



Chapter One

They had told her that she would experience nothing during suspended animation. The effect would be sleep without dreams. Just a general sensation of nothing with no way to perceive how much time had elapsed. The arch-Skeptic in the group had told her that it would be a foreshadowing of the sensation that all people would eventually experience upon death, which had prompted a sharp and angry retort from her to keep his opinions on such matters to himself.

Signs of journey's end, she had been told would be akin to a slow return from deep sleep. A dim awareness of surroundings, and maybe the indistinct forms of people accompanied by the sound of voices in a hollow, distant kind of echo that would make it hard to distinguish specific words at first. It might take centons or even a centar or two to regain total awareness of where she was, but it would come back.

So when her blue eyes began to dimly sense the shadowy forms of people moving about, and her ears began to discern those hollow echoes of voices, she knew right away that she was returning from the suspended state. And if she was returning from the suspended state... it could only mean one thing. That the incredible risk she had chosen to undertake had been successful. And if it was successful, that would mean... she would be experiencing the greatest answer to a prayer she had made every day of her life for the more than two yahrens leading up to when she'd stepped into the shuttle and the hatched had been sealed shut.

And so even as things remained too fuzzy to see clearly and too indistinct to hear clearly, her mouth formed a smile. A smile of total... happiness that when her vision cleared, she would see the face of her one and only love. And he would be saying her name...

"Ila?"

Yes, yes. That was it! The words were becoming more distinct! It was true. Everything she had hoped and dreamed for when she'd insisted on being the one to do this undertaking in which so much was riding on the outcome. Technically, the personal happiness it would bring her was to be but a fringe benefit. But for this initial moment of awakening, she could put the larger picture on hold and think only of what this meant for herself.

"Ila? Ila, can you hear me?"

The voice was more distinct though the form was still hazy. But... now that the voice was more distinct, her mind realized that something wasn't right. It should have been one voice in particular, but it wasn't. It was another voice. A familiar voice to her, but one that her mind was totally unprepared to hear. Because it was a voice that she didn't associate with the realm of the living. And if it was that voice... did that mean she was...

Abruptly, she bolted upright in the Life Station bed she was lying in, her eyes opening to their widest, the smile gone and replaced by a look of near frozen terror.

"Ila! Ila!" the man sitting next to her bed reached out and grabbed her shoulders. "Ila, it's me, Cain! Cain! I'm alive and you're aboard the Pegasus!"

She turned her head slowly to face him. A look of disbelieving shock to see not the face of her husband, Commander Adama of the Battlestar Galactica, but instead Commander Cain of the Battlestar Pegasus.

"Cain," Ila forced the name out with a whisper, "Cain, you're... alive?"

"Yes," he said tenderly. "Yes, I am. That's... a very long and complicated story, just like... I'm sure you have a long and complicated one too, but we have plenty of time for that. The important thing is you're alive and safe."

"Safe," she slowly leaned back in the bed. "Am I... safe? I... "

"Why don't you rest, Ila," Cain's tone remained tender, "Just get some normal sleep and it'll clear out all the side effects of suspended animation. We can talk then."

"Talk," she whispered. As Cain looked at her face, which was still extraordinarily beautiful for a woman of early middle age, he could tell that shock combined with disappointment was Ila's dominant emotions at that instant. The shock over seeing him alive that was giving way now to the disappointment that she wasn't where she had expected to find herself after coming to.

May the Lords forgive me if I'm to blame for that happening, Cain thought as he silently left the Life Station.

When he entered the hallway, Tolen was there waiting for him. The Executive

Officer had waited outside since Cain had felt it was important to be alone when Ila had come to.

"How is she?"

"Shocked and confused," the Juggernaut sighed. "I think it's obvious that when that shuttle was programmed to leave the Colonies, the intent was to try and catch up to the Galactica. So that's why it was programmed to disengage the instant it locked onto a Battlestar's wake. They never expected they'd find another Battlestar instead because they didn't know we've been out here all this time."

"And she's Commander Adama's wife," Tolen still couldn't believe it.

"Yes," Cain nodded, "And also my wife's best friend. Adama swore that she'd been killed in the Destruction. But evidently... she wasn't where he thought she was."

"What does it all mean, sir?"

The Juggernaut let out a combined shrug and grunt.

