her goddaughter's spirit. Finally, as the combination of herbal tea and mystical energy calmed the girl, Ama gathered her to her bosom. She stroked the girl's hair, humming an ancient lullaby to her, as her own mother had to her when she was troubled, till she felt the girl's frame relax, and her breathing ease. Slowly, she shifted her weight, allowing Lia to rest on the couch. Disturbing! She feels it, too! Ama got up, and poured herself a libation, Empyrean Ale, something a bit more fortifying than water. She sipped, and looked back at the sleeping girl. Lia's perceptions had grown much, since they had joined the Colonial Fleet. She had embraced the responsibility of guiding the girl, as she had herself been guided, when she had been even younger than Lia. By the Aethers! That was a long time ago! But Lia was right. There was something, emphasis on thing, that was making itself felt. Something evil. It was an elusive and dark energy that she didn't recognize, but regardless she understood something of its nature. She hadn't been meditating long, when the girl had come to her. She had had a similar dream, herself, and it had disturbed her. Greatly. She had been trying to plumb its meaning, but it was elusive. But something, something malignant, was moving among them. Among the Colonial survivors. She had heard the rumors of the mysterious deaths. The first had been mentioned on the IFB. Some technician and a woman found dead. Then, nothing. As she loosed the bonds of her seeing, she understood that Adama had clamped a lid on things. Or tried to. A lid that had come off, spectacularly, at the Sealing of the Warrior called Bojay, and the Agro-worker Gayla Starbuck ("Ah, Son Starbuck! That must have been a shock!") had been there, and rumors spread faster than Cylon turbos. It had been vaguely disturbing, but nothing focused. Until now. Now, with Lia's dream, and her own, coming together, she was sure that there was some sort of connection, between the events. And even as she meditated on these things, she felt a cold shiver of

fear run down her spine, as well as her detection of this malignant presence. A presence that hungered. But for what? She looked back at the sleeping girl, knowing within her spirit, beyond doubt, that the presence wasn't here for an old crone like her. Somehow, Lia was in danger. Lia was in danger! She would have to ask Starbuck to come and see her.

## Chapter Four

"Explain, please," said Adama, in LifeStation. Cassie had called him, during a working breakfast with Siress Tinia and Sire Shanbour, with what might, perhaps, be a clue. "Electrolytes?" "They are the substances in our bodies, and those of most creatures, that among other things, produce the electro-chemical signals that fire along our nerves. Make the muscles move, transmit signals to and from the brain, and so forth," explained Salik. "And I take it the victims were different, in some way?" asked Adama. "Yes, sir. But I can't take credit for the discovery," said the CMO. "Cassie is the one who came up with the idea," Adama looked to her. "So improbable we almost didn't think to look for it," she began. "But I ran several micro-cellular scans, of both Jona and Neron. There are virtually no traces of electrolytes left in either body." "Well, I'm not a doctor," said Adama. "If you could?" "Here," said Cassie, and punched up a holographic of what she explained were nerves. "Axons, Commander. And here, is the microscopic membrane that separates the ionized electrolytes." She zoomed in. "Ionized sodium and potassium, on each side of the membrane, are excited, in sequence. Kind of like a launch tube. The reaction triggers the next part of the nerve, and so on, till it reaches the muscle, or whatever." "This is the scan from a healthy nervous system, Commander," said Salik. "And here..." he switched images. It was a nerve, like before, but it looked... damaged. Torn open, broken in places, as if it had... what? "Like it... exploded. From the inside," he said, after studying it a moment. "Yes, sir," said Cassie. "Somehow, something, and we have no idea what, sucked out from each victim's body the energy of the electrolytes in their nervous systems. Sucked it out violently. So violently, the nerves literally were blasted open from within." "My God," said Adama. "What in Heaven's Name could do something like that?" "That's just it, Commander," said Cassie. "Nothing could. Nothing known to medical science could do this to nerve tissue. No toxin, no disease organism, no known form of radion, nothing. And we rechecked each victim's autopsy. They were all free of any kind of virus or bacterium that we can detect. No prions, no protists, no radion damage. Nothing." "Yet," said Salik, "something was able to literally rip the energy from out of their bodies. Not only the electrolytes, but the ATP in the mitochondria, the compound that fuels the cells, was broken down. Totally." "Something took every bit of electro-chemical and cellular energy from their bodies, Commander. Death would have been immediate," finished Cassie.

"This is... well, it's like something out of a nightmare," said Adama. "Some hideous old tale from the Dark Times." "But real, nonetheless," said Salik. "And frankly, we not only don't know how it could have happened... " "Yes?" "We have no idea how to prevent it from happening, again."

"Umm...let's see," muttered Hesiod, late into the same day, in his little study room, aboard the Akrabi. He looked down at the ancient scroll, then at his handwritten notes. "Sacrifice. Uhh... chosen... come..., no... bring forth. He paused to write down his latest efforts, then leaned back. There was something about this he wasn't getting, but he wasn't going to let that stand in the way of scholarship. No translation had beaten him, yet. "Take... no... .absorb... Lords of Kobol, this is... feed." He looked it over, and ran it through his computer. Lords, this was weird, to put it mildly. "The Chosen offering shall come forth, and she shall feed." He shook his head. "Gross!" "What?" asked Herodotus, slipping into the study room. "Huh? Oh, just muttering to myself, is all. This text. Whatever these folks were up to, I don't think the Lords of Kobol would have approved all that much." "Really?" "Yeah. Pretty disgusting stuff." He showed his super the translation he had managed so far. "It's pretty tentative, but it sounds like it was some sort of Human sacrifice ritual." "Well, there is archaeological evidence of some of that," replied Herodotus. "The Hilan excavations, on Piscera." "Weren't you on that one, Professor?" "As a young graduate student, yes. But the results were never published, sadly." "So, it did happen? Human sacrifice?" "One could draw that inference, from some of the osteological evidence, but never anything definitive. Or so said the Powers that were," said the other. "There were other interpretations of the data." "Until now." "So it seems. Until now."

"This is bizarre," said Doctor Salik, standing next to Cassie, as she reviewed the data scrolling up her screen. "Very," she replied. "In fact, the deeper we dig into this, the more questions I seem to find, Doctor." "You're certain of the results?" "Oh yes. The blood chemistry is a mess, but there was enough left in the lymphatic and cerebro-spinal fluids to give a picture." She held up a vial of fluid. "Each dead man was in a high state of arousal when they died. The hormonal exhaustion is pronounced, and it doesn't end there. Like the proteins, the long-chain carbohydrates, sugars, and the ATP in every cell, the testosterone was itself broken down, as we have seen." "Every drop of energy stolen from their bodies," said Salik. "Energy." "Yes. More like ripped out, really. Yet, each woman shows no signs of anything similar. No arousal, no signs of anything comparable." "Yet, each man..." Salik trailed off, pondering this. In all his yahrens as a physician, he had never heard of anything like this, and he'd seen a lot of weird things. He took a deep breath, and crossed his arms. "So, each man was heavily aroused, but each woman was not." "Yes, that basically covers it," replied Cassie. "But what does it

mean?" said Salik, as much to the air as to Cassie. "It makes no real sense, so how does it fit into this little puzzle?" "I don't know, Doctor. But it is one more thing to add to the report Commander Adama will want." Salik looked at her. "In the morning," she yawned. "If that is alright?" "Go get some sleep," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "You're due to log off in less than ten centons, anyway. I won't count, too closely." "Thanks, Doctor." " 'night, Cassie." "You too."

"No!" said Ama, aboard the freighter Malocchio, as she darted awake, violently. It was deep into the ship's sleep cycle. "No!" She turned, drenched in sweat from a hideous dream, as a scream came to her ears. "Lia! Oh, Lia!"

"Oh frack!" snarled Hesiod, as the glass shattered on the floor. He looked down, and swore again. "Oh, monging..." "Hesiod?" asked his old professor. "Problems?" "Yeah, I'd say so. I just dropped it." "It?" "The scroll I was working on!" "Oh no! Is it recoverable?" "Yeah, I think so," he said, kneeling down to carefully retrieve the pieces of the ancient document. Mingled amidst the glass sleeve, pieces of it were scattered around and under his work station. Carefully, donning clean gloves, he began to carefully pick up the pieces of parchment with tweezers. Herodotus knelt down to help him. "Seems to be all here," said the old academician. "What happened?" "Oh, I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, it dropped it. It slipped from my fingers. Damn!" "Hey, don't crucify yourself, Hesiod. You aren't the first to drop an ancient artifact, you know." "You?" "When I was younger than you. An irreplaceable fragment from the tomb of an early Lord of Piscera. Mushie fingers me, and there it went. Oh, we got it all back together. Praise the Lords my pupil master never found out!" "Bad?" "He'd have fed me to the Cylons! There. I think we got it all. I... ow!" "Professor?" "Oh, just a slight cut." He stood up. "There. I think we have it." "Good. I don't want to be fed to the Cylons!" Both men laughed.

Somewhere, in the dark, something howled in frustration and rage.

