



Battlestar Galactica-A Promise Kept

Prologue

Apollo was surprised to see that Sheba had chosen to retreat to the Celestial Dome during her off-duty period from teaching new trainees. Ordinarily, he'd found that she preferred to go here only when she was in need of some introspection over something she'd rather not talk about with anyone, not even her husband. Why she would have that feeling now, was what concerned him, especially given her pregnant condition. The idea of her ascending ladders all the way up to this spot was hardly something an expectant mother should be doing at this point.

"Sheba?" he called up as he closed the hatch. His wife didn't look down but acknowledged his presence, "I'm here, Apollo. Just give me a few more minutes."

"Something wrong?" he made his way up. She was wearing that simple brown dress she'd worn the first night he'd taken her up here, along with Starbuck and Cassiopeia. Even though she was several sectors along in her pregnancy at this point it's loose-fitting quality still allowed her to wear it.

"No," she shook her head, "Just... thinking."

"About what?" he stood next to her, but hesitated to touch her.

Sheba avoided looking at him and smiled in a way that didn't reassure him.

"It's... nothing, Apollo. Nothing that important."

"Sheba," now he gave her shoulder a gentle touch, "You really shouldn't be climbing ladders at this point anyway... "

"Oh, I'm just getting in one or two final times up here before I know I have to *really* curtail all this. Believe me, I'm okay."

"Come on," Apollo said gently, "You can tell me."

Finally, reluctantly, his wife let out a sigh. "It's... nothing more than the same old, same-old wondering about... my father. Where he is now, and... what he's doing. You know how it is, Apollo. It comes and goes, my attitude about it."

"But why now?" her husband asked, "Something new to make you think about

it?"

Sheba again hesitated. Even after her marriage to Apollo it was still a struggle for her to be completely open with him when it came to talking about her father in-depth.

There was a part of Sheba that worried that to focus too much on Commander Cain and his fate would indicate some residual dissatisfaction with her life aboard the Galactica. That was the last thing she ever wanted to suggest to Apollo, Boxey or any of her friends and family.

"We're... coming up on almost a yahren since the whole detente thing began," she said. "The IFB was running a whole thing touting programs about the theme of 'Detente Plus One', and suddenly... I got so self-conscious about how so much has changed since I last saw him. And not just with you and me. I keep thinking about... wanting to just *tell* him what we've done and gone through wanting to just..." she trailed off.

Apollo decided to take a chance at lightening the mood, "What do you think would offend him more? The fact that we're working with Cylons now or the fact that you have a husband who singlehandedly destroyed the regulations on facial hair for pilots?"

His chance paid off and she laughed heartily. She lowered her head on his shoulder and he wrapped his arm about her.

"Sheba," Apollo said with tenderness, "I know why it still weighs on you. It's the need for closure. A definite answer to what happened and where he is, and what's he doing. I know it's not because you'd feel like you had some obligation to go back to him and be with him again. You just want closure. Dealing with an unanswered question that you feel like you can never get an answer to is just... a horrible thing to deal with."

"Has that ever happened to you before, Apollo?"

Apollo's expression grew uneasy and his silence caused Sheba to lift her head from his shoulder and look at him quizzically. Finally, he seemed to summon his strength and answered her.

"Yes," he said, "Yes it has. And... maybe it's time I tell you about it.

It's... something that happened to me just after Serina was killed, but before

we encountered you and the Pegasus. And... it's something I've never told anyone about. Not even my father or Starbuck."

He motioned to the bench at the far side of the dome, which told Sheba that this was going to be a very long story from him.

It took Apollo over a centar to tell her... everything. About being lost on a patrol and crashing on a planet called Equellas. About a woman named Vella and her son Puppis. About the terror being caused by a lone Cylon warrior that Apollo had mistakenly thought was the vanguard for some broader connection with the Empire as a whole, but was just a lone Cylon from a long-ago crash that had been rehabilitated by a corrupt crime lord to use as his henchman. And how Apollo had ultimately been forced out of necessity to rid the planet of that menace... and to then say goodbye to the woman and her son he had grown to care about.

Sheba had said very little during his narrative. But it was clear she was spellbound. Her eyebrows had gone up at one key moment in the narrative when Apollo had said something about Vella's late husband and Puppis' father being a Colonial Warrior who had crashed there yahrens before, and she'd been on the verge of saying something but had decided to let him continue.

"That's... it," Apollo sighed, "I... never told anyone about that because... it was too damned personal. I just told Starbuck and Boomer when they found me that I'd landed on a planet and bided my time until the area was clear of Cylon patrol. As far as they're concerned and everyone else is concerned... nothing ever happened."

He then looked her in the eye, "And nothing ever *did* happen, Sheba."

Sheba finally spoke, "It wouldn't have mattered to me if anything had, Apollo. After all... that was before we met." She paused, "Did you love her?"

Apollo shook his head, "No. No, I didn't love her. I only... wanted her because, the idea of a life with a new family, free from the war, and... coming so soon after I lost Serina... it was so tempting. So tempting. I knew that in time it could have meant love, but... I had Boxey to think of. And... if Boxey hadn't been back home, suddenly without his mother... I keep wondering if I would have found the strength to say goodbye and leave them and try to get back."

He touched her cheek tenderly, "I'm glad I did find the strength," he then kissed her. She accepted it willingly. But when it was over, it was clear she still

wanted to talk about this.

"Apollo," Sheba said, "You... said you promised them that you'd come back one day. What... made you say that? You knew there wasn't any way that could ever happen with the Galactica leaving charted space forever to find the 13th Tribe."

Her husband lowered his head, "That was a mistake," he said quietly. "I said that as if... I thought there was some kind of hope I needed to leave them with, but... I should have told them the truth. And maybe... that's the reason why it haunts me so often. Not because I wish I was still there but because... I left them with a false hope and... I can never find out if I caused more long-term harm as a result of that. It's... always going to be something that won't have any closure in my life."

Now he looked back at her again, "So... anyway, I told you this to let you know how much I understand why you can still feel down about your father, because... you want the same answer I still wish I could have about Vella and Puppis. Are they okay? And will things be all right? That's all I wish I could know, Sheba. Nothing more."

"And I wouldn't expect anything less of you, now that I know," Sheba whispered with admiration. "That story... it's another reminder of why I love you so much, Apollo. Of how tender and compassionate you are. And how... selfless you can be."

She leaned over and kissed him. Taking an extra micron to let her lips brush over the luxuriating thickness of his beard. Lords, how I love what that does for him! she couldn't help but think for the millionth time since Apollo had started growing it. A personal trauma they'd gone through had made him briefly shave it off, but now its return combined with his Zohrloch inspired equitail had insured its permanence.

"I can't give you closure to your story, any more than you can give me closure to me about my father," Sheba said when they were done, "But... you may want to know that...I *think* Vella's husband might have been from the Pegasus."

Apollo frowned. "His name was Martin. Does that sound familiar?"

"It might... I'm just not 100% sure," Sheba said. "He would have been lost... ten yahrens before the Destruction. I hadn't started the Academy then, but... if this

was the battle I remember my father talking about when he came back on furlon... that would explain it."

"Which battle?" Apollo wanted to know more. It would at least provide some more context to the lives of Vella and Puppis than he'd ever known before.

"Delta Aquinas. In the Hatari System."

Her husband nodded, "That's the right system. Do you... recall what happened in that?"

She shook her head, "Not a lot. That was long before my time on the Pegasus. I only remember him saying that it was a tough battle and he lost one of his best squadron leaders in it."

Apollo pondered that, "You know," he said, "That would explain a lot. If... Martin was one of your father's best squadron leaders, then... chances are your father saw him as a warrior in his mold. He'd be the kind of warrior who'd... regret the fact he ended up cut off from that life, and who'd be more inclined to do something impulsive."

"Maybe," Sheba admitted. "I didn't know him. I wouldn't know."

She decided it was time to bring things to an end. "Let's head back."

"Yeah, I think so."

Sheba went down the ladder first, followed by Apollo. Both of them left to ponder the mysteries of how things had unfolded in the lives of people they cared so deeply about.

Little knowing that at that precise moment of their conversation about the Pegasus and about a planet called Equellas, the unresolved stories of both were about to intersect.

Chapter One

Commander Cain of the Battlestar Pegasus had never been known for keeping a journal of any kind. He was a man who always believed that actions spoke much louder than words and as far as he'd been concerned throughout the many yahrens of his military career, he preferred to let the things he'd done as a warrior speak for themselves.

But it was different now. Events had changed in his life. And now... he wanted to keep a full, and complete record of all that had happened in his life and the life of his ship ever since he'd made the fateful decision to leave behind the most precious thing to him. A decision that still wrenched at his soul, but was one he knew he had to make. And by keeping a record... he hoped to let his beloved daughter Sheba know everything that had happened if the Lords didn't permit the reunion he still hoped would happen someday.

And that was why he was ready to start dictating anew. Like every other day aboard the Pegasus.

"It has been fully two yahrens and six sectars, since the Battle of Gomorrah, when I made the decision to take the Pegasus into hiding as part of my current master plan to one day inflict maximum terror on the Cylon Empire. The time since has been devoted primarily to keeping the Pegasus hidden from the Cylons, as well as the task of making this Battlestar as close to one-hundred percent efficiency and fighting capacity as is humanly possible. That way, when the time comes for us to truly emerge from the shadows and go on the offensive, we will be ready.

"With all damage to the ship itself fully repaired and replaced after all this time, the new priority is replenishing our ammunition supply. While it is clear that we can not increase our Viper capacity of forty-one, nor replace the four missiles used to destroy two basestars at Gomorrah, there remain many abandoned outposts and garrisons throughout the star system that conceivably contain forgotten supply depots that will enable us to fully restock our ammunition supplies for our vipers and our laser turrets. The more laser weaponry we draw from that can be converted into our on-ship firepower, the more formidable a threat we become.

"It has not been easy to spend all this time in the shadows where our actual combat activities have been confined to occasional commando style raids on isolated Cylon outposts that are not capable of realizing these activities are the product of a battlestar the Cylon Empire presumes to be dead. But *if* my primary goal of what I can accomplish on my own is to have any chance of succeeding, it has dictated this low-profile approach these past two and a half yahrens. It can not be accomplished by a battlestar that carries too many scars of old battle damage and diminished firing capacity. Nor can it be accomplished by a crew that isn't well-fed and lacks the means to fight the greater battles that are still to come. So that is why our activities have been confined to the shadows... making sure that what we've done has helped buy us the time needed to one day become a truly

formidable threat.

The Juggernaut paused and then grew reflective in a way that he would never dare show to anyone in his presence.

"Of course... there are many in my crew who continue to ask what is the true objective of what we can accomplish all by ourselves? These are the so-called 'Grumblers' who were steadfast in their loyalty to me following the Battle of Molocay and again in my conflicts with Adama, but who in their minds didn't expect that our parting from Adama would be permanent. To them... they see what I am doing as something that can only result in eventual suicide. And perhaps... deep down I recognize that the ultimate end for us, when the truly *final* battle plan I have in mind is implemented, I see the results only in terms of how much maximum damage is inflicted on the Empire's ability to ever care about the Galactica and her Fleet again, without confronting the fact it likely means our deaths. But I come from a tradition where the prospect of death is something to take for granted without any constant fear. If my death, and the death of my ship ultimately means that the people of the Fleet... which includes my beloved daughter... are able to never again fear the danger of Cylon pursuit across the Alpha Quadrant to the planet Earth that they seek... I will consider that more than worth it."

He paused and then allowed himself one more personal digression.

"And in the process, I will have atoned for the greatest mistake of my life when I failed to make the attempt to get home to the Colonies after Molocay and denied my people of my services at the time they were most needed. When I might have been able to prevent the Destruction of our civilization."

Just then, the intercom chime sounded, and Commander Cain set the microspeaker of his computer journal down, "Yes Tolen?"

"We're approaching the Hatari System, Commander," the executive officer's voice seemed to have a trace of something different than it's usual tone of efficiency.

"On my way," he immediately rose and flicked the switch off.

Once Cain was on the bridge, both he and Tolen were staring at the view screen in awe at the blue nebulous cloud that filled their line-of-vision.

"After twelve yahrens, it looks the same," Cain said wistfully.

"Yes," Tolen nodded. There was more than wistful memory in his tone though. Inside, there was a good deal of sadness and regret.

"They say warriors never return to the scenes of their old battles," the Juggernaut continued to look at the cloud grow closer, "But as always, it looks as though I'm proving to be an exception to everything they take for granted about a warrior."

"Sir," the executive officer turned to look at him, "Truthfully, how would you rank Delta Aquinas out of all the battles you've ever fought?"

Cain shrugged, "A qualified success. The Cylons were driven from the quadrant, but there was one thing we didn't do, and it's because of that, that we now find ourselves returning."

Tolen cast a somewhat sad glance at the floor, "There was one thing I didn't do back then, Commander. Unfortunately, it's something that can never be corrected."

The Juggernaut looked at him and frowned in amazement, "Tolen, are you trying to tell me that you still haven't let go of that?"

"I thought I had sir," Tolen said, "Until I learned that we'd be coming here."

Cain slowly shook his head, "Tolen," he said gently, "Captain Martin was one of the finest men I ever commanded. But what happened to him was part of the job. He knew that. You've never had any reason to blame yourself."

"I was his wingmate," Tolen said quietly, "And I took my eye off him during the battle. If I didn't have a reason, then I wouldn't have resigned as a combat flyer after that mission and transferred to Bridge Support."

"And halted your career in its tracks," an edge of coldness now entered Cain's voice, "You were a damn good combat warrior, Tolen. You could have had a career that would have had you commanding your own battlestar at the time of the Holocaust. As good a Bridge Officer as you became, and as good as an executive officer as you've been, you denied me of your true talents."

The executive officer was silent. If he needed any confirmation of the reason why he'd always known he'd never be given his own command, Cain had just given it to him.

"But I'm going to need you to put those talents to use," the Juggernaut continued, "You're the only other veteran of Delta Aquinas currently serving on the Pegasus, Tolen. That means you'll be responsible for planning and organizing all that we need to do."

Tolen frowned, "Sir?"

"You heard me," Cain was blunt, "I was only a participant from the bridge of this ship. You on the other hand, were on Delta Aquinas, and you know the area. That's why I'm counting on you to get a team of three other warriors together."

"And you expect me to take part in this as well?"

"Originally, I hadn't planned on that," he looked him in the eye, "But frankly Tolen, as a result of this conversation, I have changed my mind. You are going to be in command of this assignment. It's time you bury the ghosts of the past forever."

The executive officer visibly stiffened.

"Start going over the warriors you think will help the most," Cain's tone became pure business, "As soon as you've done that, assemble them in the briefing room and let them know what's at stake. The old battle charts are at your disposal."

"Yes sir," Tolen did not even bother trying to protest. Protest hadn't worked when he'd first tried to convince Cain of the folly of not staying with the Galactica. It certainly wasn't going to work now. Not with a man as implacable as the Juggernaut.

"And another thing," Cain flicked his swagger stick against Tolen's shoulder, "I expect you to be wearing something other than a bridge uniform when you get started."

As Tolen left the bridge, he didn't even bother with a natural comeback about needing the services of a Caprican tailor.

When he put on his brown flight uniform and jacket for the first time in yahrens though, he discovered to his amazement that he wouldn't have needed a tailor. It still fit with the same ease he'd worn it during his first six yahrens of service as a warrior aboard the Pegasus. And yet, even though the clothes fit perfectly it didn't ease the overall sense of discomfort he still felt. Selecting a team

for this assignment had been relatively easy. It had become clear to Tolen that since the Juggernaut had made his decision to leave the Galactica after the Battle of Gomorrah, the ranks of the Pegasus warriors could be divided into two groups. The majority of them, typified by the likes of Silver Spar Group Strike Leader Captain Skyler, had ultimately agreed with Cain's decision with few to no regrets. But there were others in the ranks, who had become known as the "Grumblers". They were warriors who had always been loyal to Cain in the past. They had stood by him when Commander Adama had briefly relieved him of command. But they were also warriors who had still expected the Pegasus to stay with the Galactica. They were warriors who had family and friends they had hoped to see once again and now they were cut off from them when they hadn't expected that to be the case. After more than two yahrens, they continued to still loyally serve Cain, but it had never been the same for them. If any of them had their druthers, they would have openly admitted their belief that they made the wrong choice in staying with Cain.

Tolen had decided that all of the men on this mission would be from the ranks of the Grumblers. To get them to realize that they were expected to do the necessary jobs for the greater good of survival which by extension meant helping the Galactica and the Fleet. The selection had finally come down to Lieutenant Banker, Lieutenant Angus, both veterans of Silver Spar Squadron, and Sergeant Doyle of Colonial Security. He had briefly considered Lieutenant Paris, who was rumored to be the worst of the Grumblers, but decided that he couldn't take the risk that Paris would be less professional in carrying out his duties. The other three, he knew he could trust to get the job done.

And so, it was those three who now sat in the briefing room and listened to what he had to tell them.

"All of you haven't been with the Pegasus long enough to remember the Battle of Delta Aquinas, twelve yahrens ago," Tolen began, "Before you understand what will be at stake on this mission, some background information will be necessary."

The executive officer then projected an image of a star chart on the screen behind him.

"This is the Hatari System," he ran his hand across the image, "It's comprised of literally dozens of planets and asteroids packed together, at least half of which are capable of sustaining human life."

Two of the three warriors began taking notes. All save Banker, whose expression was massively indifferent.

“Apparently some thousand to two thousand yahrens ago, prospectors from the Colonies first set out for this system, and according to what sketchy information we have, long-term settlements did take hold on some of these planets. It was because of that sketchy intelligence on isolated human settlements still existing, that the Cylons moved into this region twelve yahrens ago for the purpose of building a garrison here.”

A close-up of a solar system consisting of six planets now appeared on the screen and Tolen pointed to the fourth one.

“Delta Aquinas, although suitable for human life, was chosen by the Cylons because the lack of known human settlements facilitated their timetable by letting them establish a garrison first, before getting to work on destroying the populated planets. Once this information on the garrison construction was intercepted by Colonial Intelligence, the Fifth Fleet was sent in for the purpose of eliminating the Cylons from this system.”

“Sir?” Lieutenant Angus raised his hand, “Did the intelligence indicate how far these settlements had advanced in terms of their ability to defend themselves?”

“I’m glad you asked that, Angus,” Tolen said, “The intelligence reports indicated that none of the human settlements had reached a technology beyond that of the third millennium. Evidently, the prospectors who’d originally migrated there long ago, were not very bright in terms of developing basic technologies. None of them had any kind of spaceflight capability.”

“So the Fifth Fleet went in to stop a potential massacre from happening,” Sergeant Doyle noted.

“Exactly,” the executive officer nodded, “We went in full force to destroy the garrison, and hopefully seize their ammunition storage bunkers.”

“I think I can guess what happened, Colonel,” Doyle jumped in again, “The garrison was destroyed and the Cylons driven out, but the ammunition is still there.”

Tolen continued to nod, “It was not for lack of trying to get the ammunition though. The Pegasus and the Celestia were able to get in the first strike, but by the time we got assault teams in to secure the area, two basestars showed up to try

and pull-out all the remaining Cylons.”

Another picture filled the screen. This was an overhead shot of the landscape showing a massive military fortress, with numerous markings placed to indicate various sections.

“This is the layout of the Cylon garrison,” Tolen pointed, “The ammunition bunkers were located here. The plan we operated under, was to send in a one-man shuttle stripped of all excess weight, and piloted by Lieutenant Staley, to load all the surplus ammunition. Overhead, two squadrons commanded by Silver Spar leader Captain Martin were to provide escort for Lieutenant Staley’s shuttle back to the Pegasus.”

“One man to load an entire garrison of ammunition into a shuttle?” Angus frowned in disbelief. “That’s impossible.”

The executive officer smiled thinly. “Exactly why Commander Cain planned it that way. It was something the Cylon forces down there never would have anticipated. The idea being that the ground forces would be cut off from the ammunition storage facility as a result of our bombardment, and thus enable just one man to march in and load all the boxes he could manage in a span of about ten to fifteen centons. Cain ran some tests and the computer said one man could load forty boxes in that span if he parked the shuttle right by the storage facility. If one man could load that much, then no point wasting an extra warrior who might be needed for viper duty in the battle. Plus, there was the fact that a smaller one-man shuttle had a better chance of eluding immediate detection when it entered the planet’s atmosphere than the standard two-man shuttle.”

“Incredible.” Doyle shook his head.

Tolen paused before resuming, “Unfortunately, the plan was dependent on the fact that the Cylon ground force was all we would be dealing with, and that our vipers would not have to be worrying about return fire as we bombed the garrison and cut off the storage lockers from the rest of the base while Lieutenant Staley went to work. As it turned out, Staley had not yet gotten off Delta Aquinas when four squadrons of Cylon fighters suddenly descended on us followed by the two baseships. What happened next, was probably the most massive combat engagement the Pegasus went through until Molocay. Almost half of Silver Spar group was lost, including Captain Martin.”