"All I can tell, Tolen, is that we're dealing with variables that even I never considered," they kept walking down the corridor. "From the very beginning, I've had a picture of the Colonies as a place where all humans who got left behind had been exterminated. Just as thoroughly as the Cylons exterminated the Delphians. That picture's clearly wrong, now. And for Ila to have made her way out from there in a craft with those special modifications... that means something much bigger is going on back there and we need to find out from her just what that is."

The Juggernaut then stopped and looked at the executive officer, "And on the heels of this development with those four centurions you brought back from Delta Aquinas, we could be looking at a *really* dramatic turn of events... for the better."

Their journey came to an end in front of the Electronics Lab. When they entered they saw the head of the division, Dr. Arnoff engaged in an actual conversation with the gold centurion, Commander Cobre.

"That's *very* interesting!" Arnoff said, "We had literally no idea that second-brain Cylons could be so... discriminating."

"Second brain Cylons believe all begins and ends with them," Cobre spoke in the lower tone sound of gold centurions, but as always, the signs of genuine

emotion were evident now.

"Yes," Cain stepped forward, "Yes, and with a proper alliance, Commander... you would agree that their attitude could be turned against them... for the benefit of those like yourself."

Cobre lifted his gold helmet toward Cain, "If it were possible."

"I would like to make it possible," Cain said, "You and your fellow centurions from the garrison would be glad to help?"

"We would of course welcome your insights and opinions on *any* plan of action that might be undertaken," Tolen chimed in. He was still much quicker than Cain to recognize that the key to winning trust with these Cylon traitors was to stress that they saw them as equals, and not underlings trading one set of masters for another.

Cobre nodded, "Yes," and then looked back at the three silver plated regular class centurions. All of whom nodded and said in unison, "By your command."

On the one hand, he felt like laughing at the irony of how simple it all seemed to deal with these centurions. But on the other... there remained in the back of Cain's head a lingering distaste for the fact that he was in this position of treating them this way. A position that he had to admit had been forced upon him by Tolen, and which he'd needed some convincing on.

Is this really the right thing for us to be doing?

Three centars later, Cain was back in the Life Station, where first he paid a visit to venerable old Dr. Laughlin. He'd always considered it fortunate that the medical officer had been part of the Pegasus for so many yahrens that personal loyalty to Cain had dictated his decision to stay behind and not evacuate with the bulk of his medical team to the Galactica when the injured were transported. If that hadn't happened, the Pegasus would have been without the services of anyone with professional training in medicine these last two and a half yahrens.

"No side effects from the suspended animation?" Cain asked.

"None," he said in his familiar Aerian brogue. "I have no expertise in the field of suspended animation, but whoever designed it for her was a genius. All of her life signs are completely normal. She's had a couple centars of regular sleep to let everything reach total equilibrium. Whenever she feels like getting up... she can

go.”

“Has she said anything?”

“Just thank you when a med-tech brought her water. Since she woke up, she’s mostly been... staring straight ahead. Nothing catatonic, just... someone lost in thought.”

“I don’t blame her,” Cain sighed. “I know this isn’t what she expected. I’ll try talking to her now. Don’t let anyone disturb us unless it’s a Red Alert attack signal.”

“Yes sir.”

Cain entered the room. Ila was lying upright in bed, her eyes open and as Dr. Laughlin indicated her expression was one of deep thought and contemplation. The shock being replaced by a coming to terms with how things were. That was already from Cain’s standpoint an encouraging sign. It told him that he wasn’t likely to see any hysteria or emotional breakdowns from her, but instead would see her intellect take charge. And Cain, having known Ila for more than thirty-five yahrens knew that intellect was something she had an overwhelming abundance of. He’d seen that on the first night Adama had proudly introduced her to him.

The memory of that night was always so vivid to Cain. He had run into Adama, whom he hadn’t seen in more than four yahrens on a skybus where both were returning from their respective battlestars to begin a six sector furlon (standard policy in those days where combat crews rotated duty after more than a full yahren and a half away from home and took advantage of extended down time to relax and avoid the phenomenon of combat burnout). Adama had told him that since they’d last met he had become sealed to a Professor of Drama and Music at the Caprican Fine Arts Institute named Ila. Since Cain, unattached at the time, had no immediate plans on what to do on his furlon (which he had tried hard to get out of since the thought of an extended absence from combat wasn’t something he relished in the slightest), he had accepted Adama’s invitation to dinner at their Caprica City apartment, where he immediately saw how lucky his friend had been to find a woman of such refined beauty and intellect.