## Chapter Five

Ama sat, alone, surrounded only by the dim light of candles, meditating. Or rather, trying to. Despite her best efforts, and generally her efforts were the best, she could not calm her mind enough to focus. Whatever it was that she had crossed paths with, it had left her as rattled as a newly-minted acolyte. She had been awakened by the scream of young Lia. Her scream, and the cold, choking feeling of utter evil that seemed to waft through the Malocchio. She had leapt from her bed, and run for the girl's cubicle... To behold a faint, sickly aura of light hovering over her. The girl was screaming, as if in pure terror, and reflexively, Ama

had exerted all her power against it. Though faceless, it had somehow turned to regard her, then vanished, leaving only a thin wail behind it. She rushed to Lia, trying to calm the frantic girl. A girl that had deep, spreading bruises around her mouth and face, as if someone had been choking her. Choking the very life out of her. Putting her palm to Lia's forehead, she took a calming breath, and let some of her own vital essence flow into the other. Slowly, she could feel Lia's pulse and breathing calm, her life force return to normal. "Ama!" cried the girl, her eyes at last focusing on her guardian. "Ama, there was this... oh it was horrible!" "I know, Child. I know," said Ama. "It tried to kill me! It said I was going to die!" "It spoke to you?" She waited till Lia collected herself. Taking a deeper breath, she touched the edges of Lia's soul, and loosed her own bonds of seeing. O Elementals!

Starbuck had just returned from a training patrol and gone straight to the Rising Star where he met Chameleon for a light dinner. He'd been looking forward to this for some time since it was finally going to be a chance to let his father know something that he hadn't found the right moment to share for the last few sectors. Bojay's sealing had been too crowded and formal a setting. But here, he could finally tell Chameleon that he no longer carried any bitterness inside him about the woman his father had known and loved... ..and then lost. Chameleon had been pleased to hear his son tell him this. He had long been able to more easily put into perspective the loss of his beloved Claudia. Never feeling the hurt completely disappear, but at the same time learning to keep the memories of the joy and the laughter first and forefront in his mind. Just as he still did, and always would, with Starbuck's mother. Dinner finally ended and they parted company. Starbuck decided to pay a visit to another friend before returning to the Galactica and made his way over to the Rogelio's java stand. He was grateful to sit down at the bar and enjoy the hot liquid's full body, coming on the heels of a well-prepared meal. "Thanks, Mairwen," said Starbuck, as he leaned up against the bar at Rogelio's java stand, aboard the Rising Star. He reached out and took his piping-hot mug, and savored the liquid as it went down. "That goes down a treat." "How goes piloting?" she asked him. "Pretty much the same. Stars, and lots of empty space in between. Then, ya know, stars. How's the java business?" "Doing just fine," she replied. "I owe you, big time." "Nah! Cassey?" "Off playing with some friends in the new Day Center. Thanks again, by the way." "For?" asked Starbuck, all innocence. "For your help in setting it up. You and your father made it possible, fronting the start-up money." "Well, I mean... hey, it was nothing, really," shrugged the Viper pilot. "Yes it was," she smiled, refilling his mug. "You wanted to give some of the kids in the Fleet something that you never had. Something way better than a state orphanage." "Well, okay, but don't tell anyone," he said, pulling out a fumerello. "I might lose my reputation as thoughtless and selfish." "You're secret's safe with me, Starbuck," said Mairwen, handing him an ignitron. She turned to

attend to another customer, when suddenly, an older woman was there, at Starbuck's side. Funny, she hadn't seen her come in, but then the arcade was crowded. Maybe... "Starbuck," she said. She was old, but it was her wild hair that seemed to stand out. Literally, as it was wont to go in every direction. "Ama?" asked the Viper pilot, cup to lips. Already, he could tell that she was rattled, not her usual calm, inscrutable self. "I would needs speak with thee," she said, slipping into her people's antique mode of speech. Make that a definite. "Am..." She grabbed his java, taking a large sip, more a gulp, and then making a face. She glanced at Mairwen. "Do you have anything stronger? Something to curl the hair around my nipples?" Starbuck laughed, coughed, then gagged. Mairwen blinked. Loudly. She looked from one to the other. Ama banged Starbuck on the back until the coughing eased. "I think we need to talk, Dear Heart," Ama insisted, handing back his java with a scowl. "In fact, I am certain of it." She took another drag of the java, and coughed loudly herself. "Right after we find a decent tankard of ale."

Commander Adama looked at the latest reports in front of him. One from Security, the other from LifeStation. Despite repeated checks and rechecks, Security had turned up nothing new. Paulson was no more pleased about this state of affairs than Adama, but facts were facts. And, basically, essentially... They had run out of them. "I don't like this," said Adama. "Just... waiting for this thing to strike again. It's almost like asking it to take another victim." "I don't like it, either, sir," said Paulson. "But for the moment, we are out of fuel and adrift. This killer is either fiendishly clever, or just dumb lucky. There is so little to go on." "So, essentially, we just wait for another innocent person to fall victim to this... thing." "Yes, sir," sighed Paulson. Beep How strange, Adama said to himself. "Enter," he called into the intercom, and the door to his quarters slid open, admitting Starbuck, and... Ama. This was something of a surprise, for while he had of course met the leader of the Empyrean refugees, it had been brief. They had exchanged pleasantries, of course, but something about her just... well, he wasn't sure what, but he felt mildly uncomfortable around her. "Siress Ama." What the Hades Hole is Starbuck doing with her? "Commander," she said, looking directly at him, and drawing herself up to her full height. "I know what is going on, in the Fleet. These deaths." Adama looked at once from Ama to Starbuck. He had ordered that the deaths not be talked about, certainly no information shared with anyone who was not involved. Starbuck held up his hands, shaking his head. "I didn't say a thing, Commander," he insisted. "Ama just asked me to help her get in to see you. You can be hard to reach, after all. When she told me what was up, I said I would. So." "Starbuck has told me nothing, Commander," said the Wise Woman. "I approached him, not the other way around." "I see," Adama replied, though he didn't see. Really. Not a bit, actually. "Has there been another death, Siress Ama?" "No, but there almost was." She was obviously agitated, and doing a great job of

trying to conceal it. "Last evening. Aboard our ship." "Almost? I don't understand, Siress Ama." "Let me explain, please." They all sat, and Adama offered a small libation. She accepted. Somewhat to Adama's surprise, Starbuck refused. Whatever it was, the Viper pilot was as unsettled as was Ama. "Yes?" said Adama. "It was during the Long Centars of the Night. We were all asleep, when I was awakened from a terrible dream, by my dear goddaughter Lia. She was screaming, a scream of purest terror. I ran to her cubicle..." She went on to described what she had seen, the sickly, suffocating light that surrounded the girl's bed, and the malevolent intelligence she had sensed in it. She went over the story again, after Security Chief Castor, and Paulson, had been summoned. Ama repeated her story, still obviously disturbed. "Well," said Castor, slowly, "I'm not sure I see the link between this... whatever it was that you and Lia saw, and our killer. I have a check in progress, but so far, there were no deaths in the Fleet, last night. None since the last killing, in fact. Not even any serious accidents." "Even so," said Ama, just a tiny touch of asperity creeping into her voice. "The being responsible for the deaths of the others was there, on board the Malocchio. Had I not been able to resist it, to repel it..." She closed her eyes, and shook her head, thoughts of Lia falling victim to the... thing, still vivid in her mind. "What is it, then?" asked Paulson, as no-nonsense and "show me" as his super. "I can't clamp shackles on a waft of light." "And that is not how we shall fight this thing," said Ama. "What I saw, what attacked Lia, and killed the other people, is a spirit of the utter netherworld. In our ancient lore, it was called a lilitu, or sometimes, more commonly, a succubon." She saw Adama's posture straighten, his expression change. "Say that again, please," he asked her. "A succubon, Commander." She studied his face. "You know of what I speak, do you not?" "I know of the ancient legends, yes. Stories my Academician grandfather told me, out of some old books, when I was young." "Excuse me, Commander," asked Castor, "but what's a... suck...?" "Succubon, Chief Castor," replied Ama. Beep. "Yes?" said Adama. It was Technician Hummer, from Doctor Wilker's lab. They had, possibly, a break in the case.

"It's called what?" asked Starbuck, in Wilker's lab. Technician Hummer sat at his usual place, arcane equipment about him, and of all "people", former IL Cylon, Commander Septimus. "Quantum ghosting," replied Hummer. "It's old, and few techs have ever even heard of it. Unless you read old tech manuals." "So, how does this relate to the problem at hand?" asked Commander Adama. "Well," said Hummer, "on a wild hunch, I decided to run the scan of the death of Jona, through a multi-spectral processor. While that was running, well, I'll let Commander Septimus explain, if that's alright." They all turned to the IL, and Adama nodded in the affirmative. "As your man says," began Septimus, "he was running spectral enhancement schemes on the data, and left that to continue helping me with my