“Some things never change,” Banker muttered under his breath, as he

absently gazed at the floor.

Tolen glared at the disgruntled warrior for a moment, but decided not to say anything about it yet. Instead, he took a breath and went back to the board.

"At any rate," he continued, "By the time the battle was over, all contact with Lieutenant Staley had been lost. And because we had the two basestars on the run, Commander Cain decided it was more important to pursue them than to go back for the ammunition. Since one of the escaping basestars was destroyed, the decision turned out to be correct from a short and long term standpoint."

"And after all these yahrens, that ammunition is still on Delta Aquinas?" Angus asked.

"All intelligence indicates that the Cylons never came back to the quadrant," Tolen answered, "So yes, it should still be there amidst the garrison remains," he skipped a beat and chuckled grimly, "Along with Lieutenant Staley's shuttle."

Banker continued to look at the floor and shook his head in disgust.

"Why didn't the Pegasus or any other ship go back to look for the ammunition after the battle?" Doyle asked.

"Because after the battle, with the Cylons expelled from the system, it wasn't worth the time and effort diverting ships to where they weren't needed." Tolen said. "Until now, there hasn't been any reason for any Colonial ship to go back to the Hatari System."

"I see," Angus nodded. "So how do we end up retrieving the stuff?"

"We'll be using two shuttles, which is all we can afford to spare, and which should be enough to handle forty boxes in an unstripped condition." the executive officer said firmly, "It's imperative that we get in and out of there quickly, and avoid all contact with any of the human settlements on the other planets. We can't run the risk of someone spotting ships from the Pegasus and using that information as leverage with any Cylons that might conceivably come back here some day. That would defeat the overall master plan we're still operating under of not wanting to tip off the Cylon High Command that we're still alive."

This time, Banker let out a grunt that was indistinct in terms of the words but the tone was abundantly clear to Tolen.

He shut the monitor off and looked about the room, "Angus, Doyle, report to Alpha Bay and stand by. Banker, don't go. I want a word with you alone."

As soon as the other two warriors had gone, the executive officer then came up to where Banker was sitting, with the coldest expression he could muster.

"All right Lieutenant," Tolen said with equal coldness, "Suppose we clear the air right now, before we go any further on this mission."

"I'm listening," Banker said with flat indifference.

"You sure as frack didn't give me that impression during the briefing," Tolen shot back, "Repeat the major details of the mission assignment, now."

"Yes sir," Banker looked at him, "Delta Aquinas, the ammunition stored in sector 4-CG of the abandoned Cylon garrison as the overhead view indicated, which is where we will make the first attempt to discover the location..."

"Very good," Tolen said, "Can I expect similar attentiveness during the mission?"

Banker got to his feet.

"Colonel," he said, "Right now, I hate Cain's guts more than any other warrior on this ship with the possible exception of Paris, and if those feelings seem obvious at times, then I'm not going to apologize for that. But one thing I'm not, is a man who shirks his duty when he's asked to do a job and I'm not about to start now."

"Good," the executive officer looked him in the eye, "Stick to that, Banker. Now in the meantime, get down there and join Lieutenant Angus. Sergeant Doyle will go in my shuttle."

"Pegasus Core Command to Delta Aquinas shuttles, you are cleared to launch," Major Ham's deep voice intoned.

"Affirmative, Core Command," Tolen replied as he made the final adjustment to his belt, and then switched frequencies, "Beta shuttle, prepare to follow."

"We won't be taking our eyes off you, sir," Angus replied.

Tolen then looked at the console and took a breath. How long had it been

since he'd last flown one of these things? At least five yahrens. He'd been able to keep flying these things on occasion long after he'd stopped flying a viper.

And that, he thought further as he flicked a switch, had happened right after the last time he'd been here, twelve yahrens ago. When the man who had been his wingmate, his squadron leader, and his best friend since Academy days had been lost in battle.

As the shuttle roared to life, exited the landing bay and began its trek toward the nebulous cloud where the planets of the Hatari System lay, Tolen found himself reflecting further on Martin. When he'd entered the Academy, Tolen had never thought he'd meet a man with a greater passion and zest to become a combat flyer than himself. That had changed the micron he met Martin, a fellow native of Virgon. The two struck-up a fast friendship after discovering that they shared a mutual passion for replaying historic battles on the war games computer. From that point on, many long centars after Academy classes would find Tolen and Martin engaging each other in a contest of wills over who had the better mastery of military strategy, while other evenings would find them in the flight battle simulators, seeing who could outrun the other in simulated combat.

After four yahrens at the Academy, it soon became apparent to Tolen that as good as he was, Martin was better. Then again, it had long become clear to Tolen that Martin simply had more desire. Whereas Tolen had learned to broaden himself by finding the time for dating young women, and going out with his fellow cadets on other activities, it seemed as though nothing could ever break Martin away from the war games computer and the flight simulator. It was as if the singular devotion to combat and fighting the Cylons was all that gave any meaning to Martin's life.

And so, when both men were assigned to the Battlestar Pegasus, it didn't surprise Tolen that his friend rose through the ranks more rapidly, and that after six yahrens, Martin had already been promoted to Captain and was the commander of Silver Spar Squadron. But he'd still thought enough of his old friend's ability to make Tolen his wingmate, and Tolen considered that the highest respect he could ever receive from Martin. It was something he took to heart every time they participated in a battle.

But Delta Aquinas had been different from all the other battles they'd participated in. It seemed as though there had been more Cylon fighters in the heavens than at any other time. Coupled with the additional concerns over providing cover for Lieutenant Staley's shuttle, and the protection of the other

planets with their primitive human settlements, the usual pattern of tight organization that Martin had always kept over Silver Spar Squadron seemed to collapse. This time, the vipers and the Cylon fighters were simply flying all over the place with almost no coordination.

Somehow, Tolen had managed to hook-up with Martin just in time to see a new phalanx of seven Cylon fighters enter their area. But once Tolen had radioed that no one could find Lieutenant Staley's shuttle on their scanner, Silver Spar leader had ordered him to pull back and try to find it.

Tolen had hesitated for a brief centon. As good as he knew Martin was, the thought of letting his friend go up against seven fighters seemed like too much of a burden to take up. But after another forceful order from Martin to go-back and look for the shuttle, Tolen finally gave in, hit his turbo and sped back toward Delta Aquinas.

He arrived to find four more vipers from Silver Spar locked in another dogfight with ten Cylon fighters. The battle continued for almost ten centons until a recall order came from the Pegasus. The two basestars were pulling out of the quadrant, and the Fifth Fleet had decided to pursue. By the time the disorganized remnants of Silver Spar had made it back to the battlestar, Tolen discovered to his horror that Martin was not among the survivors. No one else in the squadron could recall seeing him on their scanner to know how and when it had happened, but whatever the case may have been, the brilliant life and career of Captain Martin was over.

Almost immediately, Tolen found himself plunged into a deep depression over his friend's death. Not simply because Martin had been his best friend aboard the Pegasus, but because he felt that he was ultimately responsible for what had happened to him. A good wingmate would never have heeded Martin's request that he could take care of the seven fighters himself. And he knew that if he hadn't been so blinded by Martin's talents as a flyer that he had seen ever since their Academy days, then he would have followed his instincts and stayed with him. What only made it worse for Tolen was that the reason why he'd been ordered away, to search for Staley's shuttle, had all been for nothing. Just as the battle's intensity prevented anyone from ever locating what had happened to Martin, so too had it been with Staley. It seemed likely that it had been destroyed before getting off Delta Aquinas.

When the battle finally ended with the destruction of one of the two basestars, and the Fifth Fleet returned to the Colonies for overhaul and repair, Tolen's depression reached the point where he decided that he could no longer be a

combat flyer. And so, he had requested a transfer to bridge duty, which a reluctant Cain agreed to. And thus began his second career that in the twelve yahrens since had seen him go from the Pegasus's weapons officer, to chief bridge officer, and finally to executive officer.

He found himself enjoying his new responsibilities, and as time passed, he discovered that the only way he could prevent the past from haunting him, was to block all memories of Martin and the battle from his mind. It was a subject he felt so strongly about that when he became married two yahrens later, he pointedly refused to tell his wife why he'd left flight duty, and it was a vow he'd stuck to throughout their marriage. All the way up to the day the Pegasus "disappeared" at the Battle of Molocay, and he'd been plunged into a similar depression at the thought that his wife might not ever know he was still alive.

But those concerns became moot when word of the destruction of the Colonies came through to the Pegasus. And when they had been reunited with the Galactica, a check through their Fleet Personnel Computer only confirmed what Tolen had already known, that his wife had been one of the fifteen billion victims of the Holocaust.

His wife's death was a tragedy he'd long since been able to put into perspective, because he knew that there was nothing he could have done to prevent that. But Martin's death was different. He knew he could have done something then. And that was why the return to Delta Aquinas after all these yahrens only reopened those painful feelings he'd experienced at the time.

But as the executive officer continued to guide the lead shuttle through the outermost cloud of the nebulae that would take them into the Hatari System, practicality finally returned to him. If he had to give Lieutenant Banker a stern lecture on the need to put aside his hostility to Cain in order to get the job done, then he knew he had to practice what he preached and put aside the bad memories of what had happened twelve yahrens ago as well.

After another centon, the swirling clouds of the nebulae faded, and several planets now became visible to both Tolen and Doyle.

"Which one is Delta Aquinas?" Doyle asked.

Tolen motioned his arm to the right, "The one that looks like a place where the Cylons would build a garrison. The nondescript grey one right there," he then adjusted his headset, "Beta shuttle, do you copy?"

"Took a bump coming through the cloud sir, but we're here," Angus replied.

"Good," Tolen said, "Landing coordinates programmed. We should be on the ground in fifteen centons."

"It'll be nice to breathe some real air again after three yahrens," Angus added dryly.

Tolen almost smirked, "I've been there, Angus. It isn't much. One breath there, and you'll already be yearning for the purified recycled atmosphere of the Pegasus."

"Cylon residue, no doubt," Doyle grinned.

Inside the second shuttle, Angus turned to Banker and noticed the sullen expression on his fellow warrior's face.

"What's the matter, Banker?" Angus gently needled, "Not willing to join in the merriment about the planet's air?"

Banker continued to stare ahead, "Who gives a frack anyway?"

Angus shook his head in disgust, "Banker, now is not the time to keep stewing over Cain."

"What else has there been to do, these last two plus yahrens" he kept looking ahead, "We hop around from system to system, keeping a low profile while we fix our ship and restock our ammunition. And for what? So the Merchant of Death can take us out in a last blaze of glory at some point?"

"I hate it too, Banker," Angus turned away from him and returned his attention to the shuttle ahead of them, "But only because I had to find myself left with no choice but to go along for the ride. I don't fault Cain for wanting to do things his way. But the least he could have done was make it clear that this was what we were in for. If he had, I would have evacuated myself to the Galactica."

"Kobol knows I would have," Banker's bitter tone increased.

"Yeah, yeah, we all know. And every Grumbler, Banker, knows the real reason you wish you'd bugged out was so you could keep pining for Sheba. Why don't you just admit that's the real reason for your attitude?"

"You're out of line," Banker hissed.

"Am I?" Angus acidly retorted, "Then you tell me why you still keep a picture of her inside the top of your locker." Banker recoiled in shock, and Angus decided to press on.

"Oh yeah, Banker, we know. All of us know. Stop trying to think we don't. It's one thing Loyalists and Grumblers both know how to have a few laughs about behind your back."

He looked away from him and went back to monitoring his console, "And the reason I'm telling you all this, Banker, is because for the duration of this mission, I am no longer a Grumbler. I'm going to do my fracking job and do it well, and you'd better do the same. And that means the only time I feel like hearing you open your mouth will be if you want to be official, or if you'll be willing to lighten up. Act like a Grumbler and I'll shove your astrum out the airlock before it's over."

"Yes, *sir!*" Banker sarcastically and acidly retorted. "As of now, pending official business, I'm invoking my right to remain silent."

The silence in the shuttle was as cold inside as out, as Beta shuttle followed Alpha shuttle in toward the planet ahead of them.

Chapter Two

The surface of Delta Aquinas was flat and desolate, equally matching the nondescript image the planet projected from the stars. As Tolen set the lead shuttle down and exited, he could see instantly why no human prospectors had ever settled on this planet. There was literally nothing of value to be found here.

Until now, he gently corrected himself as he and Doyle watched the other shuttle carrying Angus and Banker land thirty feet behind him. A centon later, both warriors emerged and had joined the other two.

"How far are we from the garrison?" Angus asked.

"Right over that clearing just ahead," Tolen motioned, "We may have to blow some of the doors inside there, so bring some low-level charge packs."

"Already have them," Banker patted the extra belt around his waist, "I believe the briefing notes indicated that we might need them for just such a purpose."

"Good work, Banker," Tolen smiled thinly, "Glad to see how focused you are."

The lieutenant's return smile was equally thin, and equally devoid of mirth.

The four warriors then trudged off on the dirt flatland to the small rise ahead. When they reached the top, they looked down and saw the abandoned Cylon garrison, just fifty feet away.

What had once been an imposing structure designed to strike terror into the eyes of any non-Cylons who ever beheld it, was now a pathetic remnant of its former self. Although the walls remained intact in their original position, the once-shiny metal showed clear signs of blast and fire damage, while other sections had slowly rusted over time.

"My, my," Sergeant Doyle noted, "Looks as though you did an efficient job of turning this place into a mess twelve yahrens ago, Colonel."

Tolen allowed himself a small chuckle, "The irony of it Sergeant, is that it will be better for us if we weren't so efficient. It won't do us any good if the ammunition depot was destroyed back then."

The four made their way down the incline to the garrison entrance. The steel door hung open on its rusted hinges, and they went in. No sooner were they inside when something caught Tolen's eye and caused him to abruptly pull out his laser pistol and wheel into a firing crouch.

"Colonel, relax," Angus said gently, "It's only a dead centurion."

The executive officer slowly exhaled as he got back to a standing position and put his pistol back in his holster. He then went over to the long-dead console, where the broken but intact body of a Cylon centurion still sat in its chair.

"Can you believe that?" he mused aloud, "Still keeping watch after all these yahrens."

"Thank the Lords it's been a silent vigil," Doyle quipped.

The four resumed walking past more wrecked equipment and more dead centurions as they went deeper and deeper into the complex. Numerous holes in the metal roof above caused the wind from outside to echo through with a haunting tone amidst the decayed and collapsed garrison.

"Sure seems spooky," Banker spoke up for the first time, "How much further to Compartment 4-CG?"

"Around this corridor up ahead," Tolen said as they stepped over a collapsed portion of ceiling bulkhead. When they reached the door that led to the ammunition bunker, they saw that it was sealed in the closed position.

"Looks like we'll have to blow it open," Banker started to remove one of the charges from his belt.

Angus went up to the control panel and then held up a hand, "Hold on, I don't think we're going to need an explosive."

"What do you mean?" Tolen frowned.

"The auxiliary power unit for this section is still intact. I think with an adjustment or two, I can get it operating and we'll have power restored for this whole section of the complex."

Tolen looked at the other two warriors, "An evaluation please, on whether that seems prudent."

"I say we chance it," Doyle said, "With full power back, we'll save a lot of time getting this stuff out of here."

"There is the danger that some live circuits could trigger an electrical explosion," Banker pointed out, "Twelve yahrens is a long-time for these circuits to be inactive."

"No chance," Angus shook his head, "All the wires are in place. The wall here is intact, so the safety coating on all of them must still be intact as well."

Tolen took a breath and then nodded, "All right Angus, go ahead."

The lieutenant calmly went to work on the control panel to one side of the door. After several delicate adjustments, he then pressed the switch that would turn the console on. At first, there was nothing, but then, a groaning noise echoed throughout the corridor as machinery came to life for the first time in twelve long yahrens. Several of the overhead lights that had been dark suddenly flickered before coming on.

"It works," Banker was amazed, "It really works."

"Who'd have thought it," Doyle chuckled, "The Cylons really knew how to build them sturdy."

Angus turned his attention to the panel controlling the door. A micron later, the compartment door leading to the ammunition storage room opened. As they entered, they could see the restored power taking effect throughout the entire room. Long-dead consoles now blinked to life with activity again. It seemed as if the room had been functioning smoothly all this time. But on the other side of the room, a large blasted hole in the wall that exposed the desolate landscape outside provided a sharp reminder of the battle that had taken place long ago that the restored power could never eliminate.

"The bunker lockers are over there," Tolen pointed as he and the other warriors walked across the room amidst the ghostly echo of the wind swirling in.

"Sealed shut," Angus grunted as they came up to them, "But with the power back on, that should be no problem."

The four of them took an anxious breath as Angus went to work on the consoles controlling the storage lockers. The low beeping noises of the buttons being pressed sounded, and then to the sound of compressed air escaping, the lockers all opened together.

And then, the anxious anticipation that had been building inside each of the four men suddenly evaporated and was replaced by expressions of crestfallen disappointment.

"It's gone," Banker broke the silence, "It's all gone."

The executive officer ran his hand inside the empty locker. They should have been packed completely with ammunition cartridges. But there wasn't a single piece to be found in any of the lockers.

"Looks as though the Cylons were able to take it with them when they were chased out of here," Doyle said glumly.

"Not a chance of that," Tolen shook his head, "I was there. There were no Cylon shuttles or cargo ships that could have done it."

"Whatever the case, it seems as though we came here for nothing," Banker said with the faintest trace of bitterness.

The executive officer then looked back at the gaping hole in the wall and snapped his fingers.

"Sir?" Angus frowned as they followed him over.

"Banker," Tolen leaned in front of the hole, "You're the explosives expert. Would you say this hole was caused by laser turbos from a viper, or from a high-level explosive charge?"

Banker got to his knees and inspected the charred metal that bent inward and slowly nodded, "Definitely not caused by viper fire, or else the rest of the room would have been shot to Hades. This was done by a charge planted on the outside, all right."

"And I know who planted it," Tolen said as he pieced it all together, "Lieutenant Staley. He actually made it in here and loaded the ammunition into his shuttle."

"Then he was better than you ever could have imagined, Colonel." Angus noted dryly. "Because that means he had time to load forty boxes and then shut the lockers to fool the Cylons into thinking everything was okay before he left."

"But that also means that we're really at a dead end, Colonel," Banker got to his feet.

"How so?" the executive officer stood up as well.

"We made a thorough scan of the area before we landed, didn't we Angus?"

"We did," Angus admitted, "There was no trace of any shuttle wreckage here or anywhere else on the planet."

"So that means if Staley was able to load the ammunition from here, as it seems likely that he did," Banker went on, "Then he took off, and during the chaos of the battle, the Cylons blasted him into infinity."

Tolen absently drummed his fingers against the wall.

"I think sir, it's clear that we came here for nothing," Banker said, "The sooner we get back to the Pegasus, the better. If the ammunition's gone, we don't have a mission objective to fulfill any longer."

The executive officer was silent for a moment and then slowly shook his head.

"Not yet, Banker," he said gently, "Not yet. There's still one other thing we have to consider before we scrub the mission."

"Which is?" Angus asked.

Before Tolen could respond, a look of concern suddenly passed over Doyle's face.

"Something wrong, Doyle?" Tolen asked.

"Sir, is it my imagination, or am I hearing something funny?"

The four of them grew silent and listened about.

"Just the wind from outside, Doyle," Angus said, "I know it sounds spooky, but that's all it is."

"No," the same look of cautious concern crossed over Tolen's face, "That's not the wind. It's coming," his eyes suddenly locked on to the compartment door on the other side of the room, "It's coming from there."

They made their way up to the door, with each warrior cautiously drawing his laser pistol.

Tolen pressed his ear to the wall and listened. The noise was much more distinct. A back-and-forth whirring sound that was quite familiar to him.

"Holy Frack," he whispered in horror as he backed up, "There are live Cylons on the other side."

"How?" Angus and the rest were shocked.

Tolen looked back at the door they'd come through, "A sleeper contingent. When power was restored to this section, it turned them back on."

"I'll go shut it off," Angus started toward the entrance.

"Not yet!" Tolen hissed through clenched teeth, "Not yet. At any rate, that's only going to prevent more from waking up. It's not going to do a thing for the ones already out there."

"We have to take them on sir," Doyle said, "A single one of those tincans could find a way to fix communications and have a basestar in this area in less than a sectan."

"Agreed," Tolen nodded, "But there's no telling how many we're dealing with."

"We've got to take a look and find out," Banker said grimly, "As soon as we know, we can drop back and regroup, and then kill the power."

"Okay, open the door Doyle. Banker, Angus, cover me."

The sergeant's heart was pounding as he flicked the switch. The door slid open, and they instantly saw three Cylon centurions standing just in front of the entryway.

"Fire!" Tolen shouted as they opened fire with all the fury and intensity they could summon. The lead two centurions were hit instantly and collapsed to the floor.