That night had also had even greater ramifications for Cain. After dinner they’d invited him to a play at the Caprican National Theater that featured in the cast a woman named Bethany who had been Ila’s best friend since childhood. The play had been awful but Ila’s friend had given a spellbinding performance that

captivated Cain and stole his heart completely. Before Cain's six sector furlon was over, Bethany had become his wife. His one and greatest love as surely as Ila had been Adama's.

"Ila?"

Commander Adama's wife looked over at him and slowly shook her head but in amazement, not disbelief.

"It really is you," her voice was low and soft but normal. "You really are alive."

"Well like I said... it's very long and complicated, just as I'm sure it is for you to explain... everything," Cain moved over so he could sit down by her bedside. "I'm... trying to figure out what the best way is for me to condense my story, so I can get to hearing your story."

"Well, you can obviously dispense with the fact you weren't killed at Molocay," Ila said. "That much I can figure out. But... if you survived Molocay then... why didn't you try to get back home?"

Cain let out a sad sigh and lowered his head. This was forever the one thing that would stick in his craw as the greatest mistake of his entire military career. Making a decision not to try and get back at a time when he had no conception whatsoever of all the political machinations going on that had resulted in the phony Peace accord arranged by Baltar that had resulted in the Destruction and the Holocaust. Nothing could ever make him escape the thought that if he'd been there, he might have been able to prevent that by warning the people against the peace offer.

"I... used to have an explanation that I thought was a good one," he finally answered her, "Time has proven me wrong on that. It's... the reason why I'm still this close to home and not with... Adama and the Galactica."

"Then you've seen him!" Ila came forward in the bed so that she was just inches away, looking into his eyes.

"Yes, yes, I have," Cain nodded. "Two and a half yahrens ago we hooked up near Gomorrah. I... helped get two pursuing baseships off his back, and then... I slipped away and headed back into charted space while he and the Fleet went off into the Alpha Quadrant in search of... the Thirteenth Tribe."

"And you've made no contact with him since?" her voice was still anxious.

The Juggernaut shook his head. "No. We've had no contact since then, but that's... because we've basically spent all that time going in opposite directions."

Ila looked down at the bed trying to process this information.

"Exactly how far away from the Colonies have I come?" she finally asked.

"We're near the Hatari Sector in the Alpha Quadrant." he then added, "According to the chronometer in your ship, you were only in flight for about three sectans."

Adama's wife closed her eyes with sad regret. "I was supposed to go much further than that," she whispered, "All the work we did putting that together, all the calculations we made... I was supposed to be in stasis for as long as three or four yahrens to try and cover all the distance he's gone since the beginning."

"I assumed as much," Cain understood her disappointment, "Your... ship was programmed to hone in to the unique drive of a battlestar's wake. But that meant... it did so with the first battlestar it came across, which was the Pegasus, not the Galactica."

"We had no idea," Ila shook her head, "No idea at all there was another one."

Her eyes then narrowed, "What have you been *doing* the last two and a half yahrens?"

"Preparing," Cain said. "We had battle damage to repair and weaponry to replace. If I was to make the Pegasus a formidable threat to the Cylon Empire and their holdings close to home, I needed to take the time to build our strength back to something in excess of what it was. So... I've spent all this time raiding isolated Cylon supply depots and looting abandoned ones, as well as making contact with scattered human outposts in the Alpha Quadrant where there was food to be had."

"Toward what end?"

Cain sighed again, "Toward... whatever results in crippling the Empire to the point where they won't ever be any kind of threat to Adama again."

She looked at him thoughtfully, "You've never really had a plan... except eventual suicide."

"Well now, I'm not sure I'd put it that way," he grew slightly defensive.

"One battlestar thinking it can take out the whole Empire by itself? Cain, that's..." she trailed off, unable to think of anything else she could say. It made him wonder if she was upset that his presence had thwarted her goal of reaching the Galactica for a reason she didn't think was a good one.

He decided he had to change the subject to something more positive.

"I, ah... met your son and daughter. They're alive and well."

Ila's head darted back up, "My son and daughter?"

"Yes. Apollo is... quite a fine warrior. I got to know him very well. Other than the fact his hair hasn't changed color, he's the image of his father."