reassembly and recalibration. My visual system is multi-spectral as well, and we were running diagnostics on it, when I chanced to look at the monitor." Septimus gestured at the screen at Hummer's work station. "By purest chance, the wavelons involved, mine and the machine's, in conjunction, brought out the very thing it appears you have been seeking." "Let's have a look," said Castor. Hummer activated the monitor, and blew up the image. It ran as he had seen it many a time already. The light falling, Jona being electrocuted, only this time... "What the Lords of Kobol is that?" asked Starbuck. "It is the thing that attacked Lia!" declared Ama. On the screen, indistinct and watery, a faint something, vaguely Human in shape, crossed the camera's field of view. After a few moments, a tendril or filament slithered out, and the lighting rig fell over on Jona, the massive voltage killing her quickly. Once she was dead, and Zed gone, it seemed to shrink, joining or becoming one with Jona, soaking into her form, like water into a rag. "Holy Lords!" said Paulson. "There is nothing holy about this... thing," said Ama. "It is altogether evil." They watched, even Septimus morbidly fascinated, as the dead Jona got up, moving jerkily, looking around. Then, as if suddenly aware of being watched, it looked directly up at the camera. In normal settings, nothing had looked askance, but here, now, the eyes of the dead girl glowed from within, glowed with a sickly greenish-white radiance, as she glared up at the camera. Glared with an angry, hateful expression. She raised a finger in the direction of the lens, and with a burst of snow, the image ended. "What the Lords of Kobol was that?" breathed Paulson, after they had run it again. "God only knows," said Adama. He looked to Ama. "Except perhaps you do." "Yes, I do," said Ama, and they all sat down. Ama tried to compose herself, but it was clear that all of this had left her rattled, not the usually cool, always-in-control Ama that Starbuck was familiar with. "What exactly is this thing?" asked the Security man. "It is, as I told you, what in our ancient lore is called a succubon. Put shortly, it is a demon, that..." "Oh, really," said Paulson. "A demon? That's..." "Unbelievable?" asked Ama. "What we just saw is unbelievable." "Please, continue," said Adama. "It is a demon," Ama resumed, "specifically a female demon. It lives, if you can call it that, by stealing the energy from the bodies of it's victims." "Jona?" asked Adama. "No. The succubon feeds off the life force of men. The energy of sexual arousal. It was said, by the ancient lore masters, that the demon would couple with men, in their sleep, and rip all the life-force from their bodies." Starbuck shuddered. "But why attack Lia? Or any of the other women?" "It was said that the creature needs the physical body of a woman, to perform it's foul deeds," replied Ama. "It is the woman who provides the arousal for the male victim that it has selected." "And this thing was trying to find another victim?" asked Castor. "I believe so," said Ama. "Elementals, if I had not been there, Lia..." She broke off, visibly shaken. Starbuck shook his head. He had never seen the Empyrean Wise Woman anything but controlled and self-composed. This was... a shock. "Why didn't it kill Lia, then?" asked Adama. "It



seems it had her at it's mercy." "When I saw it, I did not think, Commander," replied Ama. "I just reacted. Much as you, as a soldier, might react to suddenly seeing a phalanx of Centurions heading towards you. I slammed it. I sent every thought force against it that I could summon to my mind in so quick a moment. I sensed it was surprised. I slammed it." "Excuse me?" Adama asked. "I harnessed the energy around me and then redirected it at the succubon. I sensed that it was surprised, but it... oh, how do I say it?" "Did it communicate with you, in any way?" asked Adama. "No, not in any normal way. Certainly not in the way we are now, at least for the rest of you mere mortals. I felt as if... as if it's thoughts were open to me. I am the Empyrean Necromancer, so I have been known to communicate with the dead." "Hold onto your helmets, this is where it starts to get even weirder," Starbuck said as eyes dropped around the room, a few of them rolling in disbelief first. "Go on, Ama," the Commander encouraged her despite the scepticism in the room. "Thank you, Adama," she replied, closing her eyes and gathering her thoughts. "Its thoughts were open to me, but rather than ideas or any discernible language, at first I only read pure emotional hatred. It was vile, like staring into an abyss. But I felt very plainly that it was hungry. Starved for energy." "Did it speak?" "In the mind, only. It seemed to say 'she is mine!' and although I understood its words, the tongue was ancient and guttural. I believe it realized I might be a threat because I suddenly felt as if my mind had been struck with a cold, burning fire." She opened her eyes again. "But I'm no shrinking violet, especially where my goddaughter is concerned. It staggered me, but I summoned all I could against it, then it was gone." "You drove it off," said Paulson. "Away from Lia, yes, but as to its final whereabouts, I don't know. I felt it recoil, yet there was something else. It vanished, and I sensed a cry, like a wail of pain and anger, as it fled away. Something happened that caused it to flee, after I had hit it with my spiritual energy. And both Lia and I sensed... fear. It was both angry, and fearful." Ama heaved a great sigh. "I don't know. It is all very shattering, and even I know little of those ancient tales. Little has come down to us, even to those of my line." Silence hung heavily in the room. "You speak to the dead?" Hummer finally asked. "Call it a hobby," Ama replied, shrugging. "I'm popular in certain quarters." "Ama, you looked bushed," said Starbuck. "Fighting demons does that to a gal, so yes, I'm completely knackered," replied the other. "Feel free," said Hummer, gesturing to the couch along the bulkhead. Ama nodded, and stretched out on it. "A powernap might be just the thing I need." She yawned. "Thank you, Technician Hummer, Commander," she said, then looked at Starbuck. "And you too, Son of my Heart, Starbuck. If you did not have faith in me, then I wouldn't be here sharing critical information with all of you. Information that will save my Lia and others like her." "Sure, Ama," said Starbuck. He looked from Ama, to the rest, then back to her. She was already asleep. And beginning to snore. " 'Son of my Heart', Starbuck?" asked Hummer. "Yeah, well, it seems that lately I accumulate parents like other people

do 'Free Play' tokens for the Mega Slot Machine on the Rising Star," Starbuck replied with a shrug. "Well, now what?" asked Adama, shaking his head slightly. "We obviously need to learn more about this... creature. "Are you talking about Ama or the succubon?" Hummer asked drily. The Empyrean Necromancer's snores reached an ear-splitting crescendo. "The succubon, of course," Adama replied, glowering at the technician. "Ama certainly seems to have some heightened senses and may seem perhaps a little eccentric . . ." "Just a little?" Starbuck interjected. Snorrrrrrrrrreee!!! "But I sense her heart is in the right place," Adama concluded. "Now, where do we go from here?" "Well, I know someone who might be able to help," said Castor.

## Chapter Six

"Yes, I heard about that girl's death," said Hesiod, in his study room aboard the Akrabi. "It certainly was bizarre, from what I saw on the IFB report. Falling out of the ceiling, onto the buffet table." "Very," said Adama. "So, how can I help, Commander? I was late, finishing up some work here." "Well," said Castor, after a glance from Adama had giving him to go ahead, "the investigation into this matter has gone in some... unexpected directions." "Unexpected? I don't understand," said Hesiod. He looked at Castor. "Does this have anything to do with all that felcercarb about Dravius and Jabez, and the theft of all the Libran antiquities, Castor?" "Not that I am aware," replied the Security man, "but I remembered how you were always steeped in arcane lore, and thought perhaps you might have some... insights that could help us." During the whole sordid affair with Antipas' minions, and the loss of so much history, Hesiod was one of those who had been questioned, most thoroughly, by Security. He and Castor had known each other, somewhat, before the Destruction, but their respective interests had carried them onto very different life-paths. Castor into Security work, Hesiod into the rarified world of the scholar. "Well, I'll do whatever I can, of course," replied Hesiod. "What do you need to know?" "What can you tell us about a creature from ancient legend," Adama said, "called a succubon. Sometimes, also, a lillitu." For an instant, Hesiod had the expression of someone who had been caught with their fingers in the mushie jar. Exposed. Like the school child caught cheating. Almost a frightened look. But the look was as quickly gone. "Well," he began, after a swallow, "a succubon was a female demon, that sustained itself by stealing the life-force of it's victims, after seducing them, often in their sleep. It used it's powers to arouse them, almost into a mindless state, then steal the essence of their souls, leaving them dead." He reached for a glass of water, taking a long sip. "But how does that relate to what happened? That was just a bizarre accident, wasn't it?" "Well, there have been some... bizarre developments, as I said," replied Castor. "Hey, what's this?" asked Starbuck. He was looking at a paper notepad, with scrawled lines of

text. He looked up at Hesiod. "That? Oh, just a project I'm currently working on," replied Hesiod, a bit... quickly? "One of many, in fact. One of the items salvaged from the Libran relics. An old scroll, we're trying to translate. Nothing important, really." "Well, it looks really interesting," said the Viper pilot. "Not really," said Hesiod, a bit strained. "Just some old ritual or other. Most of it resists translation. We know very little about the dialect of that period." He turned back to Castor. "What 'bizarre developments'?" "Bodies, drained of all their bio-chemical energy," said Castor, his voice taking on a no-nonsense tone. "Men killed in the very throes of arousal." He was silent a bit. "Pretty strange, you must admit." "Creepy," added Starbuck. "Well, I suppose so," said Hesiod, "though I don't see how some ancient superstition... would you please put those down?" he said, looking to Starbuck, who was continuing to rifle his way through some of the antiquities and texts in the room. He was currently looking over a couple of jeweled finger rings, like an unruly child turned loose in an antique shop. "They are old, fragile, and worth half the gross planetary product of pre-Destruction Caprica." "Starbuck," said Adama, and the Warrior set the baubles back down. "Yes, sir." "As I said," resumed Hesiod, "I don't see how some ancient superstition could have any connection with this tragedy. I mean, it was just an accident, wasn't it?" He looked at all of them. "Wasn't it?" "Well, so far," said Castor. "So far."

"He's one nervous guy," said Castor, as they made their way towards the Akraabi's landing bay. "He's holding something back." "You think so?" asked Adama. "I remember him when he was interviewed before. When Antipas' people looted the Libran antiquities. He obviously didn't like talking to us, but he wasn't nervous, or frightened in any way." "And now he is," said Adama. "That much I could see." "Scared mongrel is what he is," said Starbuck. "I'm pretty good at reading faces, Commander. Pyramid does that. And when you mentioned that word succubon, I saw it in his eyes. He knows something." "You mean he knows who the murderer is?" asked Adama. "That I don't know, sir," replied Starbuck. "Yet. But he knows more than he is telling, and whatever it is, he's scared. Did you notice how nervous he got, when I started going through those notes of his?" "Yes. He seemed nervous." "I sensed something wrong almost from the beginning. Thank you for letting me play my hunch sir." "Your hunches have usually proven to be of value, in the past, Starbuck," replied Adama. "Thank-you, sir." "Well, we'll get to the bottom of this," said Castor. "One way or the other."