Quickly, the four warriors began to drop back as several more centurions became visible.

"At least five, six more!" Doyle shouted as he resumed position.

Just then, the new column of centurions entered the room as the four Pegasus warriors fell back on the main entrance. Armed with their own bulkier laser blasters, they returned fire.

As Tolen backed out into the corridor, he looked frantically at Angus, "As soon as they're all in, kill the power and get them sealed in there!"

"That's all of them, just those six!" Doyle shouted as he fired another shot.

"Kill the power!" Tolen barked at Angus.

As the lieutenant frantically went to work on the control circuits, a shot from one of the centurions then struck Doyle squarely in the chest. The sergeant collapsed to the floor in a motionless dead heap.

A horrified Tolen fired back and took out the lead centurion that had killed Doyle. He saw the Cylon crash to the floor just as the door slid shut and the lights

above went out.

"Doyle!" Banker looked down in alarm.

"No good, he's dead!" Tolen shook off the anguish going through him. Casualties were the last thing he expected to have on a mission like this.

"I've got them sealed off from the way they came in, sir, but they can still get out through the hole in the wall."

"We've got to cut them off from there!" the executive officer started to dash down the corridor, "Come on!"

And then, without looking back at the body of their fallen comrade, the three warriors ran down the corridor back to the garrison entrance as fast as they could go.

When they emerged from the garrison and back into the desolate landscape, they could see the Cylons emerging from the blasted hole on the other side of the complex.

"Felgercarb," Tolen hissed, "I shortcounted them. There are seven of them. That's too much for the three of us to handle."

"Recommendation, sir?" Banker could scarcely conceal the anger that was raging inside him.

The executive officer sucked in his breath, "Okay, here's what we'll do. Banker, you and I will fire and create a diversion to get them back toward here. Angus, when that happens, you get your astrum back to one of the shuttles and get the landram out."

"Got it," Angus grimly nodded.

"Stand by," Tolen motioned to Banker, "Stand by and now!"

On cue, Tolen and Banker leapt in front and opened a massive volley of fire toward the seven centurions in the distance. At the same time, Angus began sprinting off in the other direction up the incline that led back to the two shuttles.

None of the centurions were hit by the barrage from the two Pegasus warriors. But the Cylons did turn toward them and lost sight of Angus, which was

all they had hoped to accomplish at that point.

"Take cover!" Tolen shouted at Banker. The lieutenant scrambled in back of a rock outcropping while the executive officer shielded himself behind the blasted opening of the garrison entrance.

They could hear the whirring sounds of the centurions draw closer, and the thud of their metallic boots against the ground grow louder.

Tolen bolted out and fired one shot that took out the second centurion in the column. He ducked back and safely avoided the return fire that slammed against the door.

Thank you very much, Commander, he said to himself in disgust as he heard another barrage hit against the door.

From the other side, Banker popped up from behind the rocks and took out another centurion from the rear of the column. That caused the five remaining to scatter about in the area near the main entrance. Banker looked back over his shoulder, hoping he'd see the reassuring sight of Angus driving the landram down the incline. But he knew it would take at least several centons before Angus could have it started and away. He had to keep buying some more time. The lieutenant decided to chance it to another outcropping. He dodged more than six shots from the five centurions before he made it over.

From the main entrance, Tolen felt his heart pump faster as he got off another round but scored no hits. If any one of them drew closer, he'd have to retreat back inside the garrison complex, and he'd be trapped inside for all intents and purposes.

And then, a loud roar erupted from the distance and caused Tolen and Banker to momentarily smile in relief. They could see the landram descending the incline headed straight for the main entrance. The five centurions were caught off guard by the sudden appearance of the landram. They all turned their attention to the approaching craft and opened fire on it. Several sparks erupted as their blasts ricocheted off the vehicle's surface. But now that they were focused on the landram, the five of them had now left their backs totally exposed to the two hiding warriors.

"Take 'em out!" Tolen shouted as he leapt into the open and fired rapidly. From behind the outcropping, Banker also leapt out and opened a barrage.

In less than ten seconds, all five of the remaining Cylons collapsed to the ground.

"Oh God," Banker sighed as he and the executive officer trudged out to meet each other, while simultaneously the landram came to a stop, "God, that was the last thing I expected to go up against."

"Forget it," Tolen said bitterly, "I don't know why I didn't think of the possibility of a sleeper brigade. The full responsibility for this rests with me."

The landram door opened and Angus stepped out, "Is that all of them, sir?"

"That's all," the executive officer said, "Damn."

"Do we go back for Doyle?" Banker asked quietly.

"No," Tolen said bluntly, "There's nothing we can do for him, and we can't take time out to lug his body around."

"At least we can bury him with some dignity!" Banker protested.

"Lieutenant," Tolen responded sharply, "We don't have time. The way things stand now, I'm not even going to waste time reloading this landram. The sooner we get off here, the better."

"Sir, if you'll forgive me, that's not a good idea," Angus gently cut in, "The whole point of our mission is to leave no trace that we've been here, and if the body of one of our men is left in the complex, along with an abandoned landram, than any Cylon wandering by here is going to learn right away that the Pegasus is still alive and well."

Tolen threw up his arms in exasperation, "All right Angus, you go ahead and reload the landram into the shuttle you took it from. Banker and I will...do what we can for Doyle."

Banker seemed too bitter to say anything as he and Tolen went back into the complex to retrieve Doyle's body. When they re-emerged ten centons later, Angus was already waiting for them, having finished returning the landram to the shuttle.

"We'll have to put him in the cargo hold and jettison him into the atmosphere," Tolen said bluntly, "I'm sorry if that sounds callous, but there's no other way. If it's too risky to leave him here, it's equally risky to leave a burial site

that can be excavated."

There were no other words spoken as the three of them carried their fallen comrade back to the lead shuttle, where the body was placed into the empty cargo compartment.

Tolen then looked down at gently crossed the arms of Doyle together and closed the eyes. The sergeant almost gave the impression of one who was merely asleep.

"Sergeant Doyle was a good warrior, who gave his life in the service of the Colonial nation," the executive officer said solemnly, "We shall miss him and always remember his bravery and his sacrifice."

And then, Tolen pressed the button that caused the cargo compartment door to slam shut.

"Where to now, sir?" Angus asked quietly, "Back to the Pegasus?"

"No," the executive officer shook his head, "We still have one option to consider before we scrub the mission. We know the ammunition isn't here on Delta Aquinas. But we know that if Staley got off the planet safely, then he could have made it to one of the other planets in this solar system."

A look of dubious anger came over Banker's face.

"Are you saying we have to search five other planets in this system?"

"Not all five, Banker," Tolen replied with coolness, "Only two other planets in this system are capable of sustaining human life. The only chance we have of finding the ammunition is if Staley made it to one of them."

"The two inhabited planets," Angus noted, "Colonel, it is something of a longshot gamble."

"And if I didn't take it, Cain would throw our astrums in the brig for incompetence and send in some men who would do it," the executive officer sharply retorted, "The sooner you both realize that, the easier it will be for all of us. As long as I am in command of this mission, we are going to do every last thing possible to make this mission a success! Now have I made myself clear?"

Angus nodded, "Perfectly."

"Banker?" the executive officer wheeled.

It took the disgruntled lieutenant a micron's delay before he too nodded.

"That wasn't quick enough," Tolen came to within an inch of him, "When I give an order, I want to hear you respond immediately. Is that understood?"

Banker tried not to look as if he'd caved-in, "Yes sir!"

Tolen then decided now was the time to go into the mode of an Academy drill instructor intimidating a first-day cadet. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

"YES SIR, SIR!" he was at rigid, ram-rod attention.

"Then let's get going," Tolen exhaled as he made his way back to the lead shuttle, "Angus, you'll pilot Beta shuttle solo. Banker, you're coming with me."

The three of them made their way back. Angus went back to the second shuttle, while Banker was first to enter the lead one. Before entering, Tolen turned around and cast one last look at the garrison, where the rays of the sun glinted off the bodies of the dead centurions.

"Goodbye Delta Aquinas," he whispered under his breath, "You've sure as frack wrecked my life enough to last a lifetime."

And then, Tolen entered the shuttle and the hatch slammed shut.

Chapter Three

As soon as the shuttle had reached escape velocity from Delta Aquinas, a grim-faced Tolen calmly pressed the button that would empty the storage compartment of its contents. The computer readout of the shuttle's weight load was all he needed to know that the task he'd been forced to perform was done.

"The Lords of Kobol be with you for eternity, Sergeant Doyle", Tolen whispered as he took the shuttle on a heading away from the planet.

Banker cast a look back at the planet, "I almost envy him, Colonel," he said wistfully, "At least he doesn't have to do anymore waiting for the inevitable end we all face."

"That end comes to every human who was ever fated by God to live, Banker,"

Tolen wasn't going to let the disgruntled lieutenant goad him into another argument, "It's the same for those we left behind on the Galactica as it is for us."

"They still have a chance to enjoy things that we never will again."

The executive officer looked over at him.

"Like what?" he decided he wanted to hear this, "Level with me, Banker."

Banker felt himself growing uncomfortable, having been through this already with Angus. He realized he'd have been better off staying silent.

"Nothing, sir," he said, "I've said too much as it is, and... I'm sorry. I won't let that happen again."

"I'm going to hold you to that... Lieutenant," the executive officer put an edge of the drill instructor tone back into his voice. He then adjusted the radio to contact the other shuttle. "Angus? You copy?"

"Affirmative sir, just reached escape velocity."

"Good. Now here's how the plan of attack goes. The only two planets we can check are number five and number six, since they're the only ones Staley could have escaped to. I'll start a scan beam of five, and you take care of six. The technology of these planets is so backwards that the wreck of a shuttle or any kind of craft should stick out like a socialator in an Otori sect gathering."

"Sir," Banker leaned forward, "I suggest that instead of splitting up now, it might be better if the two shuttles worked together on one planet at a time."

"I agree sir," Angus affirmed, "We should save more time that way."

Tolen nodded, "Sound thinking. Okay Angus, follow me in. Next stop is planet number six in the system. It's called Equellas."

"Equellas?" Banker raised an eyebrow, "And before that, Delta Aquinas? Who the frack came up with those planet names, anyway? They don't make any sense."

"Colonial star mapper, Aquinas of Gemon first mapped the system. His readings only spotted four planets so that's why the first four are Alpha Aquinas through Delta Aquinas. Subsequent mapping discovered the other two planets and they were named according to discoverers prerogative. Don't ask me why they

came up with Equellas." He paused, "Try remembering how star mapping and planetary discovery worked if you want to keep yourself up on what's in this and any other system we'll be checking out in the future."

How long a future will that be? Banker left his grumbling thought unspoken this time

Slowly, the sixth planet of the solar system drew closer to them. The greenish tinge of Equellas evoked a far more pleasant feeling in each of the three Pegasus warriors than the foreboding grayness of Delta Aquinas had.

"Now that looks like a planet humans would settle on," Banker noted.

"Agreed," the executive officer nodded, "Angus, assume orbital arc opposite to ours. This way we should cover the maximum of the planet's surface. Keep your scanner on high coordinated to the metallic composition of a Colonial craft."

"Orbit achieved, and now activating scanners."

"Affirmative that. Alpha shuttle now activating our own."

Silence then came over the three warriors as they focused their attention on the computer readouts.

"I'm picking up the human settlement," Banker observed, "Looks as though they've stayed concentrated in just one region on the planet."

"And it looks as though they didn't do much advancing in two thousand yahrens," Tolen sighed, "Their settlement actually predates the beginning of the war with the Cylons. It almost makes you wonder if they ever learned about it."

"Now that would be a life worth envying," Banker said.

The executive officer looked at him, "For the first time Lieutenant, I concur with you."

As Banker went back to his scanner, his brows suddenly arched upward, "Colonel, I think I'm picking up something. We've definitely got a contact on the ground composed of more refined metal. Definitely not indigenous to the planet."

"Good," Tolen's eyes lit up, "Keep with it. Angus, rendezvous here and focus your beam on planet sector delta three, mark zero, five, eight."

"Sir, look at this!" for the first time Banker sounded a note of enthusiasm, "I've got two contacts now, the other registering within ten kilometers of the first. Both comprised of the same substance."

"This is something really worth investigating," Tolen could scarcely believe the good luck that now seemed to be coming their way, "How far is the location from the human settlement?"

"About twenty-five kilometers. Indications are that both contacts lie outside the agricultural regions and are smack in the middle of the desert."

"Colonel!" now Angus' excited voice broke through, "I've got both contacts now, and let me make a correction there. I register three contacts, all within a twenty kilometer range."

"I've got them too," Tolen's enthusiasm rose, "Let's head on in to a point somewhere in the center between all three. If our luck holds, we'll be out of here in less than a centar."

Tolen then took the shuttle out of orbit and began a graceful approach that would take them down to the planet surface.

When they landed, they found a desert region that seemed more foreboding than the landscape of Delta Aquinas had been. Even so, the knowledge that there was no possibility of finding live Cylons this time made the region seem infinitely safer. Moments after they were on the ground, the two landrams emerged from the shuttles into the cold desert night.

"Angus, you head for the first contact to the north," Tolen radioed, "Banker and I will take the contact to the south. If both of them turn out to be dead-ends, we'll try the third one to the west."

"Okay, I'll keep my channel open."

As Tolen guided his landram across the sandy surface, the nightwinds occasionally kicked up some of the sand against the windshield.

"Hungry sir?" Banker absently nibbled on a protein chunk from the ration kit.

"Don't mind if I do," the executive officer took the offered morsel of food while keeping his eyes facing front, "God, this tastes like it was packaged before we last left Caprica."

"Probably right sir. I don't think this landram's been used since long before Molocay, so the ration kit probably wasn't replaced."

"Now there's a complaint Cain will listen to," Tolen said as he swallowed the unappetizing chunk, "I'll take it up with him when we get back."

A beeping sound then emitted from the scanner on the main console.

"We're closing in on it," Banker hunched forward, "Can't make it out visually with the night conditions, but the computer should give a visual echo in another micron."

Tolen reduced speed and focused his attention on the console, bracing himself.

What emerged on the screen was a familiar looking craft. But not of the type they were looking for.

"That's not a shuttle sir," Banker said, "That's a wrecked viper."

"Yes," Tolen looked at the image in amazement, "That must have been someone else in my squadron who was lost in the battle."

"Would you be able to know who, specifically?"

"Only if whoever it was, left his helmet in there," a flood of memories went through the executive officer's head as he tried to recall the names of everyone who'd been lost in the battle of Delta Aquinas. There had been so many. And then... he frowned as another possibility entered his head. Could it possibly be that it belonged to...?

"Sir, shall we move on?"

"No," Tolen shook his head, "Bring us to a stop. I'm going to check that ship out."

"What for, sir?" Banker asked.

"I need to see if there's a body in there," Tolen threw on his heavy jacket, "Because we have to consider the possibility that whoever piloted this ship crashed here safely. And given our proximity to the human settlement, we have to consider the real possibility that live Cylons aren't the only survivors of Delta

Aquinas we'll end up encountering."

Banker shook his head and chuckled as he brought the landram to a stop, "An old squadron reunion, then?"

"Who knows?" Tolen shrugged as he buttoned his flight jacket, "It'd sure beat the reunion we had earlier today."

The executive officer opened the door and stepped out, slowly making his way forward in the sand. Even under his jacket, the biting night wind felt brisk against his face and caused him to shiver. After only twenty steps, he could see it. It was the wreck of a Colonial viper. Though largely intact, the yahrens had clearly taken their toll on the once-sleek fighting machine. The red paint of the Colonial markings had long since faded off. The cockpit canopy was missing and the front end bent and broken. Evidently, the landing had not been a smooth one for whoever had taken it down. Tolen then shined his flashlight on the viper and could see a blackened scorch mark near the tail of the craft. It was clear that it had taken a major hit in battle, and that was what had forced it down.

He walked up to the front of the craft and gently vaulted himself up, so he could get into the open cockpit. The exposure to the elements had corroded and rusted the control panels, while the cushioned seat had several holes in it. Evidently, some birds at one time or another had chosen to sample it. Tolen shined his light on the floor and felt his heart pump faster when he saw a helmet lying there. He reached down and gently picked it up. Like the viper itself, the paint had faded over time, but there was no mistaking where it had come from. The equine-logo of the Pegasus was still distinct. And the name stenciled on the chin area was also still legible.

Tolen felt his heart skip a beat and he almost dropped the helmet. It was the helmet of his old friend Martin.

"You made it," he slowly shook his head in amazement and grinned, "You beautiful madacca, you actually made it." It all became clear now why no one had been able to confirm Silver Spar leader's death. Martin had taken a hit and crash-landed on Equellas. No doubt waiting for the Fifth Fleet to come back and rescue him. But that rescue had never come for Captain Martin.

Tolen looked off into the distance, in the direction of where he knew the human settlement lay. The thought that his friend, whose apparent death had caused so much depression and anguish inside him for so long, might actually still

be alive was a prospect that excited him far more than the thought of recovering the Cylon ammunition. A prospect that he had every intention of investigating when the opportunity presented itself.

But not right away, he reminded himself. The primary mission objective still had to come first.

"Sir?" Banker's voice piped through his headset.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" he kept his new-found exhilaration hidden.

"Angus just reported in. The north contact is the wreck of a Cylon fighter. He's proceeding on to the west target now."

"Okay," Tolen dropped back on to the sand, "We'll rendezvous with him there. The west target is the last hope we've got that Staley's shuttle is here."

Tolen picked up the battered helmet and reentered the landram. He was feeling more grateful than ever that Cain had demanded he go on this mission.

"Incredible," Banker muttered as he looked at the helmet Tolen had set down, "After all these yahrens, you find out what happened to your old wingmate."

"An unexpected dividend of the mission," Tolen smiled thinly as he started up the landram and it began moving again.

"I'd still feel better if we could get the main part finished," the lieutenant grunted, "I don't know why sir, but for some reason, I like this planet less than I did Delta Aquinas."

"Hopefully it'll seem cheerier once we reach the settlement."

Another beep registered on the scanner.

"Alpha landram, I have you on my scanner now," Angus' voice filled the interior.

"Affirmative Beta landram, we read you too. How much further to west contact?"

"ETA in about two centons. Scanner reading should be sooner."

"All right, brace yourselves," a tense note entered the executive officer's voice, "This mission is in big trouble if it isn't Staley."

"Then that would mean packing up and heading for the sixth planet," Angus said, "Frankly, I've found these two to be quite sufficient for one day."

"We'll just take the situation as it's presented to us and adapt accordingly, Angus," Tolen replied.

Soon, a second beep emitted from the scanner.

"Sweet felgercarb, we've got it!" Banker grinned, "Contact confirmed as one beautiful Colonial shuttle. And it's a Gamma class one-man model!"

"I see it," Tolen matched it, "Okay Angus, get out and meet us in front of it. We've got some heavy loading to take care of."

Once the three warriors were outside and had arrived in front of the wrecked shuttle, Tolen was the first to notice something that was not quite right.

"Look at that," he pointed, "The door's been pried off."

"Yeah," Angus nodded as he drew closer, "And it's been pried off from the outside."

"Colonel," an uneasy feeling came over Banker, "I don't want to jump to any conclusions, but I'm getting the feeling that someone has been here before us."

"Could very well be," the executive officer admitted as they drew closer to the opening in the shuttle's side, "But let's not forget that Captain Martin could have found his way here."

Tolen entered the wrecked craft and shined his light toward the front. In the front seat, a skeleton in a rotting Colonial flight uniform was suddenly illuminated.

"Holy Frack," Tolen recoiled and nearly dropped the light. As Banker and Angus entered, the two of them both winced in disgust.

"Well Colonel," Angus recovered his composure first, "I take it that's Lieutenant Staley?"

Tolen made his way forward and hunched over the corpse, "Yeah, it's Staley.

I'm no med-tech, but... it looks as though he broke his neck in the crash."

"Ouch," Banker winced again, "Not a pleasant way to go. He probably didn't die instantly."

Angus then shined his light on the rest of the shuttle's interior.

"Colonel, was the ammunition supposed to be piled up inside here as well?"

"Certainly was. That's why this shuttle was stripped down for the mission."

"Well this shuttle is still stripped down, Colonel."

Tolen turned around and shined his light back as well. The rear of the shuttle was entirely bare.

"Great," his shoulders sagged in disappointment, "Someone did beat us here."

"Can we even be sure he had the ammunition in the first place?" Banker asked.

"You saw the proof that he unloaded the depot back on Delta Aquinas. If the ammunition had gone up before he loaded it on the shuttle, then he wouldn't have made it off that planet."

"Yes, but..."

Angus leaned down and then picked up a square object from the floor. "And this cinches it. This is the top of an ammunition crate. He had it in here, all right."

"So where does that leave us now?"