"He always was," her voice grew quiet. "And you met... Athena?"

"Yes, I didn't get a chance to talk with her, but she was working in the Galactica Bridge section."

To his surprise, Ila didn't seem overly happy by this news he'd revealed. Instead, her expression was still tense.

"What about Zac?" she finally asked quietly, "My youngest son?"

Cain frowned at first. And then... an uneasy memory of something Adama had told him came back to him. About how Adama's youngest son had been the first casualty of the battle.

Oh my God, Cain thought. I have to be the one to tell her...

As it turned out, he didn't need to say anything. Ila was able to guess the truth from his face and his body language. She lowered her head and closed her eyes. And then, she brought her hands up to her face and began to cry softly.

"Zac, my baby," Ila whispered through her quiet tears, "Why you? Why you? Why not me instead of you?"

Cain felt totally ashamed of himself. He rose from his chair and began to awkwardly pace up and down the room.

"Hades Hole, Ila, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I've fracked everything up trying to explain what's happened. I guess none of it makes sense. Maybe, I..." he stopped and shook his head, "I don't know. I just don't know."

"It's okay, Cain," Ila wiped her eyes and slowly exhaled, trying to get her strength back. "I would have had... just the same kind of reaction if I'd heard the news from Adama. And Cain... don't apologize for anything else. It's not your fault that things... didn't happen the way I thought they were going to happen. I guess maybe it's just realizing that all this time... there's been missed signals between you and those of us in the Colonies. If we'd... both known about our situations, we... really could have been doing a lot to help each other."

Cautiously, the Juggernaut resumed his seat next to the bed.

"I ah... guess this is now where I get to learn a lot of things I haven't known before," he said. "Unless you'd rather it wait a bit, because you need some more time because of... Zac."

Ila vigorously shook her head, "No, no. I'd rather start doing some explaining to you."

"All right," Cain nodded. "It'll help me if you start from the beginning. Adama told me that he and Apollo went down to the surface of Caprica after the Destruction and found what was left of your house. It took a direct hit."

Ila finished wiping her eyes and smiled mirthlessly as she leaned back against the headboard of the bed once again. "Yes... he assumed I was right where I said I was going to be that night. The night all of Caprica and all of the Colonies were going to come together to celebrate the end of the thousand yahren war and take part in the greatest, festive celebration in the history of mankind. Well... I didn't feel like going to one of the big celebrations in downtown Caprica City. My husband and my children were all on the Galactica to be part of the Fleet rendezvous with the Imperious Leader that never was for the treaty signing that never was. My best friends were either gone like Bethany or moved off from Caprica and all my former colleagues at the Fine Arts Institute had their own plans. So... I just decided I was going to sit on my terrace looking at the ocean with a glass of ambrosia. I remember how there were all these boats lined up along the seashore and they were all loaded with fireworks ready to go off the micron the word came through from President Adar that the treaty had been signed and the war was officially over. And... I'll never forget sitting on the terrace and seeing one little plume of fireworks that one boat set off prematurely. How it just went up and

let out a little tiny burst as if it was anxious to usher Peace in. And how it was a glimpse of something that would never happen.”

Ila reached over to the table next to the bed where a water container had been set up. She lifted it and took a deep gulp and set it down again.

“It was about two centons after that little trail of fireworks went off that my telecom rang. It turned out to be my closest friend next to Bethany. You probably remember her since Bethany knew her well. Zakiya.”

“Zakiya,” Cain thought and then nodded, “Oh... yes. I do remember the name. I don’t think I met her more than a couple times over the yahrens.”

“Well, she had moved off of Caprica about a yahren after Bethany died to be close to her children on Gemon. But it turned out she was back on Caprica that night because she wanted to be on her home planet the night the war ended. And she had gotten two tickets for a reception at the Astral Needle and insisted I *had* to join her. So... with just a little reluctance I pried myself off the terrace, changed into my best stola and took an airtaxi to downtown where I met her in the Astral Needle lobby.”

Ila then took a deep breath, “We got in line for the outside lift. The one on the Needle that let you look through transparent glass on the whole of Caprica City as it took you to the top of the Needle and the restaurant. The most glorious view of the city imaginable. And... while we were in the line, that was when the attack began.