"It can't be," whispered Hesiod, looking at the scrawled notes that had so intrigued Starbuck. He looked them over, then at the drawer, where the original scroll fragments themselves were kept. "Superstition. It's can't be! And how did a dumb Viper jock, of all people, know?"

"You were quite right," said Septimus, back in the lab, with Hummer, examining the recording surreptitiously made of the interview with Hesiod. "He is quite highly stressed." "How highly?" asked Adama, of the former IL. "Voice stress analysis of Hesiod, along with ocular dilation and changes in sub-dermal blood flow, shows plainly that he is concealing something. Having a long experience of Humans, and their varied physiological responses, my best statistical analysis is that he knows precisely who it is that is responsible for these acts, but cannot bring himself to believe it." "Not believing it?" asked Starbuck, momentarily wondering just what sort of "experience" with Humans this Cylon had. "How do you mean?" "In some Human way that I cannot understand, Hesiod is in denial about it. Whatever conclusions he has come to, part of his mind refuses to accept it, while the other does." "What could that mean?" asked Hummer. "That the ultimate truth, whatever it eventually turns out to be," said Septimus, "is something that his mind may not be able to live with." "Lords," whispered Starbuck. "Well, he'll talk," said Castor. "One way or the other."

Ama sat in her private chambers aboard the Malocchio, deep in contemplation. After her venture to the Galactica, through the good offices of Starbuck, to see Adama, and laying out all she had thus far determined, she felt somewhat calmer. Somewhat. She was focused and in control once more, yet, there was still, somewhere in the background, the very real presence of that thing. The malignant, vile thing that had tried to take her beloved Lia from her. Take her for the purpose of ensnaring another young man to his doom. But did Adama really believe her? Did he take seriously, honestly, believe what she had told him, about the appearance, and nature, of this ancient evil? While she liked the Commander, and found him a solid, morally sound person, she just could not be sure. She knew he was a man of faith, yet many such men would argue into the next millennia about their gods or their "one true God", while they would scornfully dismiss other entities of what they referred to as the "supernatural" world, or "superstition". Despite her musings upon this point, whether he, a man from a highly technical culture, really seriously accepted what she, from a far more... pastoral society, had lain before him remained to be seen. It mattered not as she was accustomed to working alone. Whether Adama was with her, against her, or would act the bemused spectator, the fact remained, somewhere in the Fleet, she knew not yet how, a vile, hideous, unbelievably dark being had been unleashed, from, she sensed, a millennia-long slumber. Something, or someone, had, presumably unknowingly, released this being, to resume it's hunt for victims. It's food. For if what they were telling her was correct, from the medical evidence, the lillitu, or succubon, needed the vital energies, the life force, of corporeal creatures to sustain itself. The others, Adama and the physicians, the scientists, expressed this in terms of proteins, or chemical bonds. In her more ancient Path of

Knowing, knowledge passed down through the Tellings and her own understanding of the cosmos, Ama saw it as the devouring of the souls of those unfortunate enough to cross the creature's path. Similar, in some ways, to what her ancient forebears called a nosferat. An undead thing that refused to stay where it belonged, but restlessly returned, to feed upon the living. She must go deeper. Deeper than perhaps she ever had, into the Vortex of Knowledge. It was dangerous, even for the most adept of adepts. Her own teacher had, wisely, feared to tread there, and it was said that some, venturing within, had never returned. But this was too important. Not only was every person in the Fleet in danger, as long as this thing was loose, but Lia... her beloved Lia was at risk. And nothing, certainly not some vile slime from the ancient pit of death, was going to harm her goddaughter. "Now," she said aloud, to the sea of candlelight surrounding her. "To begin."

"Well, I didn't used to believe in things like that," said Starbuck, to Cassie, across the pillow. "Demons, spirits, ghosts. Not this kid. Either I could fly it, or blow it up. That was about it." " 'Used to,' " said Cassie. "What changed your mind?" "Count Iblis. I mean, that was no flesh-and-blood man. And the beings we've met, on the Ship of Lights. I don't pretend to understand it all, Cassie, but that stuff is real." "Okay, but how does that relate to these killings?" she asked him, propping herself up on one elbow, and looking at him. "I mean, are you saying you think a... ghost killed those people?" "I don't know what you'd call it, but something outside the usual universe that you and I know did. And I have come to trust Ama's instincts about certain things." "Ama? How so?" "Well, let me tell you a story." He unfolded to her his "journey", back to Earth's Second World War, and how the Empyrean Wise Woman seemingly had orchestrated, or at least guided, the entire episode. "I don't know how, but she has powers that go beyond the weird. It was no dream, Cassie." "You think maybe Iblis is behind this whole thing?" "No, I don't. I mean, I wondered at first, sure. But if it were Iblis, he'd show up. Taunt and gloat. You know how he is. His ego wouldn't let him stay low-profile. He'd have to turn up and trumpet himself." "Yeah. I see that. So, who?" "Well, Ama thinks it's some sort of entity that feeds off the energy of living beings." "All the men who died were certainly drained of energy," replied Cassie. "Not a nerve or a protein that wasn't sucked dry." She sat up. "But this is crazy. I mean, the nearest legend I ever heard to this was the vampiron, but that needed blood. Physical fresh blood to live. This thing, whatever it is, doesn't. And the women were all killed by trauma. Fractured skulls or broken necks. Electrocution." "Well, like I said, I don't claim to get it all, but that woman is usually right about stuff." "Why you?" asked Cassie. Starbuck's brows furrowed. "You, Starbuck. Why is she involving you in this?" "She said it made it easier to get in to see the Commander." "But you doubt that," she said. "I think Ama could get in to see God, if she tried," said Starbuck. "She seems

to focus a lot of attention on me, for some reason." "Any clues why?" "Not really. But I know that if I hadn't had that weird adventure in Earth's past, the whole planet's history might have gone down differently. When I asked her why, she just smiled and got cryptic." "I hate that," said Cassie. "By the Lords, give me straight answers. Maybe it's my medical training, but I hate an unresolved question or loose end." "Makes two of us, hon. "As a Warrior, I feel the same way. But with Ama . . . well, there's something just different about Ama." "How so?" His features shifted as he contemplated her question. "It seems like she thinks the rest of us are a bit stupid about these things, and she wouldn't normally waste her time trying to explain it." "That's an awful thing to say!" Cassie slapped his arm, before raising her hand over her face to hide her grin. "What about Commander Adama?" "Well, if he's the President of the Stupid and the Commander of the Stupid . . ."

Starbuck shrugged, leaving the rest implied. Cassie exploded into laughter. "Commander Adama would strip and module you if he could hear you now!" "Tigh would strip and module me. The Commander was there with Ama. He seemed just as befuddled as the rest of us and would probably see the humor in it." "But if Ama came to the Commander, there must be a reason for it. If she really felt like you were idiots, why go at all?" Cassie asked. "I get the sense that she can't remove us from the quotient. I know that doesn't make much sense, but it's like we all need to reach some conclusion, and she's there to guide us somehow." He looked embarrassed, ducking his head. "It was the same on Earth. We might be peons, but we're still part of the game." Cassie smiled gently, reaching over and brushing Starbuck's hair out of his eyes as he met her steady gaze. "I've never heard you talk like this before." "You weren't ready before," he teased her, his eyes sparkling with mischief. She laughed again, giving him a playful shove. He captured her hand, pulling her against him. "I'm ready now," she purred as she kissed him.

"Yes?" said Pliny, answering the telecom next to his bed. "Huh? No, I just have to be up in six centars. Don't worry, it's okay, I was asleep anyway." He listened. "Well, yeah, I suppose so. I can call him, and see if he will. Why so urgent? It does? But... you think some of them might be involved? What? Something crazy like that? I don't... okay. Okay, I will. I'll call when I know something. Right." Click. He put the telecom back in the cradle, and sat up on the edge of his bunk. "Lords of Kobol! If he's been smoking that plant vapors again, I'll wring his blasted neck!" He sighed loudly. "Now where in Hades Hole are my trousers?"