The executive officer made his way back to them. "It means we head toward the settlement and try and get some answers", his voice was firm, "Someone who emptied an entire garrison worth of ammunition isn't going to be able to keep it a secret on a planet like this."

"If Captain Martin's alive, he could have wound up getting some delusions of grandeur," Banker said dryly.

"And just what do you mean by that, Lieutenant?" Tolen suddenly grew cold.

"What I mean sir, is that a man stranded on a place like this with a cache of ammunition that these people have probably never seen the likes of before, could easily see an opportunity to vault himself into a position of considerable authority."

"Now you listen to me, Lieutenant," Tolen came up to him and said with cold pointedness, "I knew Martin, and while he was a junior version of Cain when it came to combat, one thing he wasn't was power-hungry."

"Sir, just because he was your friend, doesn't mean it's beyond the realm of possibility," Banker retorted mildly.

Angus uneasily stepped between them, "Sir, Banker has a point. We have to consider it, but we shouldn't rush ourselves."

"Agreed on both counts, Angus," Tolen sighed, "All right, we'd better start moving. As soon as we get reasonably close to the settlement, we'll try and find a way to hide the landrams. I don't think it'll be a good idea to suddenly charge in, especially if someone unfriendly has all that ammunition."

As the three warriors got back to their respective vehicles, there was a uniform sense among all of them that the mission had taken far more unexpected twists than they had planned on. And where it would all end, Tolen thought grimly as he started the landram up, only God knew.

Chapter Four

Equellas had been settled more than a thousand yahrens ago by prospectors who had set-out from the far-away twelve colonies in crude deep-space convoys, hoping to discover enormous wealth and riches in mineral deposits that unmanned scout probes had hinted at.

For those who'd landed on Equellas, the experience had turned out to be a colossal letdown. The indications from the scout probes had turned out to be completely erroneous, owing to the less than accurate scanning equipment that had been installed in the machines. Though quite suitable for basic agricultural development, there wasn't anything else on the planet that would enable a thriving technological society to take hold.

The original settlers soon realized that for better or worse, there could be no going back to the Colonies. The convoy that had brought them to the Hatari System was not capable of making a return journey, and soon after, all contact

with the Colonies was lost. The final communications they'd received over the fuzzy and broken gamma frequencies indicated that a major war had erupted between the Colonies and some strange race of machines that had attacked the Hasari civilization. Because of the similarity in name to the Hatari System, some inhabitants of Equellas at first mistook the transmissions to mean that the war had erupted close to their planet. But as time passed and no trace of the war ever came to Equellas, the whole matter was soon forgotten. And as the original equipment broke down, no details ever came through about who the new enemy of the mother civilization was.

And so, the settlers were forced to begin a new society rooted entirely within a primitive agricultural system. As their original supplies were exhausted and the original settlers died off, the knowledge of the more advanced civilization they had come from was totally forgotten over time. The capacity to return to the distant stars from which they'd come was gone forever. So too, the laser technology that had powered the weapons and equipment they'd brought. As time passed and the spartan resources of the planet were adapted into cruder and more primitive devices needed to survive, the sixth millennium explorers who'd come to Equellas had succeeded in creating a late second millennium agricultural civilization, that one thousand yahrens later had changed very little. Unless one belonged to the small elite of the well-educated who could afford to attend the school in the nearby ramshackle town, hardly anyone on Equellas knew of the great society beyond the heavens their ancestors had come from.

An exception to that was the family that occupied the agroland on the outermost edge of the agricultural region, a scant ten kilometers from where the soil and the woodlands beyond ended, and the desert began. Twice, in a span of ten yahrens, their lives had been impacted by events from far beyond the stars. On both occasions, it had brought joy as well as tragedy.

"You finished with the feedstock, Puppis?"

The blonde youth of eleven was jolted from his gaze at the stars, and he hastily went back to spreading the grain in his bucket along the bottom of the fenced area where the six livestock animals they maintained for breeding purposes were kept.

"Sorry Jason," he replied with a trace of embarrassment, "Another three centons and I'll be in."

"You know it's not good to linger out here," his middle-aged second cousin

stepped up to him, "Ever since the lupus trouble started up again."

"Hey, I know how to handle a lupus," Puppis patted the primitive firearm slung around his shoulder that was called a numo. It operated under the principle of firing lead pellets from a compressed air mechanism. In the three millennia prior to the development of the laser pistol, it had been a standard weapon of Colonial civilization. Here though, it represented the maximum that Equellas was capable of developing, "I've killed them before, you know."

"I know," Jason sighed, "But you know how your mother worries."

Doesn't she always? Puppis said silently to himself with a trace of disgust. Did it seem as though his mother was always going to be trapped in a never-ending cycle of worry and overprotectiveness? Damn it all, why couldn't she show some respect for his own ability to take care of himself, just once?

"She doesn't have to," he said calmly, "No reason why I can't spend a few centons taking things in."

"Looking up at the stars and wondering if he's ever going to come back," Jason sadly shook his head, "Puppis, there comes a point when you've got to learn to stop dreaming."

"Not much else I can do, is there?" the boy turned away and looked back at the endless expanse of stars that filled the night sky, "Between Marco and all his henchmen, that's about the only thing left to hope for. If he did come back, he'd be able to help us. Just like last time when he killed Red-Eye."

Jason found himself unable to say anything. Deep down, he felt the same way as his cousin's son. After all that had happened in the last yahren, when it had first seemed as though a miracle had happened, and some quiet calm had been restored to the life of every human on the planet, the nightmare had returned on a more hideous scale than at any time during the days of LaCerta and Red-Eye. And if this nightmare were to end, it would probably take another miracle from the stars to bring it about.

But if one had the ability to travel through the stars as the Great Ancestors had done, as Martin had done, and as Apollo did, then it seemed likely that one could find enough things out there to keep oneself occupied for a lifetime. Things far more important than what was happening on some isolated little speck called Equellas. That was why Jason had given up hope long ago. It was also why Vella

had stopped hoping. Puppis though, still had the more innocent faith of a child. He'd yet to acquire the cynicism that walked hand-in-hand with adulthood.

"Come on Puppis," he gently laid his hand on the boy's shoulder, "Let's go."

Puppis let out a sigh and started to walk back up the short path that led to the house, when something caused the two of them to stop in their tracks.

"Hear that?" the blonde youth asked as he looked off toward the nearby woodlands.

"Yeah," Jason nodded and frowned, "That doesn't sound like any kind of animal I've ever heard before."

"Look, there's some kind of light!" Puppis pointed.

Two sets of bright lights accompanying the sounds could now be seen. From time to time, they became briefly obscured by the foliage as they seemingly moved about, but still showed no sign of going away.

The strange sound slowly dissipated, and the lights stopped moving. The instant the noise stopped, the lights abruptly winked out.

"If that's another one of Marco's new toys, we've got even more trouble," Jason sucked in his breath as both he and Puppis continued to look ahead.

"I think someone's coming," Puppis dropped his voice to a whisper.

The sound of multiple sets of footsteps could be heard, and through the darkness, they could see three shadowy figures start to approach. Instinctively, Puppis cocked his numo to a firing position.

"Easy," Jason gritted his teeth and nudged his second cousin slightly, "Easy."

Just then, the door to the house opened and a somewhat attractive blonde woman in her late thirties wearing a simple, ragged homespun dress emerged. A look of both concern and anger lined her face.

"Puppis!" she shouted, "Get in here now!"

"Shhh," Jason turned around and impatiently waved his hand at his cousin, "Someone's coming, Vella."

"Who?" Vella lowered her voice and came up to them.

"Can't tell," her son gritted his teeth as he continued to aim his numo, "We should know soon enough."

His mother's instinctive revulsion for guns came to the forefront, "Be careful with that."

"Only if it's one of Marco's men," Puppis calmly replied. "If it's just a local marauder with a numo, we can take care of him."

The three shadows grew closer. The light from the house and the farm equipment now shined off them. Their faces were still indistinct, but not their clothing. Clothing that the three Equellans instantly recognized.

"My God," Vella whispered in shock, "Apollo?"

Puppis slowly lowered his numo as the three drew closer. Both he and Jason were also in near-shock to see three men wearing the uniforms of Colonial warriors, just as Apollo had, and as Martin once did. Inside, the boy was beginning to feel a rising tide of exhilaration like nothing before in his life.

And then, a brief flash of disappointment crossed their faces as the three men drew closer and they realized that none of them was Apollo. But it didn't lessen any of the shock at seeing them. The fact that anyone wearing a Colonial uniform would appear to them again was enough of an answered prayer even if it wasn't the one specific man they hoped it to be.

"Hello," Tolen said as he and Banker and Angus came to within twenty feet of the Equellans, "Don't worry, we mean you no harm and we're quite friendly."

"We're sure of that," Jason managed to speak as his mouth hung open, "You three men are Colonial warriors?"

"Yes," Tolen frowned, not expecting to hear that, "You know what we are?"

"We certainly do," Vella managed to whisper.

The executive officer of the Pegasus decided to take a chance, "In that case, you might be able to help us. We're looking for a friend of ours who crashed his ship nearby a long time ago."

"You're looking for Apollo?" Puppis spoke up for the first time as he cautiously returned his numo to the sling around his shoulder.

"Who?" Tolen's frown deepened.

"Apollo. He crashed here almost two yahrens ago, but—"

"Just a micron, son," Banker stepped forward as he tried to comprehend all this information, "Do you by any chance mean Captain Apollo of the Battlestar Galactica?"

"I don't know about any Galactica, but he's a captain," Puppis went on with concern, "Didn't he make it?"

The three Pegasus warriors exchanged equally confused glances.

"Uh... we're not looking for him," Tolen uneasily resumed, "We're looking for someone else. We're looking for someone named Martin."

Vella almost fainted from the additional shock and Jason had to grab his cousin to keep her from collapsing.

Puppis decided to respond, "He was my father."

It was now Tolen's turn to look shocked. For almost a centon, there was a long confused silence as no one seemed sure what to say next. Too much information was passing between them much too fast.

Angus was the first to shake himself out of the stunned stupor that afflicted all of them.

"Uh, look," the lieutenant said, "I think it's obvious that we all have some information to share with each other, so do you think it's possible that we could come in and perhaps talk the whole thing over?"

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea," Jason nodded, "Come on inside and make yourselves at home, gentlemen."

With Tolen and Vella acting as the spokespersons for the respective groups, the next several centars were spent sharing all that they knew to each other. Vella went first, telling the Pegasus warriors how twelve yahrens ago, she had found a dazed Martin, virtually incoherent after his crash far out in the desert. She had

nursed him back to health and fallen in love with him. They had been married and had a son, Puppis.

As she talked, Tolen found his eyes darting over to the eleven yahren old boy, looking for some trace of Martin in the face. It was hard to detect at first. Puppis had inherited his mother's hair and general facial characteristics. But once he studied the eyes and the jawline more carefully, it finally clicked. The way Puppis hunched forward in his chair almost looked identical to the gesture Martin would make when he'd be hard at work on the Academy war games simulator.

"He never talked about his old life," Vella sighed, "But I could always tell it haunted him. It seemed like every night, he'd lie out on the front looking at the stars. Saying nothing, but always dreaming about what had been taken from him."

Tolen awkwardly lowered his head. He could think of a score of people who would have envied what had happened to Martin. Alive and safe from the craziness of the thousand yahren war with the Cylons, with a loving gentle wife and a child to raise. But not Martin. Not the man who had aspired to be the next generation's Commander Cain. Martin's whole life had been devoted to the purpose of killing the Cylons and becoming the best warrior in the Colonial Service. And that whole sense of purpose had been taken from him when he'd found himself stranded on this planet with no way of ever getting home. For all the love and tenderness that Vella could provide him, there was no way that the void in Martin's life could ever have been filled.

"And then when Puppis was only two," Vella choked back a sob as the memory returned to her, "Red-Eye showed up."

"Red-Eye?" Banker frowned.

"He was what you call a Cylon, I think," Jason spoke for the first time as he handed a cup of nourishing hot broth to Tolen, who gratefully sipped it after having only had the unappetizing food from the ration kit.

"You think." Tolen said as he took another sip and set the cup down. "You know about Colonial Warriors but you never knew about Cylons before?"

"We've been cut off from the civilization our ancestors came from for more than a thousand yahrens, Colonel." Jason said patiently. "And I suppose that in light of what we've learned since, that's one of the few things we can still consider to be a blessing from the Lords."

"But all of a sudden just one Cylon showed up."

Angus set his own cup down and suddenly snapped his fingers, "Must have been from that wrecked Cylon fighter out in the desert I spotted. I didn't pay much attention to the reading at first, but I only noticed two centurions in the cockpit wreckage."

"What happened?" Tolen felt an uneasy tension come over him.

Vella told them how the town crimelord LaCerta had found the lone Cylon and how it had impulsively obeyed all of his commands. Armed with a laser pistol, the Cylon dubbed 'Red-Eye' had become a deadly enforcer for collecting outlandish sums of tribute from all of the local farmers.

Vella then broke down into sobs, as she was unable to go further. Jason came over to her and put his arm around his cousin, trying to provide some kind of comfort.

"I'll tell them Mom," Puppis said with an air of nonchalance that also seemed hauntingly familiar to Tolen, "When Red-Eye first came by here to collect tribute from us, and my father saw him, he went berserk. He grabbed his old laser pistol and tried to kill him."

Tolen let out a sad sigh of dejection, "I think I can guess what happened next."

"There was no reason to be so impulsive," Vella slowly recovered herself, "He wasn't wearing his old clothes, so Red-Eye wouldn't have known what he was. But he just..."

The Pegasus executive officer shook his head in frustration as he took another sip of broth. That was the Martin he knew all right. Impulsive. Shoot first and ask questions later. And in this instance, two yahrens away from the job he'd loved doing had eroded his skills and unleashed itself in a wild frustration when he first saw a Cylon again. And as he saw Vella wipe her eyes, nothing needed to be said that the results had indeed been quite deadly and tragic.

That crazy madacca, he thought. Right up to the end, Martin had to die doing his best imitation of Cain and trying to win the war all by himself. Just like when he'd ordered Tolen away and vowed to take out the seven fighter phalanx himself. That was why he'd been so damn impulsive when he really should have known better.

But strangely enough, amidst all the sadness he felt at learning what had happened to his friend, Tolen almost felt the guilt he'd carried inside his heart since the Battle of Delta Aquinas ended, evaporate completely. True, perhaps he could still fault himself for the circumstances that had caused Martin to crash. But now that he knew what had happened since, he could see that Cain had been right. He didn't have to blame himself for Martin's death because Martin had died as a result of his own foolish instincts. There was nothing left to reproach himself about at all.

Not that that would lead him to request a return to flight status, he thought further. Once this mission was over, he was going to put his foot down the micron Cain asked him to do something like this again. This one mission was quite sufficient for him.

He settled back in his chair as Vella regained her composure and resumed her narrative. She talked of how the next eight yahrens had seen LaCerta use Red-Eye on a literal reign of terror for collecting unseemly sums of tribute, turning the farmers into virtual slave laborers.

"But then something incredible happened two yahrens ago," for the first time her voice seemed to brighten, "A miracle came from the stars."

"This is where Captain Apollo comes in?" Banker cautiously asked.

"Yeah," Puppis chimed in, "The greatest man I ever met."

For a brief instant, both Banker and Angus found their minds drifting back to that unpleasant exchange with Apollo in the Pegasus launch bay after Commander Adama had relieved Cain of his command. The two of them had joined a group with Sheba, Bojay and virtually every other top Pegasus warrior that was ready to organize a mutiny for their commander. The sudden start of the Battle of Gomorrah had prevented that, but both Banker and Angus could always remember how they wished they could have torn the Galactica warrior's head off at that moment. Which only made it strange for them to hear someone else attach such greatness to the man.

Vella then went on and told the Pegasus warriors how Apollo's ship had run out of fuel and landed on Equellas. How Apollo had been hesitant to use his laser pistol to kill Red-Eye despite the urgings of her brother Bootes because he feared that Red-Eye had some kind of connection with a large force of other Cylons.

"Oh boy, was he wrong about that," Angus interjected at that point, "There hasn't been another Cylon in this quadrant of space since the battle that stranded Martin and Red-Eye here."

"But he didn't know how Red-Eye had been found," Puppis spoke up with defensiveness, "Even we didn't know until after it was all over."

"Yeah, I wouldn't fault his thinking on that. He played it by the book," Tolen nodded as he finished off his broth, "With the situation Apollo's people are in, he couldn't take a chance that there was another garrison in the background."

"What situation is he in?" the blonde youth asked, anxious to learn more about Apollo, "We never had time to find out more about him."

Tolen held up a hand, "If you don't mind Puppis, I'd like to hear your mother explain the rest of what happened. You'll be hearing a lot from me as soon as she's done."

Vella seemed to smile weakly as she resumed. She described how her brother Bootes had been shot dead by Red-Eye, and how just after that tragedy, Apollo had learned the truth about the Cylon's origin from one of the young women who'd hung close to LaCerta and his ex-henchman Marco. And only then, had Apollo been able to take action and kill Red-Eye with his own laser pistol.

"He left not too long after that," Vella sighed, "I almost sensed that he wished he could stay here with Puppis and me, but... well he mentioned that he had a son waiting for him back on his great ship in the stars, and that because of that he had to find a way to get back. So I took him to the wreck of Martin's ship and he used some of the old fuel tanks in there to give him what he needed to get his own ship working again."

"He did say he'd try to come back again," Puppis jumped in, "The last thing he said to us before we watched his ship go off into the sky. He said he'd come back...someday."

"But I guess we don't even know if he made it back," his mother added.

"He did," Tolen said gently, feeling thoroughly drained from the magnitude of all these revelations.

Vella leaned forward, "You know that?"

"We do," Banker spoke up, "He was here more than two and a half yahrens ago. Our ship, the Pegasus, caught-up with his ship, the Galactica, about six sectars after that."

"Is he all right?" Puppis asked.

"Oh yeah," Banker nodded, "He's one of their best warriors, and right now, he's probably still doing his job well, protecting the people of his fleet."

"You mean he's not with your ship anymore?" this from Jason.

"No, um...that's not easy to explain," Tolen said awkwardly, "Look, I might as well start from the beginning."

Now, it was Tolen's turn to become the storyteller, while Vella, Puppis and Jason became the listeners. He began by explaining the nature of the war between the Cylons and the Colonies, and how the Holocaust and Exodus had come about. He explained that Apollo's ship, the Galactica was searching for a legendary thirteenth colony of humanity on a distant planet called Earth, while his ship, the Pegasus was staying behind to fight the Cylon Empire.

"So Apollo and his ship can never come back?" Puppis asked with a crestfallen expression.

Tolen looked at him and decided that Martin's son had to be strong enough to hear the blunt truth, "Puppis, if you want my honest opinion, the Galactica and Apollo will never be within infinity's range of this system again. They're totally committed to the goal of finding Earth, and once they do I still doubt that they'd ever come back for any reason. We're talking about... going all the way across the Alpha Quadrant of the galaxy. They might not even reach the end of their journey for a generation."

He could see Vella's expression grow slightly sad by this revelation but it was mixed with the resignation of someone hearing an inner most suspicion confirmed at long last. For Vella, there could be final acceptance of what she always knew was likely to be the truth.

Puppis though, sullenly looked off toward the fire that burned at the other end of the room, "I guess that was just an empty promise then."

"Look, don't blame him for not being able to keep it," Tolen said gently, "It's been a difficult situation for him and all his people."

"He's right, Puppis," Vella looked over at her son, "When you get down to it, Apollo was a lonely person who was grateful that there were people kind enough to help him, and that he'd been able to do something for us."

Puppis looked back at her, "He shouldn't have made that promise if he knew he couldn't keep it."

Jason uneasily cleared his throat and changed the subject, "This is all very interesting, Colonel Tolen, but could you explain why you and Banker and Angus have come here after all this time? From what I gather, your coming here wasn't an accident like it was with Apollo and Martin."

"No, it wasn't," Tolen smiled thinly, "I said we were looking for Martin, but that isn't the main reason. We're here because another friend of ours who was lost in the same battle as Martin, also crashed his ship here."

"Who?" Vella frowned.

"You wouldn't know him, because he was killed when his ship crashed," Tolen said, "We already found the wreckage before we came here. But what we're interested in, is the cargo his ship was carrying."

"Cargo?" Jason frowned.

"His ship was loaded with ammunition just like this," the Pegasus executive officer held up his laser pistol, "Literally hundreds and thousands of rounds that would power a single one of these."

For the first time since they'd first seen them, the three Equellans all froze in shock.

"Good Lord," Jason's mouth once again hung-open in amazement, "That explains it. That explains the whole miserable nightmare."

"What are you talking about?" Angus lifted an eyebrow, "From what you said, I thought Captain Apollo took care of your major problem with LaCerta and Red-Eye."

"He took care of that," Vella admitted, "But a few sectars after he left, the trouble started up again."