“The whole... panic that erupted was just horrific. For some reason, there were actually people so spooked they did the dumbest thing possible which was get *inside* the lift when it opened up. Zakiya and I... we managed to head in the direction of the bomb shelter underneath the Needle. That was where all its machinery for powering the glass lift and the restaurant with its revolving gears were housed. We got ourselves inside all secure... and then during the attack, Cylon fire severed the Needle right in its mid-section and sent the top section that included the restaurant crashing to the bottom, where it landed on top of the entrance to the shelter, burying everyone who had gotten inside it including Zakiya and me.”

Her words were as dispassionate and objective as they could be, but Cain could see in her eyes the trauma of reliving that experience. But he didn’t dare ask her to stop because she knew she was performing a necessary service to him and

to history by revealing what had really happened to her on that horrible night and which those she loved most had no idea was the truth.

This was what she had planned on telling Adama. He had to stand-in for him at this critical moment. And to also for the first time get a true insight into just how horrific that night had been for everyone.

"How long were you trapped in there?" he asked.

Adama's wife sighed, "Two sectans. Well past the point when Adama had all the people he could get evacuated off Caprica and the rest of the Colonies to join in the Exodus."

She looked over at Cain, "Do you know what was agonizing about that? We were trapped but we had plenty of food down there from the restaurant storage lockers. We had bottled water to drink. Even the portable turbo flush still worked. We just couldn't get out because the stairwell was buried. But the cruelest thing was that three hundred feet above us, there was a hole in what had been the street that was big enough to let the outside air in so we could breathe. We just couldn't access it because it was like... being in the center of a vast temple structure and above you, the high ceiling at the center has a hole in it that lets the sun and the rain and the air in... but you can't access that hole to get out because it's too high up. But it lets the air in so you can breathe. And it also meant that public announcements being made in the streets during the evacuation could be heard. That meant... I heard the announcement that was repeating itself on an endless loop from the BNC telling everyone to report to the nearest aerodrome facility to try and get off Caprica in the next three cycles to join up with the Galactica. The announcement that... Adama made."

She let out a mirthless laugh, "There I was... trapped and hearing my husband's voice over and over warning everyone about the danger that existed if we didn't get off Caprica. And I couldn't do a thing about it. That message kept repeating itself on a loop for the first three cycles until finally... when it stopped, I knew he was gone. And that all of us... if we managed to get out alive were going to face the Cylon occupation forces once they finally moved in."

"Well how did you finally get out?"

Ila sighed, "That was when... the next phase of my life began. When Commander Deval and his team came to our rescue."

"Deval?"

"At the time, he was Lieutenant Deval of the Battlestar Solaria," she said. "When his ship was destroyed, he chose not to join other pilots who were able to land on the Galactica. Instead, he chose to pull out from the battle and go to Caprica to see what was happening. Apparently... he found his wife buried under the wreckage of his house and decided that he would rather stay behind on Caprica until she was freed rather than report to the aerodrome and join the evacuation. He organized a group of other survivors and got his wife out two days after the Exodus ended, and from that point on, he began taking charge of all other survivors he could round up who had also missed the Exodus."

"And that was when your group was found."

"Yes," Ila nodded. "They... used some plastic explosives to blast away the debris that was blocking the stairwell and finally... after two sectans, I and Zakiya and thirteen other people emerged from our prison still in our tattered formal gowns and tunics."

"And it was too late to use any kind of ship to try and catch up with the Galactica?"

"We had no access to ships. The first places the occupation forces secured were all the aerodrome facilities. And if you tried to get off the planet in something smaller like a skybus or an air taxi, it only took about three centons for some Cylon tracking device to atomize you. We see a lot of that as we straggled our way through what was left of downtown Caprica City to try and find a place of safety."

"And obviously you found one," Cain had never heard a more spellbinding narrative in his life.

"Deval led about... three hundred of us to the old Caprican Agricultural Institute just outside the city. The Institute had just opened a new facility at another location twenty kilometers away but was in a transitional shutdown phase of the old Institute so it hadn't been completely abandoned yet in terms of functioning laboratories. And more importantly, it still had operating experimental greenhouses. That proved to be our immediate salvation because the next thing the Cylons did to try and flush out all of the humans who were still in hiding was to introduce pluton into the atmosphere so it could get into the food and water supply on the surface and contaminate everything. When we... heard a warning announcement from them that this was what they were going to do, we managed

to save enough additional seed and soil samples before it was too late, and we also tapped further into the underground artesian water which was shielded from the surface level contamination. That allowed all of us to go safely underground within the old Institute campus and use the laboratories and greenhouses as our nerve center for surviving. And... the first yahren after the Destruction was the time when we pretty much stayed hidden, and just... tried to find some semblance of living."