## Chapter Seven

Many of the rescued Earth refugees had found billets aboard the Constellation, the former possession of a now-deceased alien crime lord, and,

since leaving the wild and sin-soaked RB-33 space station, a converted warship, renamed, and integrated into the Colonial Fleet. Most of the rest were calling the Adelaide, of similar origins, home, for the return trip to Earth. Given that both ships were commanded by officers who were themselves of Earth origin, it was hoped that such surroundings would help to ease the transition, into a more technologically advanced society, for the liberated Earthers. But, for the moment, many of those same refugees were to be found, not aboard either warship, but in one of the domes of the Agro Ship. For the present back from a wide recon of the Fleet's port flank, Constellation had once more taken up position on the Fleet's starboard side, her crew enjoying some downtime, while the Century headed out into the void, in her place. As the shuttle drew close, Pliny was once again impressed at how the Fleet's engineers had performed heroically, in salvaging the vessel. Virtually blown to bits by the Cylons, forcing a detour to the obscure Human agro settlement of Serenity for food and seed, several of the Agro Ship's domes and sections had been salvaged. Normally, this would never even have been attempted, certainly not under conditions of a running battle, but the Fleet's situation called for unprecedented efforts. Three of the ship's domes were deemed reasonably salvageable, and part of the ship's frame, along with one engine pod, might, with great effort, be restored to use. So, while still on the run from the enemy, the three domes were tractored in, as well as pieces of the spaceframe, and the power plant. In a project that no sane engineer would ever have attempted, the engine was reattached ("Slapped together, like a child's paper mobile" as Starbuck had put it), and one by one, the domes as well. Much of the rest of the wreckage was scavenged for whatever usable materials remained, and could be reclaimed and sent to the Foundry ship. Never stopping, always dodging their intractable foe, Adama's people nonetheless accomplished the impossible: within less than a sector, sections of the "new" Agro Ship had been rendered habitable once more, the fractured domes reattached, resealed, and, gradually, brought back on-line, till they were once more supporting the plant life the Fleet had so far managed to save, or acquire on Serenity, taking pressure off the other ship. Once more, they were producing food, as well as a measure of recreation for the beleaguered survivors. Pliny's companion, Hesiod, wasn't impressed at all. He was too busy snoring. Entering one of the restored biomes, the smell of forest was the first thing that hit both men. Following the map on their pads, passing various techs, they moved along a trail, until, smelling smoke and hearing voices, they found a group of people, gathered around a small campfire, and... Singing. "They certainly seem to be enjoying themselves," said Pliny, to his old friend. He watched as some of them punched some sort of inflated ball, about the size of a Triad ball, back and forth across a net. Off to the right, two men, one of them blue, were involved in a sort of grappling match. "Not bad for people so recently freed from slavery." "Human are resilient," said Hesiod, as the sound of singing came to their

ears. "I suspect our Earth brothers are no different from ourselves, on that score." "And hopefully have some of the same basic legendaria as ourselves, too." "Lords of Kobol, this was a stupid idea," said Hesiod, stopping for a moment, and feeling a strong urge to leave. "It's all just old scribbling on a piece of animal skin. Superstition. Period! What possible help could someone from a place as backwards as Earth... " He stopped, realizing how loud he had gotten, and turned to retreat back the way they had come, but one of the Earthers had spotted them, and motioned them over. Several turned. "Too late to back out now," said Pliny, gently taking him by the left arm. "Come on." "I still think this is stupid. Damned stupid! And I was a complete Boray's astrum for ever thinking of it!" "No comment," smiled Pliny. "Here for the barbeque?" said one, Captain Byrne, as he moved from the net, where he had been punching the ball, and moved towards the fire. "Pull up a rock, and put a load on your mind." The young girl next to him, introduced to the two scholars as Byrne's daughter Genesis, shook her head. Next to her, sat Sire Pelias, a full cup in one hand, and a fried... something, in the other. "Uhh, we aren't interrupting, are we?" asked Hesiod, casting a curious glance at the campfire. Weren't there regulations? "Not at all," said Sargamesh, one of the Eridese refugees. Unlike his opponent, Lt. Starbuck, he hadn't even broken a sweat in the contest. "Crikey, looks like we got company. You didn't bring any coldies with ya, did ya by any chance?" asked another, introduced as Captain Allen, of the Adelaide. "Uh, no, we didn't," said Pliny, having no idea at all what the Earth man meant. "Sorry." "Well, we'll slip another one on the Barbie for ya, anyway." "There seems to be enough," said the woman next to him, introduced as Kalysha, his wife, and a native of the planet Harkaelis. "Uh, sure. Umm, aren't there fire regulations on these ships?" asked Hesiod. "Yeah," said Byrne, "but we agreed to be the test for the revamped fire-suppression system. Commander Adama said go ahead." "Oh. Well, I guess that's okay, then." "We'll just pour some of this home brew on it, if it there is one," said Starbuck, with a grin. "So," asked Byrne, a musical instrument of some sort now strapped around his torso, and studiously ignoring the Lieutenant's barb, "what brings you fellas all the way over here?" "Not his playing!" quipped Allen, with a laugh. Kalysha scowled at him. "May the fleas of a thousand wallabies give you an eternal wedgie!" Byrne shot back. Again, he gestured, and the two scholars found seats among the assembled. Hesiod noticed that among the Earthers, the two refugees from Ki, Pili and Kudur-Mabug, were in attendance. As part of their assimilation, he had worked on their cracking their language, and it had been a tough nut to crack. Later, finding out that it had a very-near parallel among Earth's ancient tongues had come as quite a surprise to him. Pliny looked over, as a song began. Kalysha began to sing, and her voice seemed to fill the forest.

Here I stand with you again, remembering the moments, When our friends



were by our side, in shadow and in sunlight. All the boats have floated by, and clouds are spread across the sky, And all our friends have gone away, and left me with my thoughts today. For when I close my eyes I see, the way I know things used to be, The stars among the heavens, and the sun upon the sea! We would sing a song at noon, at night we'd serenade the moons, The moments never ended, in the years that pass too soon.

"I don't understand," said Pliny, quietly, to Pelias. "Why are there tears? Why is she crying?" "Her people have a great bardic tradition. They believe that for a song to be truly sung, it must be felt, as well." "I'm not sure I understand," said Pliny. "Felt?" "You and me both," replied the young Councilman. "All I know is that she lost most of her family, back on her home planet. Some kind of ethnic or religious purge."

Sitting on the sand around the firelight, I hear the sound of bells that ring once more, In my imagination. As the flames reach ever higher, songs reflected in the fire, Echo long into the night, and almost till the morning light! For when I close my eyes I see, the way I know things used to be, The stars among the heavens, and the sun upon the sea! We would sing a song at noon, at night we'd serenade the moons, The moments never ended, in the years that pass too soon.

"She's great," said Hesiod. His friend just nodded.

All these things will never change, and after all it's not so strange, To still recall the trees, that paths that I remember. But I chance upon a stream, I stand and gaze as in a dream, The face I see, I realize, is one I do not recognize. But when I close my eyes I see, the way I know things used to be, The stars among the heavens, and the sun upon the sea! We would sing a song at noon, at night we'd serenade the moons, The moments never ended, in the years that pass too soon.\*

There was muted applause all around, and Kalysha inclined her head to her audience. They sat for a while, taking in the conviviality. In every Earth language so far studied, both men had found that the spoken, colloquial version often differed, sometimes greatly, from the more formal, written variety. As they joined in, sampling the rustic fare, they found the items were both familiar and strange. Sausages of many sorts were known in the Colonies, naturally, but some of these were unfamiliar, as were the names. Brat, wurst, and hot dog seemed to be the main references, as well as a simple meat pattie that went by the bizarre name of porcine administrator. Pliny looked, scowling, down at his Languatron, and tried to decide if Hummer was playing a practical joke on him. Again. The easy mixing of the people, almost all from the same planet, was enjoyable, but Hesiod was here

for business. After quaffing what Captain Allen referred to as “a cold one”, and having to smile at Pili and her husband’s “ankle biter”, he at last pried Father Fisher away from his conversation with a man who spoke in a similar accent. From a place on Earth called England, as he recalled. As he downed another home brew, and piled his son, Lugalbanda, onto his lap, Kudur-Mabug, refugee from Ki, noticed how Fisher’s expression went from convivial, to curious, to somber, in short order. Whatever it was that the En-emegir, as they referred to the linguist, was discussing with the lu-dingira, the priest, it was manifestly serious stuff. He turned away, as his wife, Pili, handed him a fresh drink, and Byrne began another song.

“No, I hadn’t heard,” said Byrne, later, after several of the picnickers had departed the dome. “We just got back from a long-range recon patrol, and haven’t caught up much. Any suspects?” “None that I know of,” said Hesiod, “but Security is trying to keep as much of a lid on it as they can. No need for a panic. But... well, I had this weird idea. This scroll I’ve been working on...” He stopped, hesitating. “Oh this...” “What?” asked Kalysha. “Well, it’s all so crazy, but these killings... they seem to bear similarities with something I found in an ancient scroll, in the surviving relics aboard the Akrabi. I’ve been cataloguing and translating everything of a textual nature that survived all that horrid business with Jabez and Dravius.” “Who?” asked Allen. Hesiod explained, as it had all occurred well before the Earth voyagers had been found and rescued. Once Hesiod mentioned the name of Sire Antipas and his role in the matter, Allen nodded, as he recalled the disgraced former Councillor, who had left with the Il Fadim cult members. Hesiod then, slowly, unfolded what he had been doing, and what he was finding in the ancient text. “Why do you come to me?” asked Fisher. “I’m just a simple parish priest. Or was, until I ended up here.” “I’m not sure,” said Hesiod. “I don’t know where this idea came from, but it’s been pressing on me for a while, that I should consult with you, about this.” “How can I possibly help?” asked Fisher. “I did not even know any of these victims. I never met them.” “Well, you a spiritual counselor, from Earth. And I have found so many interesting connections.” He stopped, running a hand over his face, and taking a deep breath, trying not to look or sound as idiotic as he felt. “Have you, in all of your religious lore, ever heard of or encountered a being called a succubon?” There was silence, and from the Vicar’s expression, it was clear the word had struck a chord. “I believe in your language, it might be more closely rendered as succubus,” said Pliny. Ama! What are you up to? Starbuck looked from one man to the other. “Yes,” said Fisher. “In ancient lore, it was the name of a female demon. One that would seduce men, and steal the life force from them during sex. It was also sometimes known as a Lilith.” There was silence a moment. A long moment. “Are you saying that these people are being murdered by some sort of... demon?” Of course! thought Starbuck. That’s what she’s up to. That devious... .