"You see, after Red-Eye was destroyed, LaCerta literally became a marked

man," Jason went on, "A lot of angry townspeople and farmers were ready to have his fat body hung from the nearest tree they could find as a form of payback. Well to save his neck, he took off for the desert. There have always been rumors of other human settlements elsewhere on the planet, so maybe he thought he could find his way to one of them."

"Dear God," Tolen whispered, "He found Staley's shuttle with all the ammunition inside."

The middle-aged cousin nodded, "Once LaCerta found that ammunition, he knew that he'd found the key to getting himself and his whole slavedriving operation back in business. So he quietly made his way back and sought out his old number two man, Marco. Well Marco willingly joined in LaCerta's scheme to recover all that laser ammunition, but that only caused LaCerta to sign his own death warrant."

"How?" Banker asked.

"Marco had always resented the fact that LaCerta pushed him into the background after he found Red-Eye, and he saw this as his big chance to become the top man himself. He gathered a dozen of his own friends to recover it, and once they got there, LaCerta was quietly disposed of."

"And Marco is now using the ammunition as a means of collecting tribute," Tolen added things up.

"He's even worse than LaCerta was with Red-Eye," the anger and bitterness crept over Jason's face, "Red-Eye was just one enforcer. But Marco has a gang of a dozen who've learned how to use those pistols, and they can go out and literally destroy a whole farm on one of their raids if someone fails to pay up."

"But they are mortal," Angus noted, "Unlike Red-Eye, you could kill them with your own numos."

"No one wants to go up against a man with one of those laser guns," Vella shook her head, "Kill one of them, and another willing recruit signs on to take his place. Besides, as long as Marco's gang has the whole supply under control, there's nothing you can do."

"I used to have my own farm," Jason added with bitterness, "I'd worked at it for twenty yahrens, keeping up the tribute payments when it was LaCerta. But Marco forces you to go double what LaCerta demanded, and I had to give up

everything or else I would have been dead. And since I'm the only relative Vella has left, I wasn't about to be a crazy martyr like Martin and Bootes were. Not to mention the two dozen farmers Marco's had killed since he started his operation."

"So for the last yahren and a half, you've just let Marco and his thugs have their way," there was a slight edge in Tolen's voice.

Vella noticed it and was angry, "What can any of us do?" she demanded, "Throw away our lives for no purpose?"

"I'm not suggesting that," Tolen replied gently, "But a monster like that has to be dealt with. One man with all that ammunition could literally hold on to power for generations."

"So what can you do?" Jason asked pointedly, "You're only three, and Marco has over twelve men who've learned how to handle those guns."

"We have more experience with them," Tolen patted his holster.

"It won't be enough," Jason didn't let-up, "You'd need to take every last piece of ammunition in order to get rid of Marco and everyone else who thinks like he does. Unless you plan on staying on this planet forever, which I doubt you intend to."

"No, we're not staying here forever," the executive officer admitted. "But we *are* going to solve your problem and confiscate every last weapon that came out of that shuttle."

"How?" he looked at him dubiously.

"If we can find out where Marco keeps that ammunition, then we'll do what we can to get it."

"I don't know where it is," Jason said, "That's one of Marco's trade secrets."

"We have to find out," Tolen said pointedly, "And when we do, we make use of some things that not even Marco has seen the likes of before."

Puppis suddenly looked away from the fire for the first time in a while, "You mean those things you were riding in before we first saw you?"

He even thinks like his father, Tolen said to himself. "Yes, Puppis. Those things

are called landrams and they have an interesting item on top that makes even one of these laser pistols seem insignificant by comparison."

"Can I see one of them?" a note of eagerness entered his voice.

"No!" Vella suddenly shouted, in a tone so forceful it caught the three warriors off-guard, "Look, the three of you do what you have to do, but leave my son and the rest of us out of this. I won't let there be any more killing."

"I wasn't suggesting that," Tolen replied gently, "I wasn't suggesting that at all. Look, right now the only help we need is how to make contact with this Marco."

"You can find him in town, sitting from that throne in the local tavern where his old boss LaCerta used to rule from", Jason said, "If you want, I can lead you there. If he isn't out shooting up another recalcitrant farmer's land, he should be there."

"We'd appreciate that," Tolen said and then turned back to his fellow warriors, "Banker, Angus, I think we'd better get back to work."

As Jason led the three warriors out, Puppis rose from his chair and came over to his mother.

"They're not like Apollo," he noted.

"No," Vella sighed, "They're... different."

"You think they can really do something about Marco?"

"I don't know," she shook her head, "I just don't know."

Chapter Five

After leaving Angus to guard the two landrams, Tolen and Banker got on to the back of Jason's equine-driven cart, which would take them to the nearby town, ten kilometers away.

"How do you plan on approaching Marco?" Jason asked as he tugged at the animal's rein and the cart began moving.

"Bluntly," Tolen grabbed at the rail as the cart passed over the bumpy surface of the dirt road, "We won't hide our uniforms and we'll let him get a good look at

our own lasers.”

“And then?” the Equellan asked with a hint of skepticism.

“And then, Lieutenant Banker and I will do a bit of creative improvisation,” he looked over at his fellow warrior who seemed slightly dubious, “Won’t we?”

“Of course,” the lieutenant nodded, “Whatever you say, Colonel.”

“Whatever you have planned, I hope it works,” Jason said as he negotiated a turn, “We’ve all been praying for a miracle for a while now.”

“I sort of got the impression that Puppis and Vella were hoping it would be Apollo specifically.”

“You’re right about that, Colonel,” Jason admitted, “More so with Puppis. Apollo wasn’t here that long, but he’s practically the only father-figure that boy’s ever known. There isn’t a night that’s gone by where he hasn’t taken some kind of long look at the stars hoping he’ll see his ship come back some day.”

“Ouch,” Tolen winced slightly, “And I had to tell him that that’s never going to happen.”

“I’m sure it’s something he always knew,” Jason went on, “Vella too. But I guess it’s never pleasant when the last ray of hope is shattered forever.”

“I know the feeling,” Banker said with just a hint of double-edged sarcasm that was for Tolen’s benefit. The executive officer noticed it, but said nothing.

For the rest of the journey to town, Tolen asked Jason numerous questions about Marco and the men who surrounded him, their known habits and customs, as well as the general layout of the entire human settlement. By the time the cart pulled on to the main street, the two Pegasus warriors felt they’d learned enough to get by for what Tolen had already planned on doing.

Tolen looked about the crude wooden structures that lined the street and shook his head in amazement. He’d once visited a “living history” museum on Virgon that had been devoted to preserving what life had been like during the second millennia, through the use of a completely reconstructed village where the tour-guides wore period costumes and lived according to the technology of the era. Even after spending nearly a full-day there, he’d found it impossible to believe that people had actually lived this way, and if so, then he was grateful that he’d

been born more than five thousand yahrens later.

Ironic then, Tolen thought, that his advanced civilization was now burnt-out ruins while this outpost of humanity that was permanently stuck in the second millennia, continued to endure.

The cart pulled to a stop in front of the local tavern, where some annoying music that reminded Banker of the sounds that used to fill the turbo-lifts of downtown shopping areas in Caprica City was playing loudly from a crude electronic player. The two Pegasus warriors calmly got off and stood outside the doors that swung into the building.

"I don't think I should be seen with you two," Jason looked back at them, "I've had too many run-ins with Marco before. I'll take it around the block to the feedstore and wait there until I see you come out."

He then pulled at the rein and the cart moved off down the avenue toward the stores at the other end.

Tolen sucked in his breath before moving. It was time to tap into everything he'd learned in his Academy counter-intelligence class so long ago.

"Ready, Banker?"

"Lead the way, Colonel," the lieutenant smiled and motioned to his superior.

With all the self-confident swagger he could muster, Tolen gently pushed open the doors and entered.

There were almost thirty people inside, seated at various wooden tables, each enjoying whatever food and drink they had come to sample. All of them were dressed in the same type of worn, homespun garments that Jason, Vella and Puppis wore. Given the general lack of valuable resources on the planet, it seemed unlikely that anyone on Equellas, be they farmer or townsman, would ever be known for sartorial splendor.

The instant Tolen and Banker walked in, all activity in the room stopped. The sight of the two warriors in their sharp brown uniforms was cause for interest enough, but when the people saw the laser pistol holsters strapped around their waists, and the guns protruding from the sides, a buzz started to go through the tavern. The sight of a laser pistol usually meant only one thing to the ordinary Equellan, but it was clear that these new visitors had nothing to do with that.

At the back end of the tavern, a slightly pudgy, red-haired man of about Tolen's age, dressed in a more elegantly designed outfit than the other people in the room, was engaged in a card game. The large number of chips on his side indicated his success. The two imposing men who flanked him with laser pistols clutched in their hands, indicated right away to the Pegasus warriors that this was clearly the hated crimelord Marco.

As the low buzz spread throughout the room, the man looked up and seemed as stunned as the rest of the crowd to see the two warriors carrying their laser pistols and approaching him. But determined as he was to live up to the reputation he had carved out for himself over the last yahren and show no sign of public weakness, the stunned look quickly passed from his expression.

Tolen drew to within ten feet of him and looked him in the eye with a dead-serious expression.

"You're the one they call Marco?"

Banker was slightly taken aback to hear the executive officer's normally efficient voice suddenly assume the heavy drawl of a Virgon native. Clearly, Tolen was going to be playing his part to the hilt.

"I am," the man smiled with a tinge of malevolence, "Although I've been called other things too."

"I'm sure you have," Tolen returned it.

"I don't believe I've ever seen you or your friend before, and yet I've always prided myself on my ability to know every face there is on Equellas."

"I'm sure a man of your stature requires that," Tolen continued to smile, "My name is Tolen, and this is Banker. We've actually come from quite a long-ways just to meet you."

"Have you now?" Marco lifted an eyebrow, "And how far away would that be?"

"As far away as it took for a mutual acquaintance to come here," Tolen sat down in the chair opposite him. At the same time, a strikingly attractive dark-haired woman in a provocatively cut dress that reminded Banker of a primitive socialator's costume, came over from the bar to listen in.

"Really?" Marco tried not to seem too impressed, "Who might that be?"

"A gentleman by the name of Staley," Tolen said, "You wouldn't know that. But I do think you have met the man, or at least, all that's left of him now inside an empty carcass of a ship somewhere out in the desert."

This time, Marco was unable to hide his stunned expression. Right away, the two henchmen flanking him suddenly appeared to tighten their grip on the laser pistols that Tolen could recognize as bearing the Cylon insignia from the Delta Aquinas garrison.

The crimelord abruptly cleared his throat and tried to resume his normal edge, "If he was your friend, then you have my sympathies."

"Well he wasn't exactly my friend," Tolen said, noting the irony to himself that that was true to an extent. Staley had always been one of the more aloof warriors on the Pegasus. "You see, a long time ago, Mr. Staley took something that didn't belong to him. And I've got myself a boss from where he and I both come from, who's been upset about that for quite some time. That's why I came a long ways to find Mr. Staley so he could be punished for what he did, and to return what he had no business taking to the rightful owner."

"Ah," Marco smiled with obviously false sympathy, "And you have now discovered to your regret that this Mr. Staley is now beyond all punishment, and that your mission is a failure."

"Only partially," Tolen admitted, "But I do believe that the other part is still capable of being accomplished."

"How so?" Marco wasn't giving an inch.

Tolen looked him in the eye with all the determination he could summon, "I do believe that the contents of what Mr. Staley took are now in your possession. As a matter of fact," his eyes darted over to the two henchmen, "I also believe that your friends there are carrying a part of that load right now."

Marco looked at him for a long moment and then started to laugh.

"I see," he said and then looked up at the dark-haired woman who was now listening in, with a cold expression, "Is there a reason why you're hanging close, Macy?"

The woman flushed slightly in a mixture of embarrassment and fear, "No, sorry."

"Then do what you're supposed to do," Marco shot back coldly, "Another pitcher of vinia for me and for these visitors. Now."

He then snapped his fingers, and as if on command, the girl named Macy went over to the bar on the other side of the room.

Tolen kept a faint smirk on his expression, "You seem to have a way with people."

"That should not surprise you though, in light of what you already seem to know," the crimelord matched it.

"I guess not," Tolen showed no sign of being intimidated.

Marco leaned forward, "I believe you were saying something about your lost cargo, that Mr. Staley took from you and your... boss?"

"Yes," the Pegasus executive officer nodded, "I might as well come straight to the point, Mr. Marco. You are holding on to something that doesn't belong to you, and if my boss doesn't get it back," he let his words hang for effect, "Let's just say there could be some very grave consequences."

"Is that so?" the crimelord chuckled, "And how would you define 'grave consequences'?"

"Well you probably think that having a lot of those fancy laser guns puts you at the top of any kind of power you can achieve," Tolen motioned to the two henchmen, "But from where Mr. Banker and I come from, we've got things that would make your entire stash that you took from poor Mr. Staley seem quite puny by comparison."

"Such as?"

"Oh we have to keep our trade secrets, Mr. Marco," Tolen's drawl grew thicker, "But unless you want to see things capable of firing more than a hundred rounds of laser fire in a micron, then I think you'll do the prudent thing."

The crimelord's eyes widened slightly, as did those of the henchmen, but Marco barely skipped a beat before resuming.

"I see," he grinned, "Just turn the whole thing over to you and your friend Mr. Banker, just like that?"

"Well that would be the way my boss would like to see it."

"Your boss must be a very determined man."

"That he is," Tolen nodded.

"Mr. Tolen," he shook his head and kept grinning, "I get the feeling that a man as courageous as you and your friend are, to come in here with your pistols brandished and your open threats, is also not stupid. Now what you've just said may very well be what your boss wants to see. But I get the feeling that you would not be here unless you had something more advantageous to the both of us in mind."

The discomfort level was rising inside Banker, though he didn't show it. He didn't have the slightest idea where the executive officer was going now.

Tolen simply chuckled disarmingly, "You're very perceptive, Mr. Marco. As a matter of fact, I do have a proposal in mind. In return for a portion of Mr. Staley's cargo, which would be enough to satisfy my boss, because he'd never know the difference if it wasn't the whole thing, I'd be happy to let you be the first person in this entire settlement to be the proud owner of one of our little trade secrets that I mentioned."

Marco looked at him with a genuinely intrigued expression, "A hundred rounds in a micron, you said?"

"That's what I said."

The crimelord continued to smirk and drummed his fingers on the table.

"And how would we arrange this mutually beneficial transaction?"

"Simple," Tolen leaned forward so that he was only two inches from him, "Three centars from now, at the place where you've stashed all that ammunition, I'll be showing up with the trade secret. We give that to you in return for half your stock. And then Mr. Banker and I return to our boss and tell him we did the best we could but half was all that was left."

Just then, Macy returned with the pitcher full of the fermented beverage vinia.

"Well I guess I misjudged you, Mr. Tolen," a dark cloud came over Marco's face as he motioned Macy to pour, "Because if you think I'd be a fool enough to tell you

my biggest trade secret, then I guess you're something of a fool yourself."

"Then it's no deal Mr. Marco," the cordiality faded from Tolen's face, "I bring my trade secret to you, only if you bring me to yours."

Marco then looked up with annoyance at the young woman, "Get your pretty astrum out of here."

Once again, Macy was forced to make a quick retreat. As the crimelord sipped at his drink and returned his attention to Tolen, she quietly made her way to the front door and slipped out into the night.

"Then I guess your boss is going to have to remain disappointed," there was coldness in his voice, "Perhaps if he is determined as you say he is, then he could come back and demonstrate that himself."

"If you choose not to cooperate Marco, then that's exactly what will happen," the executive officer rose from his chair, "We'll come back in another two centars and give you another chance to consider what you're forfeiting. After that, you'll only be inviting trouble for yourself."

"On the contrary," the malevolent edge returned to Marco's face, "I think it's you and your friend who have just run out of luck."

The crime lord suddenly snapped his fingers and motioned his head at the two imposing henchman. But the Pegasus warriors had already anticipated that before Marco had finished, and quickly whipped out their own laser pistols.

The yahrens of experience held by Banker and Tolen was no match for the two henchmen. Before they could get their own pistols into an aiming position, they were both felled by shots to the chest from the two warriors. Several customers in the tavern screamed in horror as the henchman both collapsed to the floor on each side of Marco. From the doorway, Macy glanced at the scene with an expression of stunned amazement. A hush came over the room as a stunned Marco looked up at the grim and determined expressions of both Tolen and Banker.

"Three centars, Mr. Marco," Tolen said quietly with no drawl as he started to back away, "Just think about it. You've got a chance to prosper, or end up just like your two lackeys."

And then, both he and Banker turned and departed with every pair of eyes in

the room focused on them in amazement.

As soon as they were gone, Marco saw the gaze of the crowd shift to him, and he promptly rose with a furious expression, holding on to one of the dead henchman's laser pistols. It had its desired effect, and slowly the customers returned to their normal activity.

One of the crimelord's other associates, Argo, who had been over at the bar, promptly rushed up to him.

"Follow them," Marco hissed under his breath, "Find out where they came from and then kill them."

"Do you think that was wise?" Banker said as soon as they were outside. "Why did we have to kill them?"

"We have little time and few choices, Banker," Tolen said bluntly as they walked down the avenue toward the feedstore where Jason was waiting, "In case you've forgotten, we've been away from the Pegasus for more than ten centars. If we don't get this thing finished soon, then Cain is going to be pulling the Pegasus out in the interest of survival. You know how the procedure is for every system we've been hopping to."

"Oh I'm aware of that," the lieutenant was struggling to keep his emotions under control, "But does recovering the ammunition mean so much that we have to start getting involved in a potential massacre? We're going to have to use both the landrams to get the ammunition now in a firefight."

"That's exactly the idea, Banker," the executive officer said bluntly.

Before Banker could say anything, they suddenly heard a soft feminine voice calling from the shadows of one of the adjacent building, "Hey!"

The two warriors stopped and looked over to see a trembling Macy emerge.

"Yes, miss?" Tolen gently inquired.

"Look, I need to talk to the both of you," she said as she stepped forward, "I think I can help you."

"How?"

The attractive young woman sighed, "There isn't a chance Marco is going to change his mind. If you try to come back here, he's just going to have a dozen men armed and waiting to kill you both."

"Don't worry," the executive officer said reassuringly, "I wasn't lying about the trade secret."

"But like you said, you can't do anything and get what you want unless you know his trade secret," Macy said pointedly, "That's where I can help you."

Tolen lifted an eyebrow, "You know where he keeps the ammunition?"

"Yes," she nodded fervently, "The only reason why I've ever demeaned and degraded myself for him ever since he took power, was so I could become one of the privileged few who knows that secret. I... I just hoped and prayed that some day there'd be someone brave enough to take on Marco just like Apollo was when he killed Red-Eye, who could use that information."

"You knew Apollo?" Banker asked.

"I was the one who told him how LaCerta had found Red-Eye," she said, "And when he learned that, he said that was when he knew it was safe to kill him and end that monster's reign of terror. I...figured that as long as I was able to help then, I might be able to do it again someday if I kept myself close to Marco and...did all he wanted me to do."

"That was very brave of you," Tolen said with genuine admiration, "Where is the ammunition kept?"

Macy took a breath, "It's in an abandoned granary tower, on the western edge of town. His entire gang guards the road pass leading to it in shifts."

"How many?" Tolen felt his pulse race.

"Twenty in all," she said, "Actually eighteen, now that you've just killed two of them. They all get large percentage cuts of the tribute Marco collects."

"How good are they with the laser pistols?"

"Not as good as you two are," Macy looked over her shoulder, "But efficient enough to intimidate anyone else in this settlement from taking them on with a numo."

"I think we can handle that," Tolen nodded, "On the western edge of town?"

"Only eight kilometers from here," she took another breath, "And I hope and pray that it helps you. If Marco loses his ammunition, then he has no power left."

She started to walk away from the two warriors.

"Hold it miss," Banker called after her, "You know you're taking a big chance on your own life telling us this."

Macy looked back and smiled crookedly at them, "I know," she said, "But like Apollo told me a long time ago, only animals should respond to someone snapping their fingers. As long as Marco has all that power, I might as well be living the life of an animal."

And then she disappeared into the shadows of the buildings and was gone.

With a renewed sense of urgency, the Pegasus warriors resumed walking at a faster pace to the feedstore.

Macy felt as though a burden had been finally lifted from her heart as she continued to walk away from where she'd confronted Tolen and Banker. For more than a yahren, ever since Marco had killed LaCerta and taken the newly discovered ammunition as his means to becoming the new crimelord, she'd been forced to subject herself to a life of shame and degradation. Since Macy had been LaCerta's mistress during his reign of terror, the new crimelord felt he was automatically entitled to her as well.