She leaned back again and closed her eyes indicating how exhausting and trying it had been to relate this narrative.

"I have two more yahrens of history to fill you in on, Cain, and they're even *more* important but... right now, I'm exhausted... and I'm having another delayed reaction about... Zac."

"I understand," Cain said quietly. "You're probably hungry too. I can have something brought up."

"Thank you," Ila said, "And... thank you for still being a good friend of the family."

"I always will be."

But when Cain made his way out and left her alone to rest, he found himself tortured by the greatest feelings of guilt and regret that he hadn't known in his life since he was too late to reach Bethany's bedside when she died. This was the first time he had ever heard an eyewitness narrative about the events of the Destruction as it took place on Caprica from anyone. Until now the only perspective he'd heard was Adama's and Ila's husband had only seen the aftermath. To hear things this way, was something different. It finally brought the magnitude of what had taken place that night home to him with a clarity he'd never begun to imagine.

And right now, after hearing Ila's narrative of what had happened on the night of the Destruction he also knew that he wanted to reconsider everything that was happening in regards to the four Cylon centurions Tolen had brought back from Delta Aquinas.

Chapter Two

"Can you recall a time before you were deactivated when you felt this... discontent about the IL class?" Dr. Arnoff asked.

Commander Cobre lowered his head in a way that suggested contemplation.

"Memory banks suggest the discontent was always present. No way until now to express it openly."

"Can you account for that, Commander?" the electronics scientist persisted. "Was there a... distinct change within your programming that you can recall that... allowed you to express your beliefs openly?"

"Insufficient to determine causal effect of change," Cobre said. "It was simply... there."

"I see," Arnoff decided it was too dangerous to press. If the key to establishing a bond with these Cylons was to act casual as Tolen had been suggesting, then pushing them too much might come off as dominating and thus remind the centurions of the inferior status they held in relation to the higher-class Cylons.

"I think that will be all for now," Arnoff rose, "You and your fellow centurions are... free to do as you please."

"That is... appreciated."

Amazing, the scientist thought as he bid a retreat from the room where Cobre and the three silver centurions stayed seated as if they were doing a Cylon version of meditation.

"Well?" Tolen asked as soon as the scientist entered the corridor.

"I'm at a total loss," Arnoff said. "The explanation in theory should be that something was done to their programming to bring out this new attitude of hostility toward the higher classes of Cylons, and yet... they don't recall expressing that *before* they were put into sleeper mode on Delta Aquinas. Now when you reactivated them, you didn't do any tampering with their circuits?"

"No," Tolen shook his head, "There wasn't time for that. We just re-powered them and won them over initially by feeding them some double talk about how the war was over and we'd defeated the Empire and how centurions were now being used by the human winners for new purposes."

"And they accepted that."

"Well... Commander Cobre did accuse me of lying at first, and I had to lay on

the double talk even more but they eventually did go along."

"Hmmm," the scientist briefly glanced behind him at the closed door that led back to the room where the centurions were. "There was obviously something latent within them that was willing to accept the idea of a universe without superior class Cylons. There was no... instinctive loathing for humanity as one might have assumed that would have made them willing to die rather than work with humans."

"And that's supposed to be part of their primary programming," Tolen noted.

"Yes... but if their programming hasn't been tampered with... then what we're seeing is more like a kind of change that in a sentient biological creature we'd call... micro-evolutionary."

"That they're spontaneously changing or adapting into something different from what they've been?"

"Well we're not talking about the more discredited theories of macro-evolution which deal with a wholesale change of one species into another. It's more like the kind of change within a species that when they're placed in a different environment, they suddenly over the long-term adapt to that environment by changing in distinct ways. Like when humans spend generations living on planetoids with heavier atmosphere, their lungs adapt to it and the body can't function in thinner environments as well."

"But their environment *hasn't* changed!" Tolen still found all of this hard to comprehend. "It can't be a response to that."