## Chapter Eight

"My apologies for the delay in getting back to you," said Commander Adama, "but we have been having some technical problems throughout the ship." He sat, and motioned for his guests to follow suit. "What do you have?" Starbuck, and the Security Chief relayed to Adama all they had learned. Then the Commander turned to Father Fisher. The Earth cleric was reflective a moment. "From what your linguist has told me, it seems that this scroll recounts some sort of ancient ritual, involving possible Human sacrifice. Now, the being it describes bears great similarity to what on Earth, in various ancient religions and lores, was known as a succubus." He explained the word, and the lore accompanying it, to Adama as best he could. "Now understand, I am not an expert in this sort of thing, nor am I trained as an exorcist." Adama raised an eyebrow. "Someone trained in the expelling or binding of demonic entities, Commander." Beep "Who the..." said Adama, as the chime to his quarters sounded. He half rose, but the door opened of its own accord, and through it stepped... "Ama?" he said, genuinely surprised at the appearance of the Empyrean wise women. What was she doing here, and how did she even know of this conference? He hadn't called her. He looked to Starbuck, but he shook his head, holding up both hands. "Simply put, Adama," she said, without preamble, "in translating this scroll, your man has raised up from the very pits of damnation a being that feeds on life itself." She plunked herself down, and Starbuck noticed how haggard she looked. Like she'd been running a race. Maybe she has! "Ama..." "It was needful for me to be here!" she said, a tad snappishly. "This creature was worshipped on Libra, far back in time. By people who had given themselves over to practices even a Necromancer finds utterly loathsome! It is pure death, and spreads death in its unquenchable hunger for the life force in others." "But you must?" asked Fisher. "Be here, I mean?" "Yes! This thing required the energy of living beings, as they would have said, the Life Force within the Soul, the Soul itself, if you will, in order to manifest itself. It lived among them, ruling as an Empress, sustained by constant sacrifices of virile young men, in the very prime of their sexual lives. From them she took the power to maintain herself in the visible world, and dominate her subjects." "How do you know all this?" asked Castor, ever the suspicious cop. "I have delved depths, and walked in places I will not speak of here, sir," replied the Empyrean sage. "But I know that this creature ruled with a lust for her prey for generations, deep in that world's past. There was literally a war to bring her down. In doing so, Man on that world slipped back many centi-yahrens." "But this scroll," asked Adama, "if the demon was overthrown, why does it still exist? Why was it not destroyed?" "One of her followers wrote it all down, perhaps, safeguarding it until a more evil centar. Some things even I cannot see. In the course of millennia, much was forgotten, and much more lost for all time." She took a deep breath. "Thank the Lords! But

through the chances of history, she has risen again." "Look," said Castor, "I don't claim to grasp all this, but I have to say I'm not much of a believer in ghosts and ghouls. Old stories to frighten children, as far as I am concerned. When we get to the bottom of this, and I intend to, make no mistake, however these killings were done, it will turn out to be a real flesh and blood killer. Like all killers. And with a flesh and blood motive."

"Wow, you are hot," said Homier, in the now-empty rec room for engine crew aboard the Rising Star. The woman in his arms was tall, svelte, and with a set of curves no one could improve on. She also radiated a sensuality that he found utterly overpowering. "That's the idea," she said, a smile growing across her face. She licked her lips, and laughed. And laughed some more. And kept on laughing...

"After all you have seen, all I have told you, you can still blind yourself to reality?" asked Ama, voice both incredulous and scathing. "Oh, why do I bother with the likes of mere mortals..." "I believe in what I can see. A killer I can clap the shackles on." "Oh, one cannot talk to the fool!" spat Ama, dismissing him with a wave of one hand. "Hey!" said Castor, half-rising from his chair. "I don't..." "And you will not, either! There is an Earth phrase that I have learned," said Ama. She looked directly at Castor with a glare that would have shriveled many a stronger man. "One can cure ignorance, but you cannot fix stupid!" "Ama, please!" said Adama. "There is no need to... what?" Ama had brought herself up to her full height, and was shuddering, drawing in a noisy breath, with her eyes closed and finger tips pressed to her temples. "What is it?" "Ama? What is it?" Starbuck asked. Her eyes snapped open. "It is awake! Someone's doom draws near! Oh Lords, Adama!"

"Give it to me," said Adama, Castor and a full forensics team with him, in the rec-room turned crime scene. As before, it consisted of one dead man, body drained of all energy, and one woman, dead by some sort of traumatic violence. "Homier," said Castor, running the dead man's retinal scans through the database. "One of the engineering techs on the ship. Who saw him last?" "I guess I did," said one woman, Faith, sitting at the table. "We logged off together, and had dinner here. He said he was going to come and catch a holo vid in our billet, but he never showed up." "And the woman?" "One of the dancers in the Astral Lounge, I think," said Faith. "Ella, I think her name is." "Same as before, Commander," said Cassie, rising up from her examination of the bodies. Energy all gone from his body." "And Ella?" "Poisoned," said Cassie. "Scans show some sort of toxic compound in her system. I'll have to get her on the table and run a full panel, of course. But, yes, she was dead at least a centar before he was. Like the rest." "She was right," muttered Adama. "By all the Lords, she was right." "Sir?"

asked Cassie. "Uh, oh, nothing, Cassie. Carry on. Report as soon as you have any more." "Yes, Commander."

"How did it go?" asked Herodotus, as he came up behind his old student." "Oh... they wanted some kind of insight on ancient Colonial lore. Comparing it to ours," said Hesiod. "Nothing much." He had been working on the scroll again, but now slid it back into it's sleeve. "Get any further with that old thing?" asked the elder scholar. "Well... maybe. It looks as if these people worshipped a demon goddess, and made Human sacrifices to give her lasting physical form." "Sounds ghoulish," said Herodotus. "Just the bizarre superstitions of our distant ancestors, Professor," said Hesiod. "Just words on an old scroll." He looked up, to see Herodotus looking over the written bits of Hesiod's latest translation efforts. The old academician picked up the paper. "Looks like you managed to get a handle on those obscure words and symbols, finally." "Well, when you run into an obstacle, you just stick with it. Or so you always told us, in class." "Well, you certainly have done that, my boy. This is almost complete." He looked it over, and slowly began to read the words Hesiod had rendered. "She shall rise when called forth. She shall hold sway. From the abyss shall she rise, and sit enthroned and she shall feed upon their terror. From their flesh... .feed. All... worship... " "Yeah." "That all you have so far?" "Mostly. I think the rest describes some sort of sacrifice ritual, where this- whatever it was- was fed." "Creepy. Like those really bad vids my mother would never let me watch." "Just superstition, Professor," said Hesiod. "It's all just old and stupid superstition." "We shouldn't be or act so superior, my boy," said the older man. "Just because we live in a technical and scientifically-oriented age, we shouldn't look back at our ancestors as stupid and valueless." "I suppose. But still..." "Fine. We'll have to debate the difference between superstition, and the unquantified, some other time." "As per Academician Zeno's course on philosophy and reality?" "That would be the one." "Long time ago," said Hesiod. "I saved all my class notes," grinned the older man. "Oh, joy!" He sighed. "Still... superstition is not philosophy!"

"Well, thank you," said Sheba, setting down her glass of mineral water, and looking at Siress Tinia. "I had no idea that you knew my mother so well." "When we were very young girls. We went to the same primary school, and were even in a couple of very amateurish plays, when we were about Boxey's age." The Siress sipped the last of her ambrosia. "Sadly, I discovered that I had no talent for the stage, whatsoever, while your mother dripped talent like a rainforest. Then, when my parents moved away, to Virgon, and we rarely saw each other after that. Sadly." "Well, any little bit from her past," said Sheba, looking at the old photos of Tinia and Bethany, taken in costume from a school play, when no more than about 10 yahrens old. Impulsively, and because it had been on her mind lately because of

her dream, she then asked, "Did you know Adama's wife in school too? My mother said that was when she met her." "I'm afraid not. That must have been a little after my time," she shook her head. "Feel free to copy those," said Tinia. "I'm glad to help restore your family..." She stopped, as Sheba seemed to no longer hear her. She dropped the photo, and her face became slack. She stood up, and it seemed as if another form were within the room. It was a sickly white wisp of vapor, Tinia thought. It coalesced more and more into a Human-ish form, and began to move towards Sheba. Tinia began to shake, a wave of sickly fear moving through her. The form seemed to draw closer, and the room was filled with a vile stench, and she began to choke.

"Well, we should be glad of that," said Herodotus, as he handed the sheet back to Hesiod. The younger man slid it into the scroll container, and put it in his desk. "I'm heading off to the holovid showing tonight. One of the ones brought from Earth. Wanna join me?" "Sure. What is it?" "Some sort of mystery thing. Called Rear Window, I think." "Well, let's get going," said the older scholar.

## Chapter Nine

"I'm fine!" protested Sheba, trying to brush away the life mask. "Let me up!"

"You didn't look fine a few centons ago," said Tinia, pulling back the mask from her face. "And that stench..." "It's gone now." "Thank the Lords! I'm going to check with maintenance, and see if maybe a recycling line ruptured," said the Sireess. "Well, it's gone now," said Sheba. She sat quietly, pensively. "What?" asked Tinia. "For a moment, it seemed... well, I was sure we weren't alone, Tinia," said Sheba. "It was as if there was... well, like something was smothering me. Trying to choke the life out of me." She put a hand to her abdomen. "Out of us." "Well, everything reads as fine, now," she said, running the portable scanner from a first aid kit over her. "Are you sure you won't let me call a MedTech?" "No! Apollo would be all over me, worrying." "Someone choking you, you say?" "It was right in front of me," said Sheba. "A figure." "Of what?" "I'm... not sure. Human-shaped, but... horrid. Like a corpse!"