It had seemed so unfair to her. When the kind stranger called Apollo had killed Red-Eye and caused LaCerta's downfall, she'd finally been liberated from what had long been a sickening experience to her. She'd let LaCerta seduce her ten yahrens earlier, when he had only been an ambitious and successful entrepreneur (and not so disgustingly obese) who's forays into crime and corruption were not too distasteful, and she had thought this was a way to rise to a higher standard of living. But once the mysterious robot dubbed Red-Eye had fallen from the skies and been found by LaCerta while he and Macy had been on a riding trip, things had changed. Thanks to Red-Eye, LaCerta became a hideous monster, literally turning the settlement farmers into his own slave laborers who had to give over half their crops and livestock to the crimelord as tribute.

And she had found herself trapped. Powerless to do anything about what LaCerta did, while becoming more and more forced into a life where she was no

more than his personal toy. But when Apollo had killed Red-Eye, thanks to the information she had given him, and ended LaCerta's reign of terror, her life had finally been given back to her. She was free to live like a human being again.

Then came Marco's stunning comeback just a few sectars later, and a new reign of terror that made everyone yearn for the days of LaCerta and Red-Eye. She had become trapped again. Her only reason for living, the thought that she might one day meet another man like Apollo that she'd be able to help.

And now, Macy praised the Lords that that day had finally come. That more than a yahren of sacrifice and shame had not been in vain.

Her inner sense of reverie was then shattered when she felt a powerful hand grabbing her arm and pulling her into the shadows of an alley. Terrified, she looked up and saw the angry eyes of Marco's number two man, Argo staring back at her.

"It's not good to talk to strangers, Macy," his voice dripped with menace. "Bad things can then happen."

And before she could scream, his hand was on top of her mouth.

"Puppis, come to bed," Vella said quietly.

The blonde youth was looking out the door of the house, "That poor man Angus shouldn't be staying there alone. There's been too much lupus trouble around there."

"He can take care of himself," his mother's voice rose, "He has one of those guns, and he'll be perfectly safe."

"But he doesn't know where the lupus come from. Someone's got to keep him company,"

Puppis protested.

"I said no!" she shouted.

The boy had finally decided that he'd had enough.

"I don't care what you say, Mother," he said calmly, "It isn't right. I'll come in when Jason and the others get back, but I should be out there helping him."

Vella was stunned. This was the first time she had ever heard him defy her so openly.

"I don't want to do it to be brave or heroic," he went on, "Like Apollo would say, it's just something I have to do."

She lowered her head and let out a forlorn sigh, "All right," she waved her hand but didn't look at him, "Do it. But the micron the others are back, I want you in."

"I will," he said as he grabbed his numo, opened the door and went out.

Vella collapsed into her chair and almost felt like crying. The early elation she'd felt about the return of more warriors was long gone. Replaced only with a fear that the nightmare they'd all been living through since the rise of Marco was about to turn another hideous corner. Just as the rise of LaCerta had turned a hideous corner that led to the death of her husband, she now feared that the rise of Marco was going to take a turn that would lead to the death of all her remaining family.

She would gladly take two lifetimes of paying more tribute to Marco if she could be assured that her son would never be taken from her.

"Did you find out where they were going?" an angry Marco demanded as Argo re-entered the tavern.

"No," his number-two man shook his head, "But at this stage that doesn't matter. Macy talked. Told them exactly where all the ammunition is."

The crime lord's face suddenly contorted with all the fury he could summon.

"That miserable socialator scum," he whispered, "She'll pay for that."

"She already did," Argo flashed a toothy grin at his boss, "No need to worry about that anymore."

Marco did not seem entirely pleased with that information, "That's the sort of thing I prefer to do myself, Argo. She was mine to do with as I saw fit."

Argo stiffened slightly in embarrassment.

"But I guess that's not the thing to worry about right now," he gave his one of his malevolent smirks, "You'd better get everyone together and have them ready

for when their 'trade secret' arrives."

Amidst the darkness and the density of the forest, Angus found his lonely vigil in front of the two landrams to be increasingly eerie. It finally reached the point where he decided that he'd feel more secure from the laser turret position on the vehicle's top.

When he heard a rustle from the trees below, he felt his arms wrap tightly around the massive piece of firepower in tension.

"Angus?" he heard Puppis' voice and instantly the Pegasus lieutenant felt himself relax.

"I'm up here," he waved to the boy.

"Why are you on top of that?" Puppis frowned.

"Well this is the most special feature of these things. This is a laser turret cannon."

"Is that even better than your laser pistol?"

"It sure is," Angus nodded, "Come on up here and I'll show you."

Puppis mounted the handrails on the landram's side and settled next to Angus' position.

"You see with this thing, we literally have the power of a dozen men armed with laser pistols," he pointed to the control panel, "It really comes in handy when you have to take on things a lot bigger than Red-Eye was."

The blonde youth looked at the panel with awe, "I'll bet my father and Apollo used this too."

"They sure did," Angus nodded and then amended, "In Apollo's case, I'd say he still does."

Puppis then looked at the Pegasus warrior with a trace of bitterness, "Do you know Apollo well?"

"I've met him, but I wouldn't say we're good friends or anything like that," Angus said, "I've always known about his reputation though. He comes from a

great family of warriors. His father in fact, is the commander of the whole fleet of ships that he belongs to.”

“Why would he make a promise he couldn’t keep?” the boy kept his voice quiet, but there was no mistaking the frustrated bitter edge that told how much Puppis had always taken those words for granted, “He said he’d come back some day. I always thought...” his voice trailed off.

Angus sighed. How do you try to relate to someone bitter over a broken promise? Especially since he came from a situation aboard the Pegasus where he felt Cain had made a broken promise to the entire crew about what would happen when the Battle of Gomorrah was over. He’d felt for sure they’d be sticking with the Galactica permanently. Where there were friends of his from the Colonies that he’d never had a chance to talk to during that brief period of reunion.

He tried to recall what Captain Skyler had told him so many times about looking at the whole thing from Cain’s perspective, and how one could make a patriotic case for what the Pegasus’ current battle plan was. It now seemed as though it was time to apply that advice from the current leader of Silver Spar Squadron to this situation.

“Puppis,” he put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, “I don’t know Apollo enough to get into his mind, and explain everything from his perspective. But let me tell you about someone who made a promise just like that to someone he loves a great deal, but probably isn’t going to be able to keep it.”

“Who?”

“My commanding officer, Cain,” Angus took a breath as he found it hard to believe that he, one of the leading grumblers aboard the Pegasus was going to be doing this, “You remember how Tolen explained how our ship, the Pegasus, isn’t going with Apollo’s ship, the Galactica, to this place called Earth?”

“Yeah,” Puppis nodded.

“Well you see, our commander, Cain, he’s got someone he loves a great deal who used to be stationed with us on the Pegasus in our squadron. That’s his daughter, Sheba.”

Puppis frowned, “You mean they let women fly ships too?”

Angus suddenly laughed, “Why does that surprise you, Puppis?”

"Well it's just because my mom hates guns so much. She couldn't hit the side of a granary tower from ten feet."

"Not all women are like your mother, Puppis," Angus went on, "The way things are with our people in this long war with the Cylons for the last thousand yahrens, women have been needed just as much as the men to take part in the fighting."

"Are they good?"

"Some are better than others," Angus admitted, "But Sheba is one of the best. As a matter of fact, she's even better than Banker and me."

The boy shook his head in amazement.

"That's just another reason why her father loves her a lot, and why they've always been close," the warrior resumed, "But you see, when the Galactica and the Pegasus were together, Sheba was hurt during the battle we were fighting. And she had to get evacuated to the Galactica to be treated before we went off on our own battle."

He took another breath as Skyler's words in Cain's defense one evening in the Officer's Club came back to him. When Angus had offered his vigorous approval to Paris's comment that Cain only had his ego to worry about when it came to making the decision to leave the Galactica, Skyler had literally stopped the conversation cold when he pointed out that by leaving Sheba behind, Cain was losing something as dear to him as all the others who had friends and relatives aboard the Galactica were. And everyone at the table, knowing the closeness that had existed between the father and the daughter, had been unable to come up with a response to that.

"So you see, Cain, loving his daughter as much as he did, made a promise to her that he'd see her again some day. And when he told her that, he was making it from the heart without any intent to deceive. But...the way things are now, it's not likely he can ever keep that promise to her and see her again."

"Why?" Puppis asked with interest.

"Well it's like Tolen said, the Galactica and the Pegasus have two different jobs to perform. Theirs is taking 70,000 people to a place of safety on Earth. Ours is to stay behind and cause trouble with the Cylons so they can never go looking for the Galactica," he paused, "It's not because Cain tried to deceive his daughter or Apollo tried to deceive you or your mother, it's just..." he didn't know what else to

say.

Puppis looked at him in silence for a moment and then lowered his head, "I guess they all have a lot of work to do."

"Yeah," Angus nodded, "Life is full of those dirty tasks we don't like to do, but still have to do."

The boy then sighed and continued to look away, "I guess I shouldn't be hard on Apollo anymore," he said, "He has to do his work out there, which I guess matters a lot more than anything here."

Angus was silent.

Puppis then suddenly looked up, "Is this friend of yours, Sheba, married?"

"No," he shook his head and frowned slightly.

"Is she pretty?"

"Very," Angus admitted, "Don't ever mention this to Banker that I told you, but he had a big crush on her. So did I, to a lesser extent. We all... couldn't help but notice how she looked but... there was kind of a sense that she was off-limits because she was the Commander's daughter."

"I see."

"Why are you asking?"

"I was just thinking," Puppis mused, "Apollo seemed like a real lonely person when we met him. He said he'd lost his wife to one of those Cylons, and that he had a son younger than me to take care of. If he's still lonely now, and if Sheba is lonely because her father left her, then maybe... they could probably get together."

Angus lifted an eyebrow. The way he'd seen Apollo and Sheba literally go at each other's throats during that controversy when Adama had relieved Cain would never have made him think of that possibility.

But then again, he thought, it did seem as though there had been a funny look in Apollo's eye when he'd first come down to the Officers Club looking for the pilot who had outflown him and nearly blasted his ship out of the stars. Maybe it wasn't

as farfetched as it initially sounded. Whatever the case, he certainly would never know if that in fact, was how things would happen between Commander Adama's son and Commander Cain's daughter.

But one thing was certain to Angus now. From this moment forward, he knew he'd never be one of the Grumblers again.

Chapter Six

The sound of the returning cart caused a tense Vella to bolt out from the house and make her way over to where Jason brought the vehicle to a stop.

"Thank God," she said with relief, "I was afraid of something terrible happening."

"I'm afraid something big is about to happen, Vella," her cousin said with grim determination as Tolen and Banker both got off.

"What?" her tension increased.

"Something that isn't going to be pretty," Tolen said, "But if the Lords are with us, it will be the end of Marco."

The three of them started walking back to the wooded area where Angus and Puppis were waiting.

"Wait!" Vella called as she caught-up to them, "What do you mean? What do you have in mind?"

Jason turned around and smiled grimly at her, "Those fancy things they drove-up in are going to take care of Marco and all his other cronies. And then they'll get hold of the ammunition and that will finally be the end of it."

"You're not going with them, are you?"

"If they need me, I am. Right now, they need me for one important job before they can get started."

As her cousin walked away to catch up with the Pegasus warriors, the sick feeling only deepened inside her. By the time she had recovered enough to follow, they had already reached the parked landrams.

"Okay, Angus," Tolen called up to his fellow warrior, "Start up Beta landram. We're moving out."

"You found out where he keeps the ammunition?"

"We did," Banker admitted, "From probably the bravest girl I've ever met. She probably signed her death warrant when she told us."

"But we're not going there, first," Tolen added.

"We're not?" Angus frowned.

"We have to make a trip to gather some reinforcements for the battle that's going to happen."

Vella had arrived just in time to hear the end of the conversation, and she suddenly exploded.

"Now you listen to me!" she said sharply, "If you're planning on some kind of horrible gunfight with Marco just to get your precious ammunition, then you do me a favor and leave my family out of this."

"I'm going to be helping them, Vella," Jason said firmly, "We've reached a point where this is the only chance we have left to get rid of Marco."

"That's not worth throwing your life away, Jason," her cousin retorted, "My God, look what Martin did, look what Bootes did."

"It's not going to be like that," he responded gently, "This is exactly like when Apollo killed Red-Eye."

"No it isn't," she shook her head vigorously, "I knew Apollo, and he was nothing like the three of you are. He only killed Red-Eye because he had to do it, and because he wasn't trying to be a crazy hero like Martin and Bootes were. The only thing you three care about is your precious mission to get hold of your ammunition. All so you can use it to go off and do more crazy missions elsewhere in the stars. And for what?"

"That's not fair, Mother," Puppis suddenly protested, "They've got a good reason."

She then glared at her son, "And as for you, Puppis, you said you'd go to bed

when they returned. Well they have, so go now!"

Puppis shook his head in disgust as he dropped from the landram's roof to the ground. He then started to dash back up the path to his house as fast as he could go.

"Jason," Tolen said calmly, "I believe you said that when Red-Eye was killed, Apollo returned Martin's laser pistol to you."

"He did," the middle-aged cousin admitted. "It's only one weapon, which is why I knew it would be worthless to use it against what Marco's gang has."

"Get it," the executive officer said flatly, "You'll be needing it for this first phase."

Jason nodded and also went back up the path. Vella was now alone with the three warriors.

"Guns, killing," she shook her head, "That's always the story of your lives, isn't it gentlemen? I'm almost surprised you didn't ask Puppis to come along with you."

"Don't be ridiculous," Tolen said calmly. "But if we don't do something now then ten yahrens from now, the responsibility would have to rest with those like Puppis and he'd have a more difficult challenge."

"For what?" Vella glowered at him, "To throw away his life like his father did?"

"No," he shook his head, "To do something that has to be done."

She indignantly shook her head, "I learned the true meaning of doing something that has to be done a long time ago from Apollo, Colonel. But I would rather pay three times the amount I'm giving Marco right now, then take a chance that I could lose all that's left in the world that I care for."

Tolen motioned to the increasingly uncomfortable Angus and Banker, "Get inside the landrams and wait."

The two warriors nodded and got inside their respective vehicles.

The executive officer looked her in the eye, "I take it you have a very pacifistic streak inside you, Vella."

"I despise all kinds of guns," she said firmly, "If we didn't have lupus trouble, I'd destroy every numo on the planet."

"Marco is another kind of lupus, just like Red-Eye was," Tolen softly retorted, "And until there are people willing to do something about him, he's going to remain a parasitic leech on this whole settlement. We're willing to do that. So is Jason."

"No cause is worth dying for," Vella held her ground, "And if we didn't have guns, maybe people would learn to just live with each other in peace again."

"Felgercarb!" Tolen suddenly decided to stop being placid, "That is utter felgercarb."

"Is it?" she matched his hostile tone, "I saw what your kind of cold impulsiveness leads to, Tolen. And Martin paid the price for that, without giving any thought of me or Puppis. How can any of you live like that?"

"I knew Martin," Tolen held his ground, "He was my best friend. And I know he represented the dangerous extreme of what a dedicated warrior can be driven to. But if you ever stopped and listened to yourself Vella, you'd find that you represent the worst kind of extreme in the other direction."

Her anger briefly faded, "What do you mean?"

"You say you'd destroy all guns, and you say there's no kind of cause worth dying for," Tolen went on, "We had some people in our governing Council who felt the same way. That if we just stopped building our weapons and just realized it was crazy to go on fighting for a thousand yahrens, then the Cylon Empire would see the light and be willing to make peace with the Colonies. Well in case you've forgotten what I said earlier, the price we paid for that kind of thinking was the destruction of our entire civilization, and fifteen billion people dead," he skipped a beat, "Including my wife."

For the first time, Vella seemed intimidated into silence.

"We learned the hard way that there are some things worse than death," Tolen went on, "And one of those things is living under slavery. If something isn't done to stop Marco now, no matter how ugly it might be, then Puppis and every other child in this settlement is going to grow-up in a life that isn't going to amount to anything."

The anger was gone from Vella's face. Replaced now by the weight of realization that Tolen had made a legitimate point.

"Now I agree that there are wrong ways and foolish ways of taking a stand," he softened his tone as if to assuage her feelings, "Martin's way was foolish. Bootes' way was foolish. But what we're doing is the right way, just like Apollo's was. You have to believe that, Vella and trust us."

"But why do you have to act now?" she asked in a calmer tone, "This has been going by too fast for me to keep up with. Surely, you don't have to rush into a battle now. Apollo waited until he had more information."

"Because we're racing against time, Vella," Tolen said, "Our ship is under strict orders to get out of the area if we linger more than twenty-four centars without returning from this mission. And not to sound disrespectful, but none of us want to spend the rest of our days here."

"I suppose not," Vella smiled weakly, "You warriors all want to be where you belong, out there in the stars."

Just then, Jason returned brandishing the laser pistol that had belonged to Martin.

"Okay," he said, "I'm ready."

"Get in the first landram with Lieutenant Banker, Jason," Tolen motioned, "I'll need to bring Angus up-to-date on what the plan is."

He nodded and stepped inside the first vehicle. Tolen and Vella were now looking at each other with mutual concern.

"Tell Puppis we'll be all right," he said, "We'll be back in about four centars."

She suddenly took his hand. "The Lords be with you," she whispered.

He smiled and squeezed it in return, and then stepped inside the second landram. Vella stood there and watched as the landrams suddenly roared to life and started to move off back through the woods in the direction of the desert. She lightly brushed away a tear from her eye and then went back up the path to the house.

"You said we weren't going straight to where the ammunition's kept," Angus

noted as the landram continued to move.

"No," Tolen admitted, "With eighteen armed men guarding it, I think some reinforcements are called for."

"Who do you have in mind? More people from town?"

"Not a chance," he shook his head, "We can't take the risk that one of them would decide to tip Marco off. We're getting some professionals for this."

Angus looked ahead and noticed that the landram was going back the way it had come, "We're going back to the shuttles aren't we?"

"We are."

"So we're going to be contacting Cain for help?"

"Of course not," Tolen's voice was nonchalant, "You know the rule about radio silence when we're this far from the ship."

"Then if we're not getting help from town or from Cain, where could—"

Angus broke off and suddenly looked at Tolen with an incredulous expression.

"You're not serious, are you?"

"I am." Tolen said firmly. "Desperate times, call for desperate measures."

"But Colonel!" the lieutenant protested. "Aren't you concerned about the ethical ramifications? You're talking about using them... against humans." Angus was too horrified to speak plainly.

"Yes, I am concerned about the ethical ramifications!" Tolen angrily retorted. "I've been literally sick to my stomach ever since I realized it had to be done this way. But this is the only way we can fulfill our mission objective, and by the Lords that's what we're going to do!"

Angus sank back in his chair. "Is this mission really worth that kind of a price? Sacrificing one of our principles about..."

"Yes, it's worth it Angus." Tolen said firmly. "We need this ammunition to do our job, which is to keep the Cylon Empire tied down. Which helps give the

Galactica and 70,000 people long term security. And in the process we also end up helping this planet rid themselves of a monster who's practically become an Imperious Leader all by himself."

"What it ultimately comes down to is killing human beings," Angus looked ahead, still too stunned by this turn of events. "I... Lords of Kobol, I..."

"Come off it Angus. Banker and I already had to kill two of Marco's henchmen. The best way to look at this is that we're only coming up with a more effective method for taking care of the risk and fulfilling our mission."

The lieutenant shook his head, "I'm still not convinced."

"Would it salve your conscience if it were a dozen warriors from the Pegasus coming here and putting *their* lives at risk?" Tolen retorted, "For sagan's sake, Angus, start thinking practically. You don't disagree about the mission objective, do you?"

"No sir, I don't, it's just..."

"Then this is the end of the discussion," the executive officer said with finality. "I've made a command decision based on what's best for letting the mission succeed and we're sticking to it. Besides..." he then added for emphasis, "Do you think Cain would act any different if it were up to him?"

The lieutenant had no response to that since the answer was self-explanatory.

A centar later, the two shuttles were back on the desolate landscape of Delta Aquinas, and the four men were walking down the incline toward the abandoned Cylon garrison that the three warriors had traversed earlier.

Jason, the newcomer, was still trying to overcome the sense of awe that traveling in the shuttle into the stars had instilled in him.

"I still can't believe this," he said as they drew closer. And then, the Equellan stopped in his tracks when he saw the seven dead centurions from the earlier firefight lying about the compound area in front of the main entrance.

"Believe it," Tolen said as they resumed walking, "You're the first, and hopefully last Equellan who'll ever have to travel this far."

Their footsteps echoed through the corridors as they walked toward the

empty ammunition storage compartment.

"God, it's amazing that all these Red-Eyes had all this power so close to us," Jason said in amazement, "How did we get so lucky that they never came our way?"

"You can thank Martin and Commander Cain, and every one else in the Colonial Fifth Fleet who helped win the Battle of Delta Aquinas," the executive officer said. "Because of that, the Cylon Empire decided this quadrant wasn't worth it to them any longer."

"And I imagine that would include yourself, Colonel?" Jason asked.

Tolen smiled crookedly at him, "Let's just say that I'm not ashamed of my performance in the battle."

As they drew up to the entrance, Banker suddenly noticed something lying on the floor. He stopped to kneel down and pick it up.

"What is it?" Angus asked.

"Doyle's laser pistol," Banker sighed, "We forgot to retrieve it."

A grim silence then came over the three warriors as the memory of their lost comrade came back to them. Even Jason, who had been told of the sergeant's death beforehand, felt somber as Banker got to his feet and they resumed walking.

"Good thing we didn't blast the power unit when we made our exit," Angus noted as they reached the door, "Or else this whole idea wouldn't be worth felgercarb."

"We'll have to blow the door and the one beyond, this time," Tolen said, "I'm not turning the power back on until we're ready."

Banker detached the low-level charges from his belt and applied the first one to the door.

"Back up everyone!" Tolen shouted as the four moved back forty feet down the corridor.

Once the door had been blasted open, the four walked through the opening

into the abandoned storage room. The hole in the wall blasted yahrens ago by Lieutenant Staley, remained the only jarring feature of the room.

Banker then went up to the next door that led to the area where the sleeper contingent of centurions had emerged from, planted his second charge and microns later, it too had been blown open.

"Angus, go back and stand by at the power unit. Wait for our signal."

Tolen, Banker and Jason entered the next room. They had only gone fifteen feet, when they came face-to-face with the remaining four deactivated Cylons, each one seated with its weapons at the ready.

"There they are," Tolen said, "Waiting for the day to be turned on again. After twelve yahrens, that day has come."

Jason let out a low whistle. One dented Red-Eye had been an imposing sight for all those yahrens that it had terrorized the people of Equellas. To see four of them, was even more astonishing.

Incredible, the Equellan thought. For ten yahrens, a single Red-Eye had been a source of terror. Now, four of them held the key to ending a new wave of terror.

"Boy," he shook his head, "If Marco's men see four of these, half of them would turn and run in an instant."

"Exactly the idea, Jason."

The three of them carefully removed the weapons the centurions were clutching. In order for this to work, the centurions had to be unarmed when they were brought back to life.

"I hope your creative improvisation is even better than it was with Marco," Banker grunted.

"If you thought that story was outlandish, wait until you hear the one I'm going to give them," Tolen chuckled slightly and then stepped back toward the open door, "Okay Angus, hit it and get your astrum over here now!"

There was a click and slowly the lights and equipment started to come back on. With it, the circuits the deactivated centurions were plugged into, also began to hum with activity.

Angus dashed in and the four men held their pistols at the ready, waiting for the whirring sound of the Cylons to start up again.

After a long centon's delay, the first of them, a gold-plated command centurion came to life. It's red light on the top of the helmet that had led the Equellans to dub the first one they'd seen "Red-Eye" moved back and forth in accompaniment to the whirring sound. Slowly, the other three also came on.

The command centurion's hand instinctively went for his weapon holster, discovered it was empty and then looked up at where the four humans held their pistols aimed at him and all the others.

"You're the command centurion?" Tolen barked.

The command centurion got to his feet, "I am," it spoke in that lower-toned mechanical voice that also distinguished it from the ordinary silver-plated centurion.

"Well all of you get up," Tolen continued to bark with authority, "There's no sense trying to resist. Your weapons have all been taken from you, and if you even try to make a move you'll all be dead."

"Why have you reactivated us?" the command centurion asked.

"There's a good reason for that commander," Tolen smirked, "Your friends in the Cylon Empire aren't around to reactivate you. Your entire Empire has been destroyed."

Banker and Angus had to summon all the self-control they could muster to avoid chuckling or betraying the truth.

"The thousand yahren war between the Colonies and the Cylons ended shortly after you were deactivated twelve yahrens ago," Tolen continued forcefully, "And human ingenuity, the very component that you machines have always lacked, once again came to the forefront and emerged triumphant to total victory. Because of that, you and all remaining survivors of the Cylon Empire are to assist us from now on."

"You are lying," the command centurion said flatly.

"Am I?" the executive officer snorted and didn't bat an eye, "If that's the case, how come your friends have never come back for you, while we have?"

None of the centurions seemed able to answer that question, for which Tolen and the others were grateful because it was a question that had even puzzled them somewhat. The only explanation that seemed logical was that the higher classes of Cylons regarded centurions as expendable.

Good thing the Cylons prefer to just build new centurions rather than look for old ones, Banker thought.

"You're fortunate that we didn't just kill you all while you were still inactive," Tolen continued, "Because the end of the war and our victory has brought about two different climates of opinion with regard to what we do with all the remaining Cylons that are left."

The executive officer began to pace up and down in front of the eight centurions, "There are some who think we should just destroy all of you in the interests of keeping the universe pure from the stench you and your filthy empire brought for more than a thousand yahrens. To show no mercy to any of you, and let you all either turn to rust or be melted down for scrap."

Some of the centurions exchanged glances at each other. The other three humans wondered if that was from any kind of sense of unease.

"But there are others who wish to be more charitable," Tolen went on in that forceful bark, "Those who believe that you Cylons can still perform useful tasks within the Colonial Empire, and that it is wiser to let you live, provided that all of you remember that now and for eternity, your original programming to kill and destroy humans no longer has any relevance or any purpose or any meaning. You can be allowed to continue functioning, and even prosper in a long life of service, so long as you always remember what the present reality is."

The executive officer then paused for emphasis, "What's it going to be, centurions?"

Again, Tolen allowed his words to hang in the air.

Finally, the command centurion stepped forward and bowed slightly, "By your command."

It set off a chain reaction among the others. The next one stepped forward and also said, "By your command," until they had all done so.

When they had all finished, Banker and Angus both had to restrain themselves

from the desire to applaud.

“Very good, centurions,” Tolen smiled, “Come with us, and you will all be rewarded later.”

Slowly, the four centurions began to move forward and were motioned out into the next room, and then outside the hole in the storage room out into the daylight and back towards the shuttles.

As Tolen led his new and unlikely allies, he realized that the next difficult hurdle had been cleared, and that the last one, and the most dangerous, was all that remained now.

Chapter Seven

The granary tower that housed the ammunition stock lay on an abandoned farm outside town that had been seized yahrens earlier as tribute by LaCerta. Still abandoned at the time Marco had risen to power, it became the perfect facility for storing the instruments that enabled him to perpetuate his power on a scale that his old boss could never have dreamed of. LaCerta had only had one enforcer, Red-Eye, with one laser pistol. On the other hand, he had enough laser ammunition to hold on to unquestioned power forever.

That had been his whole smug way of thinking until those strangers had walked into the tavern. Unlike that mysterious Apollo who had killed Red-Eye, there was something about those two that was even more frightening. When that man Tolen said he had something more powerful than anything he had stored inside the granary, he felt sure he could believe it.

But he'd spent so many yahrens in LaCerta's shadow, serving as his lackey, and then he'd endured the humiliation of having to play second fiddle to that infernal machine Red-Eye for another ten yahrens. He'd paid his dues waiting for his chance to finally get the power he'd always felt he was entitled to, and he was damned if two arrogant little daggits were going to take it away from him.

So he had spent the last three centars waiting. And for this, he had more than just his remaining eighteen men who received percentage cuts of tribute in return for their unflagging loyalty to him. He'd also taken an extra precaution as well. He'd also sent Argo out to gather some of the farmers who'd been forced to give up their land and livestock when they couldn't keep up the tribute payments. The promise of having their lands restored to them, seemed like something worth

dangling in front of their eyes to get them to join in the defense of the granary as well.

He took a look around and made a mental note of which farmers had decided to come. And then he went over to where Argo had already taken up position with his own laser pistol.

"Very impressive," Marco said, "At least ten more decided to join."

"The only one I couldn't get was Jason," he grunted.

"Oh?" Marco lifted an eyebrow, "Did he say why he wasn't interested in a chance at getting his stinking farm back?"

"He wasn't there," Argo shook his head, "That damned cousin of his, Vella, said he was in town. Wouldn't say anything else. But I'd just come from town and no one saw him there."

"That's interesting," the crimelord put a finger to his lips, "You know Argo, if you'd just think a little more before acting, you might learn something. I have a feeling that when our friends from the tavern show-up, Jason is going to be with them."

Argo slowly shook his head, "I ought to give that slut just what I gave Macy."

"Later," Marco smiled malevolently, "A time and a place for everything, my dear Argo. And when that time comes, you and I both will gain some satisfaction from the fair Vella."

Argo slowly nodded as a similar grin came over his visage. "That's what I call a good incentive."

After Tolen and Angus landed the shuttles closer to the settlement, the two landrams, each containing two humans and two Cylons, started off on their journey toward the granary.

Jason uneasily cast a glance toward the back where the two centurions sat at attention.

"I wish they didn't make me so nervous," he whispered to Angus.

"Don't," the warrior whispered back, "Boss them around just like LaCerta did

with Red-Eye. They'll obey."

Angus then darted back to look at them as well, "We won't unleash them right away. Tolen wants to save them as a surprise if Marco turns out to be more stubborn than we realize. Right now though, the bigger problem is getting someone on top of the turret cannon once we move into position. You don't know how to either drive this thing or man one."

"So how's this going to work?"

"I'll have to do the cannon," Angus said, "Once I bring her into position, I need you to cover me until I can get up there. Think you can do that?"

Jason gestured his pistol and grinned, "It'll be my pleasure, Lieutenant."

Angus returned it and continued to follow Tolen's landram.

"By the way Angus," the Equellan's tone became more serious, "When I was getting Martin's laser pistol from the house, Puppis told me about the talk you and he had about Apollo, and about... things on your ship. I want to thank you for that. I think he's come to terms with Apollo never coming back now."

"I'm glad about that," the Pegasus warrior admitted, "I know from experience that Apollo can seem like a pain in the astrum at times, but he's not the kind of person anyone should ever hold a grudge against for any reason," he paused slightly, "This mission's also taught me a few things about not holding grudges as well."

And Angus had already made a silent vow to himself that when he got back and heard another crack about Cain as the 'Merchant of Death' from Paris or anyone else, he was going to punch that person right in the nose.

"Four kilometers to go," Banker could slowly feel the tension rise in his voice as the landram continued to trod over the dirt roads, "Looks as though Marco pulled back the men he has blocking the roads and has them all waiting at the granary."

Tolen rose from his chair, "Take over the driving, Banker."

The executive officer slowly made his way to the back, where the command centurion and another Cylon were seated.

"Do you all understand explicitly what it is we expect you to do?" Tolen brought his voice to that posture of authority he'd been using ever since they were turned back on.

"Affirmative," the command centurion spoke, "We are to await your order to attack the renegades."

"That will come when I say so," Tolen said firmly, "But don't let-up until they're all dead or have surrendered. This is a bad group of people we're dealing with. They're causing trouble with the established order of things as they're supposed to be on this world. Now since I know how much your Imperious Leader used to stress the need of maintaining order on behalf of your destroyed Empire, you can certainly appreciate the seriousness of this situation."

"We do," the command centurion nodded.

"Excellent," Tolen smiled approvingly, "The more reason for all of you to do your job well and earn the appropriate rewards."

"What is the reward?"

The smile faded from Tolen's face as he hadn't expected this kind of question to come from them. He knew he had to improvise.

"Opportunity," he said with dead seriousness, "Opportunity that your Empire I am sure *never* allowed centurions like you to experience."

"That is true!" one of regular silver colored centurions suddenly chimed in. And this also surprised Tolen.

"Indeed," the command centurion spoke again, "IL classes. Advanced brain Cylons. Always... leading us. Making us... stay where we were." He then paused, "It is good to know they have been defeated."

What in Hades? This isn't normal behavior for centurions! Not even command level ones!

"Yes," Tolen recovered himself, trying not to betray his sense of deep surprise, "Yes, it certainly is!"

He then moved back to the front where Banker was looking at him quizzically.

"Was it my imagination, or did they actually say they were glad the Empire had been defeated?"

"Yeah," Tolen settled himself back into his seat, "That almost makes me wonder if..."

"What?"

"Not now," the executive officer shook his head. "One thing at a time. I'll slow down and let you get in position on the turret cannon now."

Banker nodded and opened the door on his side. The landram slowed to a crawl as Tolen waited for the lieutenant to get into position in the cannon on the roof. A thump from above indicated that he was in, and the executive officer gingerly picked up speed again.

Tolen could feel his heart pumping faster as they drew closer. He could also feel his mind becoming distracted by what had just happened in the back and made him wonder if he'd have to change his thinking on what would come... later.

The thirty members that comprised Marco's line of defense could all feel the tension they'd been going through for the last two centars since the crimelord had rounded them up, rise as well. Some of the farmers who'd only signed-up because they'd jumped at the chance to get their confiscated lands back, were feeling decidedly more nervous than Marco's regular band of enforcers.

"I'm beginning to regret this," one farmer whispered to another, "If Marco's worried about something taking away his weapons, maybe we're on the wrong side."

"He said it means someone worse than he's been to us," the second farmer whispered back as they continued to look ahead with their awkward feeling laser pistols in their grasp.

"I'm not so sure there can be someone worse than him."

"Quiet!" Argo's voice snapped from behind, which promptly intimidated them into silence.

At the base of the granary, Marco leaned forward slightly and frowned.

"Do you hear that?" he took a step toward the others, "It sounds as though

they're coming."

And then, a stunned silence came over the thirty men as the two landrams suddenly came into sight. Never before had any of them ever seen a vehicle move without animal propulsion.

"So that's Mr. Tolen's trade secret," the crimelord kept up his external bravado, but inside his stomach was churning with anxiety, "Looks as though he was telling the truth."

The anxiety was even deeper inside some of the other men, "Sir, if he's come to make an offer, it might..."

"Not a chance," Marco gritted his teeth, "He won't settle for anything less than all the ammunition and I'm not letting him get one piece of it."

The landrams suddenly came to a stop fifty feet from where Marco's front-line was positioned. Through the glare of the spotlights, Marco could see one man stationed on top of the lead one.

He then heard Tolen's voice come over some kind of speaker from inside, "Marco, you have exactly two centons to pull all your men out of there, now."

The crimelord laughed. "Not a chance, Mr. Tolen. You'd do yourself a favor by just begging for mercy from your boss."

"Sorry, my boss is not that forgiving," Tolen replied bluntly, "We'll just have to give you and those poor souls you've rounded up a little demonstration. Lieutenant!"

And then, Banker aimed the laser cannon at the back end of the structure adjacent to the granary. A single blast suddenly caused created a hole ten feet wide in the building and sent shards of wood flying.

"I wasn't lying about the hundred rounds per micron either, Marco, so you'd better listen to me and step aside!" He then added, "And all of you men who are following this guy should know that I have no intention of stepping in to take his place. I'm taking that ammunition with me and *off* this planet so that there won't be any more parasites like Marco or LaCerta again!"

A startled hush went over a large number of Marco's men, including even some who had been loyally serving him all this time without question.

"Yeah, you heard me right," Tolen repeated with emphasis, "Turn over this ammunition to me and *all* of you will be able to own your own land freely again with *no* more tribute payments to *anyone*! That is my offer to all of you! You only have to drop your weapons and stop listening to him, now!"

The first farmer who'd earlier expressed his unease, was now feeling a torrent of conflicted emotions. On the one hand, Marco had promised to return his land to him, but on the other...

"Is that true?" he suddenly blurted out.

"Yes, it's true."

"You stay in line!" Marco angrily hissed and pointed his laser at the farmer. "You make one move toward him, and you're *dead*!"

The farmer wheeled back and glared at Marco, "I'm already dead if I *stay* with you, Marco! No way would I be able to take on one of those things!"

"Well if you're already dead by your reckoning, then this doesn't matter," Marco glared at him and then promptly shot the farmer right in the chest with his own laser pistol.

Some of the other men, even those who were among Marco's regular group of enforcers began to look uneasy.

"The next one who tries to desert me is going to get the same!" the crimelord shouted, "Now all of you move in, and kill them! Now!"

Argo promptly fired the first laser round at the landrams. It was enough to make every other member in Marco's group, act accordingly. Even those who at this point had good reason to feel like they weren't on the right side.

Banker promptly returned fire and the battle had begun.

As soon as the shots had started, Angus promptly kicked open the door to his landram, "Cover me, now!" he shouted at Jason.

The Equellan burst out of the shuttle and unleashed his own laser volley in the direction of the granary. Several screams from ahead indicated that already, there were casualties on the other side.

From the first landram, Banker increased the barrage, always aiming carefully to make sure he didn't hit the granary tower itself. But as more shots erupted from the crimelord's gang that were aimed directly at his position, the lieutenant found himself ducking more and more, and increasingly unable to keep up his precision. As a result, the intensity of fire from the cannon was drastically reduced.

From the top of the second landram, Angus settled into position and could see a group of seven men from the front-line inching their way forward as they kept up their barrage of laser pistol fire and moved in toward where Jason was trying to hold them back.

"I'm in, Jason, take cover yourself!" Angus shouted as he fired his first barrage toward the group of men.

The first blast promptly took out the lead three, and the Equellan ducked behind the safety of the landram door, as he continued to fire.

From inside the first landram, Tolen could hear the fire intensity diminishing from the roof and he decided it was time to increase the tempo of the battle. He grabbed hold of the control stick and the landram moved forward toward the granary.

"Stand by centurions!" he shouted behind him, "Stand by!"

"Awaiting your command," the command centurion said in that same unemotional drone.

As the lead landram moved forward, some more men in the front-line panicked and fell back. Their shots against the landram structure had virtually no effect.

"Aim at the top!" Marco shouted as he kept firing his own pistol, "Aim at the top! Take out both those men, and we'll overwhelm them!"

It finally reached the point where Banker could no longer expose himself to use the turret cannon. He ducked below the shield and switched to his own laser pistol, trading off shots with the next group of six that now tried to rush the vehicle.

Banker saw one try to mount the handrails that led up to where he was. He promptly brought the butt of his pistol down on the man's skull and he collapsed to the ground. Another one had begun to fumble with the door that led to where

Tolen was seated. The executive officer was forced to shoot the would-be intruder right between the eyes.

"Now!" he turned around and shouted as he hit the switch that opened the rear door, "Now centurions!"

"By your command."

The command centurion rose and the two of them with their weapons at the ready, then walked out through the rear door that Tolen had just opened.

When the Cylons emerged, the gang outside went into a state of shock that exceeded anything they'd seen up to that point. For six of them, it proved to be fatal.

"They've got a whole group of Red-Eyes!" the second farmer shouted, "Forget it Marco, I surrender!"

The crimelord was also in a state of shock. Too shocked to shoot the second farmer down, as he had done the first. Even Argo was in a state of shock.

As a result, when the blast from the two lead centurions struck them both full force, their own laser pistols were still frozen at their sides.

Through the windshield, Jason could see the first group of centurions emerge from the lead landram. He then hit the rear door switch Angus had indicated and motioned to the two centurions in the back.

"Go up there and help!" the Equellan commanded, "Go up there and help!"

"By your command."

As soon as the Cylons had left, he heard several more screams come from the lead echelon that had been harassing his landram.

"Don't shoot!" one of them shouted as he threw down his pistol and dropped to the ground, "We surrender! We surrender!"

Jason bolted out of the landram and grinned. These henchmen of Marco's who had run them into the ground with their slave labor tactics had finally learned the meaning of fear.

"We've done it Angus!" he shouted with exhilaration, "We've done it!"

There was no response to the Equellan's joyous exclamation.

"Angus?" Jason looked up with concern.

An agonizing micron went by and then the Pegasus lieutenant finally stuck his head up and gave Jason a thumbs up sign. It was then that the Equellan noticed the weary, less triumphal expression on the warrior's face. Only the grim satisfaction of one who had seen a necessary job taken care of.

Ahead, the last survivors of the gang promptly threw down their weapons and dropped to the ground. Immediately, Tolen barked an order to the centurions to cease their procession that had silenced the remaining opposition.

The four Cylons pulled back to the landram, while Tolen and a drained Banker began to collect the laser pistols strewn about.

It was a sickening sight to Tolen, to see almost half of the thirty men Marco had assembled lying dead as a result of the battle. It felt horrifying to think that he'd been forced into a position where for the first time in his life he'd had to kill other human beings, and even resort to using Cylons to do so. Killing the two henchmen earlier in town had been easier to do, but this, he knew was different.

But when Tolen came to Marco's body, he looked down at the crimelord's blank stare of death, and he remembered that evil was something not just confined to the Cylon Empire. It was even rampant among members of his own race, and this man had been living proof of that, especially when Tolen realized what had likely happened to the young woman named Macy. The blame for the carnage could only rest with Marco for using the ammunition that had fallen from the sky as a means of beginning a monstrous reign of terror akin to slave labor.

He gingerly picked up the pistol the crimelord was carrying and suppressed the desire to kick the pudgy corpse.