"Come with me, Starbuck!" said a voice, and he turned around. He was in the corridor, leading to the Officer's Club, and no one else was about. Or at least hadn't been. "Ama?" He beheld the Empyrean Wise Woman, right behind him. She gripped him by the arm and propelled him down the corridor. "How did you get here? This part of the ship is..." "Never mind that, now! We must finish this!" "Ama, I don't understand. You are manipulating something, and I don't..." "Always trying to analyze! Always trying to analyze! Always questioning!" She

stopped him short, grabbing him by the ears and pulling him to her. Her grey eyes pierced his as their foreheads touched. "This is not the attack computer in your Viper, my boy! We have to stop her!" "Who?" He felt his heart get cold. "Is that thing on the loose again?" "You need to have faith! Come with me, and don't question!" she snapped. She grabbed his hand, her own strangely warm, and pulled him along with surprising strength. "We have to get to the shuttle." "Shuttle? What shuttle? Let go of me!" "Aarrggh!!! Starbuck, listen!" she said, stopping and glaring hard into his eyes. "If we do not act soon, that thing will grow ever stronger, and it will almost impossible to stop! Even for me! Now hear me and obey, boy!!!" "I am so getting stripped and moduled for this..." he said, strangely resigned to trusting her, as she grabbed hold of him again, and they ran for the lift. She was breathing hard, as they rode down to the bay. Doors open, they fairly ran for a shuttle. "Hey! You don't have clearance!" Master Chief Varica shouted as they brushed by him. "I have supreme clearance!" Ama hollered back as they raced aboard a shuttle. "Close the damn door and get us airborne, Fly Boy!" "Hey!" Varica hollered again as he watched the craft power up. Confused, Master Chief Varica went for the nearest intercom. Something wasn't right here.

"Commander?" asked Tigh, seeing Adama's frown, on the bridge. "That was Master Chief Varica, down in the shuttle bay. Alpha. Starbuck just shoved past him, and commandeered a shuttle." "Commandeered a shuttle? What the Lords for?" "Good question. And the Empyrean woman Ama was with him." "Ama? You mean that..." "Witch? That is one word for it." Adama turned from Tigh to Omega. The shuttle had filed no flight plan, but Adama knew, somehow just knew, where it was headed. "Where are you going, Commander?" asked Tigh. "After him!"

"Akrabi dead ahead," said Starbuck. "Couldn't you just say we're almost there?" Ama grimaced. "Just a figure of speech. Pilot jargon. Ama, if this is so important, why don't you just... well, appear there?" "Because you'll play a part in this, Starbuck. I am sure of it. Here or there, this time or that. So linear in your thinking! But now is our best chance. Besides, I am... conserving my strength." "Conserving? For what?" "Oh please! Don't play ignorant with me, Son Starbuck. Dearheart. We are at war and we race towards battle!" "It's that thing, isn't it? Whatever it is that's been killing people." "Yes! Yes, you have a brain!" "That's a consolation," he quipped. "Cassie and the Commander have wondered at times. But how do you know it's there? On the Akrabi?" "I feel its presence. I might look like a dried up old woman, Dearheart, but at times like this I'm more like a finely tuned sensor array that was just upgraded by the tech nerds." "Uh Ama," Starbuck hesitated, "who exactly are the tech nerds in your corner of the Fleet?" "Who do you think, Starbuck?" She smiled mysteriously. "Now step on the gas, boy, or we'll miss the party!"

Hesiod sat, trying not to laugh. The Earth vid, something called Rear Window, had been interesting, to say the least, but like all things from Earth, confusing as well. Many of the idioms had been obscure, but the female lead... .Lords of Kobol! If most Earth women were like that... Not really tired, he didn't feel like sleeping, and was actually turning over a new idea about the scroll. He picked up the paper he had written his tentative translation on, and went over some of the words, once more. Shaking his head, he fired up his computer, and slipped the old scroll out of it's sleeve, gingerly unrolling it on his desk. Barely above a whisper, he repeated the words he had cracked, and set to work.

Aboard the Tip Barge, Sergeant Thomson was well into the throes of passion with the girl he had met a few centons before, in the passenger lounge. There to conduct a security review, he'd met this woman, and suddenly he'd forgotten all about security. Once they were alone, it was as if she was the only being in the universe. He had never felt so aroused as this before, and briefly wondered why his usual instinct for self-control hadn't kicked in, like it had with that Kiian woman Pili, on the weather planet. I shouldn't be doing this but Hades Hole I can't help it... Then she kissed him, he felt as if he were being enveloped in raw energy. "Wow. You are just..." "Don't talk," said the other, eyes ablaze with desire. And Thomson forgot all about self control.

"Who the... what the Hades Hole are you doing here?" demanded Hesiod, as his door flew open, and Starbuck entered, Ama behind him. "Oh, not her again! Get the Hades..." "Give it to me!" demanded Ama, pointing at Hesiod's desk. "What... No! I'm not giving you anything! Now get out of here!" "It is that scroll that allows her to take form!" said Ama. "As long as it exists, she will continue to murder young men across the Fleet!" "Superstition! Stupid primitive superstition!" Hesiod yelled back. "This is science! Now get out of here, or I will..." Before he could finish, Starbuck moved towards his desk, reaching for the scroll. Hesiod was surprisingly quick, however, grabbing it first. "Let it go!" "She's poisoned your mind!" hissed Hesiod, struggling with the fitter Warrior. "It's just an old parchment!" "Give..." grunted Starbuck, and shoved against the other, hard, slamming him into the wall. He grabbed Hesiod's wrist, applying pressure and the other man's hand curled open against his will. Starbuck grabbed the scroll. "No!" Hesiod whimpered. "It... belongs to the Libran... people!"

"Oh, yeah!" moaned Thomson, as the girl's arms went around him. He felt her sensuality burrow deep, then, suddenly... "NO!" screeched the other, and pulled away from him. Thomson nearly screamed. Instead of the young and sensual woman he had been embracing, before him now was a wizened old hag, skin wrinkled and sagging, and looking like the skin of a corpse. Her eyes burned with a



bright fire, but her face... And her breath. It was now as foul and corrupt as a cesspit on a hot day, and with a scream of his own, he pushed her away. She screamed again, and shoved him violently aside. He hit his head on the bulkhead, and faded out.

“NO!!!” screamed a hideous voice, and the door to Hesiod’s rooms burst open once more. Leaping into the room like a maniac was a hideous, shriveled creature, hair wild and gray streaming behind it, a choking and vile stench all about it. It looked vaguely female, but Starbuck couldn’t be sure, as he stared at it in disbelief. He reached for his weapon, but the Creature was upon him before he could get a grip on it. “Get the frack off of me!” he bellowed, as the thing tried to take the scroll from him. It also, at the same time, tried to kiss him. Revolted, he pushed her/it away with all the strength he had, and the thing staggered, screaming. “Don’t... ” began Hesiod, but the words stuck in his throat at the sight before him. All around the Empyrean woman was a shimmering light, gathering in intensity as she raised her cupped hands upward. Then she hurled a ball of light at the creature. The vile thing staggered, as it was struck in the back. It turned, and fixed it’s hellish gaze on Ama, staggering towards her. It threw arcs of light from it’s fingers, and Ama was hurled backwards, landing in a heap on the floor. It roared in triumph, the sound shrill, yet grating. Shaking off the assault, Ama leapt nimbly to her feet. She thrust both hands outward, towards the creature, and energy thundered across the room. The creature, as well as Starbuck and Hesiod were tossed to the floor. Shrieking like a lost soul, the succubus whirled like a twister, stopping when it regained its feet. Its mouth gaped in a crazed rictus and its skeletal hand pointed at Ama, a source of infinite power. “Mine!” it growled, its voice raw and throaty. “Then come and get it, Hag!” Ama shouted, tendrils of energy crackling from her fingertips. The creature rushed her. Lightning seemed to fill the room, as arcs of energy, shot back and forth, and a strong wind, filled the room. At one point, Hesiod raised a chair over his head, and brought it crashing down on the thing, but to little apparent effect. It struck him with one hand, and Hesiod dropped like a dead Cylon. Once more, arcs of light flew from Ama to the creature, and it staggered, it’s rotted face twisted in hellish fury. It turned to her, then, hand trembling, it stopped... “NO! NOoooooooooooooooooooo!” it screamed, rounding about on Starbuck, as the Viper pilot, huddled in a corner of the warzone, began ripping the fragile scroll apart. In a flash, it flew at him, picking him up like a ragdoll and hurling him across the ravaged desk. The thing looked down at the torn scroll, then back at Starbuck... “Faith!” Ama yelled as the creature looked it’s last. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do. Starbuck drew his pistol, and fired. The demon screamed, writhing and twisting as if in utter agony. But Starbuck’s bolt had come nowhere near it. He had fired into the ancient fragments, setting the bits alight. It flew at him again, and Starbuck reflexively flinched, but it slammed into

an impenetrable wall of energy. Again Ama stood with hands outstretched, but this time her blast of energy was protecting him. He fired once more, incinerating the scroll. The demon shrieked, the sound strident enough to make a warrior want to tear his ears off. Then abruptly it stopped, looked up at him, before freezing, stock still. After a few moments, it's dessicated flesh falling away, it toppled to the floor. Starbuck struggled to his feet, examining the aftermath. The wind and lightning had ceased, the vile stench was gone. The room seemed unnaturally quiet. Hesiod lay unmoving on the floor, his chest gently rising and falling. Starbuck swallowed deeply, looking at Ama incredulously. She smiled and nodded. Then she crumpled to the deck herself. "What in God's name..." shouted a voice, as Commander Adama, Castor, Cassie, and two other Security men burst through the open hatchway. The Commander stopped, and looked down at the demon. It was still now, it's eyes collapsing back into it's head. The remainder of the skin was flaking away, the hair following suit. As they watched, the hands and skull also began to crumble, and within microns, only a vaguely-Human shaped pile of dust and disintegrating fabric remained on the floor. Cassie saw the Empyrean woman trying to rise, and helped her to her feet. Taking deep breaths, Ama looked down at the remains of their foe, then up at the rest. She fixed eyes on Castor. "Well?"