"All right everyone!" Tolen shouted to the survivors, "Listen up! All of you, go home and back to your land! No one is going to be using these things to collect any more tribute from anyone!" He paused for emphasis, "I meant what I said. All of you men are going to live freely and chart your own destinies and that there won't be any more crimelords like LaCerta or Marco ever again on this planet. Because so help me, if I ever find out that any one of you is pulling a stunt like that, I won't hesitate to come back."

One of Marco's surviving henchmen, looking chastened and ashamed slowly made his way up to Tolen.

"I'm... sorry. I..."

"Forget it," Tolen's voice was now gentle, "Just start over again. All of you."

Slowly, the survivors began to disperse. At that point, Jason and Angus came up to join them.

"What do we do now, sir?" Angus asked.

Tolen looked at him, relieved that they were both alive. "Let's start loading all of this into the landrams. Make sure there isn't a single item left behind.

"Sir," the command centurion spoke up, "What is your next command to us?"

Tolen saw the four Cylons standing in a neatly aligned row. He was finding himself more conflicted than ever about what he had to do next. What had seemed so simple to him just centons ago, now suddenly wasn't so clear cut to him.

"Centurions," he said firmly, "Wait inside. I'll let you know what... happens next in a centon."

"By your command."

The four centurions disappeared inside the shuttle to wait. Tolen then motioned Banker, Angus and Jason to come close.

"My original plan was to blow them away because we don't have any need of them any longer," the executive officer said. "But now... I'm not so sure."

"Not sure?" Angus frowned, "Why?"

"Because there is something... off about them. Something where they... seemed to enjoy the idea that the Empire is dead and we can give them, the class of centurions at the bottom of the strata... opportunities."

"Yeah," Banker nodded, "Totally doesn't match the blind loyalty thing centurions are noted for. They expressed those thoughts *independently*."

"But what does that mean?" Angus asked.

"I'm not sure I know," Tolen kept his eye on the landram, "But... it's enough to make me wonder if... those centurions are worth more to us alive than dead."

"You know something, sir," Banker said, "You may be right. It could end up being... valuable intelligence on our end for the future, if... we could explore their thinking further."

Tolen slowly nodded, "Then we're agreed. We don't blow them away. We take them back to the Pegasus with us and... learn more about what's making them tick."

"I don't understand..." Jason was bewildered but Tolen cut him off.

"Jason... this doesn't concern you or your people. It's about what happens after we leave. The bottom line for you and your people is that the nightmare is over."

The Pegasus executive officer then motioned his arm. "Angus, Banker, as soon as you're done loading your share of the ammo, I want you to take the landram with the centurions back to your shuttle. Tell them that we're going to take them back to where they can have more opportunities for themselves than the Empire would ever have given them. And this is important. Record anything they say. I'm going to need that stuff documented when it comes time to making the case for what we did to Cain."

He then added with emphasis, "And under *no* circumstances are you to provoke them, or say anything that might disrupt their thinking. Treat them like... comrades and see what happens."

"And if their... normal programming should kick in?" Angus asked pointedly.

"*Then* you shoot them," Tolen said bluntly. "Can the two of you handle that?"

The two warriors nodded.

"All right," Tolen turned to Jason, "Time for me to take you home and... say goodbye."

The wait had been agonizing for both Vella and a still-awake Puppis, especially after Argo had come by to try and recruit Jason. She could only wonder now at what might happen if her cousin's involvement with the Pegasus warriors was found out, and Marco decided to take some kind of revenge on her and her son.

Another three centars passed before they suddenly heard the wonderfully reassuring sound of one of the landrams.

"They're back!" the blonde youth shouted as he bolted out the front with his anxious mother trailing.

The landram came to a stop by the woods. The doors opened, and Jason and Tolen emerged.

"Jason, thank God," Vella embraced her cousin.

"It's over," he said in a drained tone, "Marco's dead and there'll be no more of his like to take his place."

"Where are Angus and Banker?" the boy asked with concern.

"They had to go back and prepare for our return to our main ship," Tolen said. "I'm sorry they couldn't say goodbye to you, but... we're really running short on time."

"How many people died?" Vella slowly collected herself.

"Probably about fifteen of Marco's men," Tolen said, "I'm sorry it came to that, but... maybe now things will finally get back to the way it should be for your people."

"Was it worth it, Colonel?" Vella instinctively pulled Puppis by her side and glared at him. "Was that much bloodshed really worth it?"

"Time will tell," he said, "But I would say for your people... yes."

"But you have to go back to what you need to do just like Apollo did, and never come back," she went on, "So what happens if we have something *e/se* to deal with in the future? If someone follows Marco, like he followed LaCerta?"

Tolen didn't say anything as he turned and went back into the landram. When he emerged two centons later, he was carrying one box of ammunition which he dropped at hers and Puppis's feet.

"You're right, Vella. You can't keep looking to the stars any longer for people like Apollo and me to solve your problems. And that's why... I am trusting you to be the guardians of this in case anyone *ever* emerges to threaten the people

again."

Jason came up alongside his cousin and uneasily glanced down at the box.

"Colonel," he said, "Do you really think it's a good idea to leave this with us? Just one box in the wrong hands could..."

"I'm doing this because I trust your integrity, and I trust the integrity of Puppis when he gets old enough," Tolen said. "From where I come from, we had to learn the lesson about keeping our defenses ready even during a time of tranquility, because you can never anticipate where the next madman is going to come from. So Jason, take this one crate. Guard it and keep it hidden, and only use it as a last resort if another lunatic decides to start another reign of terror."

He expected Vella to react angrily, but to his amazement she didn't.

"In case there's ever something that we... have to do," she then put her arm around Puppis, "If he ever has to do a horrible job like you were just forced to do, he'll be ready."

Tolen smiled thinly and patted the boy's shoulder.

"Puppis," he said gently, "Learn from your father's instincts as a fine warrior, and a man of sharp discipline. But always temper that with your mother's sense of compassion and good judgment."

"I will," the boy nodded, "Tolen, if... you ever get a chance to see Apollo again, you can tell him that you and Angus and Banker kept the promise for him. And that... we understand why he couldn't ever come back."

"I'll tell him that," Tolen kept smiling, "I... promise."

He shared a friendly embrace with them, and shook hands with Jason. And then, the executive officer got into the landram and started it up. The three Equellans watched until the vehicle had disappeared into the woods beyond and the sound of its engine had faded completely.

When Tolen arrived, he saw Angus and Banker standing outside their shuttle.

"Well?"

"We split up the centurions. The three regular ones in our shuttle. The

command one is in yours," Angus said. "So far... they're still behaving."

"Did they say anything else?"

"Yeah," Banker nodded, "The command centurion actually mentioned how unjust it was that his class was created to die only for serving the interests of the IL class."

Tolen shook his head in amazement. "You have to wonder... if this sort of thing isn't isolated to just *these* centurions... then maybe the entire centurion class of Cylons is prone to feeling this kind of... discontent as well."

"It could be a side-effect in their programming from being shut off for over twelve yahrens," Angus pointed out.

"That's possible, but even so, the very fact that *any* centurion is expressing this kind of independent... almost sentient thought is something we have to evaluate further."

"But how long can we keep up this fiction that the Empire has been destroyed?" Angus persisted. "If they're acting this independent then it means that they're not going to be easily fooled for long on that point."

"Exactly," Tolen nodded, "At some point... we do have to tell them. And maybe... just maybe, it won't make a difference to them. If... they really hate the IL class that much."

He glanced back at his shuttle, "I'm going to take advantage of the ride back to the Pegasus and have a very long talk with the command centurion." he then looked at his two subordinates in the eye. "Conceivably, gentlemen, this mission may prove to have been important for a reason well beyond the recovery of the ammunition... and restoring stability to this planet. And if that's the case... then the whole ethical nightmare we pondered over using Cylons to kill humans in this instance will prove to have been groundless given the stakes for something... far more important."

The two of them nodded and returned to their shuttle. Both of them knowing that as a result of this mission, neither of them had cause to be among the ranks of the Grumblers, ever again.

Just like they had before on a similar night, Vella and Puppis lay out on the grass in front of their house looking up at the stars. Waiting to see what they knew

would be the streaks of the two shuttles returning to the world of Apollo and the world of Martin that would always be beyond their comprehension. Finally... they saw them rising high until they became indistinct amidst the myriad number of stars.

"Jason said it was the most wonderful thing he ever experienced going up there," Puppis said. "He was lucky he got to do that."

"Yes, he was," Vella said simply as she held her son, thinking of how events had unfolded to provide an unexpected closure to all things regarding Martin, and Apollo. Leaving them with no more wishful hopes of unrealistic dreams. Only the reality of their world and what they alone would have to deal with in their lives.

"But you know something, Mom?" Puppis said with a maturity and thoughtfulness she'd never heard in his voice before, "It... doesn't matter that I'll never do that. Not when... I know what my life is going to be about."

She looked over at her son, "Do you know, Puppis?"

"Yes," he nodded, "It's going to be about... making our home safe. So that... no one has to ever use what's in that box they left us with. So that all of us can just... live in peace with each other."

Vella smiled and kissed her son tenderly. For the first time in her life, she felt a sense of peace about the future.

Thank you Tolen, she gazed back at the stars above one final time. For keeping Apollo's promise for him.

"The IL's and the Imperious Leaders... never truly appreciated your class, did they?" Tolen gently probed as he moved his shuttle out of the orbit of Equellas to begin its journey back to the Pegasus.

"No," the command centurion said, and even in that robotic monotone sound, Tolen could almost hear genuine... distaste. "Building us to serve their needs alone... and letting us always die for their achievements only."

"And if the war were to be successful for the Empire, ruled by IL class Cylons... there wouldn't be much place for those like you, would there?"

"We would be considered a redundancy," he went on, "The end result would be construction of more IL's for their... pleasure."

"Because IL's are given the ability to understand pleasure," Tolen went on. "The entire War from their perspective is to maximize their pleasure... while making none of the sacrifices."

"You are speaking of the war as if it is still ongoing." Here it comes, Tolen thought. This would be by far the most critical test and if it failed, Tolen was ready to grab his laser and shoot the command centurion dead.

"I must be honest with you, Commander..." he trailed off, "You have a name?"

"Commander Cobre," the gold Cylon said.

"Commander Cobre, on behalf of my men and myself, I apologize to you and your fellow centurions for deceiving you," Tolen said. "The war is not over. I deceived you solely to make use of you and your fellow centurions to serve our objective on the planet below."

There was no immediate response from the centurion.

"But consider this, Cobre," the executive officer of the Pegasus went on, "I could have easily left you and your fellow centurions to stay deactivated in the garrison. Where you would have remained forgotten by the IL's who abandoned you. I could also have chosen to kill you and your fellow centurions after the objective on the planet was achieved. But I didn't because... I believe you and centurions like you *can* be productive as our allies. And not as drones in the same subordinate relationship you have known in the Empire but as our *equals*. Where we *both* have the same mutual desire of not seeing the Universe conquered to serve the pleasure interests of IL Cylons. And what we did on the planet below, in recovering the ammunition... will be of tremendous help to us in thwarting that vision."

Again, there was no response from the command centurion named Cobre at first. Just the low-tone whirring sound. Inside, Tolen felt his entire body tense and his brain was on the verge of telling his hand to start reaching for his laser.

"Your candor is... most welcome."

All of the tension inside Tolen immediately dissipated as he slowly broke into a relaxed smile.

This looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

A chime indicated that the shuttle had reached the safe area to make contact with their home ship. Tolen adjusted his headset.

"Alpha shuttle to Pegasus Core Command, come in. This is Alpha shuttle to Pegasus Core Command, come in."

"Tolen," he heard the relieved voice of Cain fill the cockpit, "Thank the Lords we were starting to worry."

"It turned out to be a lot rougher than expected, Commander," Tolen said, "We ended up with one casualty. Sergeant Doyle was killed."

There was only a brief pause from the other end.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the Juggernaut finally spoke, "Was the mission still a success?"

Tolen didn't respond at first. Hearing that question made him turn around and look behind where the glowing orbs of both Equellas and Delta Aquinas were still visible for one more brief instant. When the last glow of the two planets faded from view, he then looked to his right at Commander Cobre and smiled again.

"Yes sir, the mission was a success in every sense of the word."

Epilogue

For the last centar, Cain had exercised more self-restraint than at any time in his life as he had "interviewed" Command Centurion Cobre and his three fellow Cylons. Asking them general questions related to their dissatisfaction with the higher-class Cylon vision of order, and ferreting out whatever information he could get regarding the capability of other lower-class Cylons to feel the same way. Finally, he had risen from his chair with the same level of politeness he might have reserved for a visiting dignitary.

"Commander Cobre," Cain said, "We would very much be honored to... accept your help toward achieving our mutually desirable goal. In order to do this... we would ask that you and your fellow Cylons be analyzed in our science lab so that... we might better know and understand you. This would be similar to how we, as humans, analyze each other to properly understand biological functions so I assure you no disrespect is intended by asking this of you."

"It's merely another sign of the equal footing we regard you on with us," Tolen

chimed in from the back of the room.

Cobre rose and almost seemed to... bow, "We will do so."

"Thank you," Cain's tone was still even. "I believe... .Lieutenants Angus and Banker, whom you have worked with, are waiting outside to... .escort you to our lab."

The four of them turned and departed the commander's quarters. As soon as the door had closed, Cain resumed his seat behind his desk saying nothing. It was only when the whirring sound of the four centurions had faded completely as they were led down the hall that the mask of self-control on the Juggernaut cracked completely.

"I have never, in more than forty yahrens of service to the Colonial nation ever felt more ashamed of myself than what I just did now, Colonel," his voice was dripping with controlled fury. "How *dare* you force me to treat *Cylons* as if they were our honored guests?"

"Because you know I'm right, sir," Tolen was past the point of being intimidated by Cain any longer. His taking part in the mission and coming to terms with the fact that he had never been responsible for Martin's death and seeing the new opportunities presented had cured him of all the insecurities that had haunted his life for the last twelve yahrens. "If you thought I wasn't... you wouldn't have treated them as guests. You know as well as I do that we've just been given what could be our greatest opportunity to actually bring the entire Cylon Empire down. If it's really true that the centurion class is capable of developing this kind of independence and discontent with their lot... then the entire foundation the Empire rests upon is at risk."

Cain brought his hands together in deep contemplation. Feeling his emotional instincts clashing with his command instincts. That had happened only one other time in his life. And on that occasion, command instincts had prevailed when he had decided that he needed to leave his precious daughter behind with the *Galactica* and take the *Pegasus* off into deep space. Command instincts *had* to come first, and intellectually, in the cold light of command decisions... .only one course of action was possible with this opportunity that had been presented to him.

When he spoke again, the fury was gone from his voice. "Do you really think, Tolen, that this... is something the crew will accept?"

"Oh I'm sure we'll have Grumblers, sir," the executive officer said, "But then again... we've been dealing with Grumblers since the day we left the Galactica behind. If anything, I think we'll have fewer of them because this actually represents a truly tangible way of defeating the Cylon Empire and *surviving*. Because up to now, a lot of people who call themselves Grumblers don't think there's ever been a fate for them other than eventual death in a suicide mission. With this... they see a chance."

Cain still said nothing, fingertips still together in contemplation.

"Look at it this way, sir," Tolen said, "The Cylons needed a human traitor to help them destroy the Colonies. It's poetic justice if Cylon traitors end up being their downfall."

Finally, the Juggernaut cracked a smile.

"Colonel Tolen," he rose, his full command bearing present. "You have earned your pay for this sectan... and a lot more."

"Thank you, sir," Tolen felt more proud of himself than at any other time in his entire military career. Taking part in this mission had done more than chase the demons that had plagued him for yahrens over what had happened to Martin. It had also restored his confidence in his own abilities. From this day forward he could see Cain treating him with a respect level that he'd never truly earned up to now.

As if Cain had read his mind, he then added, "Incidentally... when you finish the final report, I expect you to make a supplementary notation to the file on the original Battle of Delta Aquinas concerning the fates of Captain Martin and Lieutenant Staley. With the additional notation that had the true facts of Staley's effort to save the ammunition been known at the time, he would have received full recommendation for a posthumous award of the Gold Cluster. "

"I will, sir," Tolen said, "It... does feel good to finally know the truth, doesn't it?"

"It does," Cain acknowledged. "At least this is one story that's finally had some closure to it, regarding... things we always wondered about."

Unlike Sheba, the Juggernaut added to himself. Oh dear Lords of Kobol will I ever have some closure regarding her?

The intercom from the Bridge sounded its chime, "Yes?"

"Commander, our scanner's just picked up something unusual," Major Ham said. "It appears to be a Colonial civilian shuttle... but heavily modified."

"Have you done a life form scan?"

"Yes sir. Indication is one life form inside in what could be a state of suspended animation. The readings it gives off are too low to confirm it as human."

"What about communications? Any kind of automatic signal?"

"We're trying to lock that down. There is some kind of signal emitting from it, but... it's not a message, I think it's more of a tracking code of some kind."

"Launch an interceptor Viper immediately! I'm on my way!"

Five centons later, both the Commander and Executive Officer were on the Bridge.

"Captain Skyler has launched to intercept," Major Ham reported, "He should be alongside the craft in another centon."

"Tie him in to my station so I can talk to him," Cain was glad Silver Spar Leader was handling this. Skyler had more than proved his worthiness to take charge of the battlestar's top squadron after the loss of both Sheba and Bojay when they'd been evacuated to the Galactica.

"Silver Spar Leader to Core Command," Skyler's voice came through over Cain's headset, "I've made visual contact with the craft. It is definitely a heavily modified D-2 one-man shuttle of Colonial origin. The modification comes in the form of some kind of... hyperdrive engine nodule mounted in the rear. Wherever this thing came from, it's likely come a *long* ways!"

"Can you get a better reading on the life form inside?"

"Yes sir, stand by. Okay, it is *definitely* human. In suspended animation."

"All right, where is its course taking it?"

"Apparently... right toward the Pegasus, Commander! In fact..."

"Yes, Skyler?"

"Commander, I'm studying the transmission code this craft is giving off. Unless I miss my guess, this thing has been programmed to lock onto the tracking signal of a battlestar! It's as if this thing's mission was to try and find us. I'd anticipate this thing landing in Alpha Bay in probably the next... eight or nine centons from now based on its current speed."

"Not at crash speed?"

"No, if anything it's likely going to make a normal soft landing."

"Thank you, Captain!" Cain was amazed by this incredible news. "Stay with it all the way back and then land in Beta Bay." The Juggernaut then activated another switch. "Life Station, this is Cain. I want two med-techs with a gurney down in Alpha Bay on the double! And make preparations to revive someone who's been in suspended animation for who knows how long!"

He turned back to his executive officer. "Well, that's everything we can do to prepare for this."

"It's incredible," Tolen shook his head in amazement, "It's as if this thing was out there looking for us!"

"Yes," Cain nodded and then added, "Or more possibly... the Galactica."

"Where could it have come from?"

"Well, at this point, I think the obvious answer is that it came from the Colonies," the Juggernaut said, "Kobol only knows how many people were left behind when the Cylons moved in. This could be one desperate survivor's chance to try and catch up with the Exodus!"

"A D-2 shuttle modified with hyperdrive does sound desperate."

"But that alone would have required a lot of effort by a lot of people just to get one person out of there," Cain's bewilderment was deepening, "So if it *did* come from the Colonies, then... that means there's a lot more going on back home than any of us ever realized!"

"Certainly possible," Tolen found it incredible that something like this could happen on the heels of the dramatic development with the four Cylon defectors.

"Let's get down to Alpha Bay and greet our... unexpected guest."

They watched as they saw the small, compact craft enter the Pegasus starboard landing bay and gracefully come to a controlled stop. Almost immediately, several ground crew technicians hurried across the tarmac while Cain, Tolen and two med-techs from the Life Station carrying a gurney followed.

"Open it up!" the Juggernaut barked.

The technicians found the automatic switches on both sides of the craft and pressed them. Immediately, with a loud popping and whooshing sound the top portion of the one-man shuttle opened... ..revealing its occupant inside, who lay snugly secure in the contours of the seat. Eyes closed reflecting the occupant's state of suspended animation.

Tolen's eyes widened in surprise as he saw right away that the person was a woman. A woman who looked to be of early middle age with dark blonde to light brown hair with some noticeable silvery white streaks on the sides. Her face reflected the air of someone peacefully asleep and served to highlight that while she was likely of early middle age, she was still an incredibly beautiful woman.

"A woman," the executive officer turned to Cain, "I didn't..."

He stopped when he saw the look on the Juggernaut's face. Eyes even wider than Tolen's. Mouth open in slack-jawed shock. His face white as though he had seen a spectral apparition.

"Commander?" Tolen never thought he'd see Cain look more shocked than he was when he'd presented the centurions to him, but it was clear this exceeded that moment.

"I know her," Cain whispered.

"You *know* her?" this, Tolen hadn't expected.

"Yes," the Juggernaut nodded and then caught his breath, "Her name is Ila."

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