## Chapter Ten

"When did you first realize what it was?" asked Adama, three days later, in his quarters. With him were Cassie, Castor, Hesiod and Herodotus, and Father Fisher. Starbuck was here, at Ama's request. "Quite late, I am sorry to say," replied Ama. Despite everything, she looked remarkably well-rested. "I had heard about the first death, of course, but I was... busy with other things, and paid scant heed. Perhaps if I had..." "No point in recriminations, now," said Adama. "Go on." "As the murders continued, I felt something. Something... wrong. Something diseased, on the edges of my awareness. But I did not know what it was. And then, it came after Lia." "Your goddaughter," said Cassie. "Yes. As near as I can tell, it picked it's victims at random. It just happened to be her." Ama scowled. "That was a big mistake." "What I don't understand," said Starbuck, "is why it killed the women. Why not just do it's thing, as it was?" "Would you be aroused by a rotted skeleton of a hag, Starbuck?" asked Ama, with a gentle tease in her voice. Starbuck looked aside. "It needed the women to arouse virile young men, in order to steal their life force. Their souls." She saw Cassie's brow's furrow. "Or absorb their electrochemical energy, whatever your particular flavor." she smiled. "It killed them, in order to use their bodies. It could not do so if their own soul remained in it. In time, had she been permitted to continue, she would no longer have needed to steal the bodies of others for her purpose. She would have been replenished, an exquisite creature quite irresistible to even the most incorrupt of men." "How do

you know all this?" asked Hesiod, quietly. He looked chagrined, as if he were still trying to come to terms with the new universe of reality he had seen. "I plumbed the depths of Truth. A fickle reality at times, so seldom forthcoming. From there I probed the Vortex of Knowledge." She waved a hand theatrically and the air shimmered, following her movements like the tail of a comet. All eyes followed the spectacle. "I... waked paths unknown to most, listening to the unspoken, and feeling the intangible. It was there I learned the true nature of the succubus and the brutal tale of her history." "History?" asked Adama. "Yes, Commander," replied Ama. "Long ago, on your Colony world of Libra, this creature was released from what you would refer to as the Infernal Realm, where she had been imprisoned long before the rise of Kobol, and came to be worshipped by many." "Hades Hole?" asked Adama. "That is a name you might use for it." "Hell," said Fisher, softly. "She ruled on Libra," Ama continued, "in what your learned men call the 'Pre-Neferite' period. In a city called Naqena. She ruled as an Empress, and was worshipped as a goddess named Lilith." "Ah!" said Father Fisher. "Worshipped how?" asked Adama. "Human sacrifice. The bodies and vital energies of virile young men. By consuming their souls, if you will, she gained and maintained enough energy to remain in a physical form. In this way, she ruled for centi-yahrens. In the form of a sensuous, eternally young woman, she would exert her power, and feed." "Like a vampiron," said Starbuck. "Yes, Dearheart. But instead of blood, she fed upon the living energy of the unfortunate. Finally, all praise to Heaven, she was overthrown, and all trace of her, it was hoped, expunged." "Except for that scroll," said Castor. Like Hesiod, he also looked... chastened. He certainly had a lot to think about. "Yes. The war to overthrow her was long and terrible," said Ama, closing her eyes and calling up the memories. "The progress of civilization itself on Libra was set back generations, as a result. It nearly collapsed, in fact. But, ultimately, she was defeated, and, so everyone thought, back in the Otherworld, where she belonged. But, somehow, the scroll survived. She was clever and patient. She knew she would rise again, and feed once more." "And it was this scroll that somehow permitted her to return to our world? Visible and solid?" asked Fisher. "Yes it was. When it was open, and it's words were spoken aloud, she stirred, and began to grow, once more. Some women who might have fallen to her were saved by chance, when you shut up the scroll, Hesiod." "Sadly, the rest were not," said the Earth cleric. He crossed himself. "God have mercy on their souls." "Why did you continue with it?" asked Ama. "You felt the push. The compulsion to continue with it, even then. Don't say you did not, Mister Hesiod. I know you did." "Well, I..." "Did you not see how she was using you, even from the abyss? Using you as a tool to bring about her return?" Hesiod said nothing. What could he say? "And now that it is destroyed, she cannot return ever again?" asked Cassiopeia. We hope, Starbuck thought to himself. Yes, we hope, said a voice in his head, and he looked at Ama. She smiled back at him.

"Yes, Commander?" asked Starbuck, later. After he meeting broke up, Starbuck was asked to remain. Ama as well. Starbuck knew that look. Adama still had questions. A lot of them. "What I want to know," he asked, both of them really, "is why you involved Starbuck in all this, Ama. He had no part in the killings. He didn't even know any of the victims." Ama looked at Adama for a few microns, as if measuring him. "You are a busy man, Adama. With everything else, and now these murders, I knew it would be difficult to get in to see you, and inform you of what I had learned for certain. To have your full attention. Starbuck," she looked at the young pilot, and an expression Adama could not fathom crossed her face, "however, he has what you might call 'an in' with you. I also knew that there would be physical struggle involved. I needed someone whom I knew could handle himself." "Hey, I could have been killed by that thing!" said Starbuck. "Damn nearly was!" "Nonesense, Dearheart. You weren't, were you?" She smiled her gap-toothed smile at him. "And I needed to conserve myself." "For struggle against... it?" asked the Commander. "Yes. After searching the Unseen so deeply, I felt how drained I was. Drained as I have not felt since I was a mere acolyte. I foresaw that Lillith would fight to keep that scroll intact, and I was not sure I could handle both her, and Hesiod, at the same time." "What about one of your goddaughters?" asked Adama. "They are too young, and they still have much to learn, before they are able to take on such a foe. If ever. Even I..." She let her hands drop in her lap. "And I have seen Starbuck in action, before. He is reliable." And stupid, malleable, and easily manipulated, you mean! He told himself. Filling my head with weird thoughts and ideas. Don't put yourself down, Son Starbuck! A voice answered in his head. "Very well" said Adama. He looked at Starbuck. "That little matter of commandeering the shuttle without clearance? You needn't worry about it, Starbuck. It will be put down to 'Council Business'." "Thank you Commander." "That was to conserve strength, too, I imagine?" Adama asked Ama. She nodded. "Why not use the new transport device, then? It was quicker." "That... monstrosity?" said Ama, stiffening slightly. "I am aboard the Fleet to help what remains of my people. Not to have my atoms scattered back and forth across space by that alien gadget!" She took a deep breath. "I did use it. Once. It left me so disoriented and sick-feeling, I swore never to go near it again."

"It does have that effect on some, I have heard," said Adama. He leaned back. "Ama, there is much I still do not understand about this whole episode. And, I am sure, much you aren't telling us."

"Please, Adama," smiled Ama, her most beguiling, dentally-challenged smile. "Leave a woman at least a few secrets?"

"What choice do I have?"

"We all have choices, Adama," smiled Ama. "We all have choices."

Fleeing from the Cylon tyranny, the last Battlestar, Galactica, leads a rag-tag fugitive fleet, on a lonely quest. A shining planet... known as Earth.

"Sheba," said a voice, and the Viper pilot turned around. In her quarters, and dressed in a maternity gown, she had been alone, looking at the old photo of her mother as a child, given her by Siress Tinia.

"Who... Ama? How did you get in here?"

"Questions, questions! You and Starbuck must be related!"

"Well, I... "

"I am not here as the Voice of Doom, My Dear. Only to reassure you. I have... seen to things. Apollo need not ever learn of your brush with Lillith."

"That was it's name?"

"Yes," Ama nodded.

"Thank you," she said, exhaling. She motioned to a seat, and Ama accepted. "I... I know how much he worries about everything."

"Even things in the past that he cannot do a thing about. Like his mother. Like Zac. The weight of the universe on his shoulders, when it need not be so."

"You said he couldn't do a thing about his mother," Sheba knew she had to ask this. "Is that true... even if his mother were... alive?"

Ama said nothing at first and then spoke, "You ask of something in which I can not say anything to you, Sheba. That is all I can say about that... and about whatever... dreams you have had on that subject."

"Yes... how did you know?"

"Questions, questions, Daughter of Cain! Like Son Starbuck... But I know that certain things must be answered in your mind. Yes, that thing would have killed you, and used you to destroy yet another young man. Possibly Apollo."

"Apollo?"

"Yes," said Ama, flatly. "And, the destruction of the child that unites the House of Cain and the House of Adama. More and far eviler that Lillith would rejoice in that, Child."

"You... " Sheba's brows furrowed. "You don't mean... "

Ama sat, and the two women just looked at each other, no word passing between them.