"I'm only guessing at this point," Arnoff admitted, "Conventional answers that pertain directly to my area of expertise which is electronics, are proving futile. The answer behind this behavior increasingly looks to be elsewhere."

At that instant, they saw Cain coming down the corridor. Before the electronics scientist could say anything, the Juggernaut was practically in his face with an angry look.

"Dr. Arnoff," he said, "You are to turn off those four tincans *immediately!*"

The scientist was taken aback, as was Tolen. "But... Commander!"

"No arguments," Cain was at his full bearing, "Turn them off and if they don't

like the idea of being turned off, then I'll make sure a security team turns them into a junkpile!"

"Commander, no!" Tolen exclaimed, "You can't do that!"

The Juggernaut spun and glared at his executive officer, who in all the yahrens of his service had never once challenged him so openly.

"Who is the Commander of this ship, Tolen?" he said quietly. "You are, *sir*, but this issue's been gone over already."

"I am exercising my prerogative to change my mind!" Cain snapped, "I will not disgrace our people any longer by treating mass murdering butchers as if they were old chums to share a tankard with in the Officers Club!"

Right away Tolen realized there could only be one explanation for Cain's abrupt change on this issue.

"Sir, what did Commander Adama's wife say that brought this on?"

"Tolen, you're out of line."

"No, sir, I am not!" the executive officer raised his voice. Something he wouldn't have dared do before he took part on the Delta Aquinas mission. "This issue impacts the future well-being of your battle plan and the future well-being of your crew, and that's the reason why you recognized the importance of keeping them alive! If Commander Adama's wife has said something to make you change your mind on this, then I want to know what that is so I can tell the men!"

So intense had the exchange become that neither were aware of Dr. Arnoff bidding a silent awkward retreat back into the lab. Or of Captain Skyler, Strike Leader of Silver Spar Squadron halfway down the corridor who had stopped in his tracks when he saw what was unfolding and was looking in slack-jawed disbelief.

Before Cain could respond to Tolen's last challenge, Skyler was uneasily clearing his throat to get their attention. The commander and executive officer both turned and immediately straightened themselves out.

"Yes, Captain?" the displeasure hadn't faded from Cain's voice.

"Um... Commander, maintenance has finished their report on the shuttlecraft."

"Oh... right. I should look that over before I talk with Ila again," he then glared at the executive officer, "As for you, *Colonel*, I'll be discussing your rank insubordination later!"

He stormed off down the corridor in the direction of his quarters. So angry was his bearing that once he reached out with his swagger stick and slapped it against the corridor wall.

Tolen noticed Skyler still standing uneasily and embarrassed.

"Is there anything else you have to do, Captain?"

"No, sir," Silver Spar Leader shook his head.

The Executive Officer then gave him the most sarcastic look possible, "Then go join your fellow pilots in the Officers Club and let the gossip begin."

And without waiting for a response, Tolen disappeared back into the lab so he could tell Arnoff to ignore the last order he'd heard from Cain.

Once Cain had departed, Ila allowed herself a few more moments to cry for her youngest son. Like all parents who had more than one child she had always known how important it was to divide the love evenly, and to never let any child think that one had been favored over another. But what was easy to do in the heart, where Ila's love for Apollo, Athena and Zac was always in perfect proportions of equality, was not always easy to do in outward execution.

Apollo, being her first, had carried from the beginning the responsibility that all firstborn sons received in Colonial society. The expectation of inheriting the father's titles and property and with it the expectation of measuring up to the standards set by the father. It was because of that, Ila had raised Apollo with nowhere near the levels of open affection she would later give Athena and Zac. Not because she loved Apollo less but because Ila's sense of dignity and respect for Colonial tradition made her fearful that to do so would be harmful to Apollo in later years. To her, it was more important to see Apollo strike the deeper bond with Adama and if that meant it had to be at the expense of spoiling him less than her maternal instincts yearned to do, so be it. When she saw Apollo bonding with his father over matters of Colonial history and religious philosophy, it made her happy. She felt as if she had performed the duty that had been expected of her as a Caprican mother raising the first born son of the family. It also helped that appearance and genetically, Apollo was definitely more Adama than her. He had

Adama's taste for quiet reflection and occasional solitude over formal socializing. Not to mention the shyness Ila had seen in Adama that she'd found so endearing during their courting days.

Athena by contrast, represented everything that was part of Ila's personality. Outgoing and fun-loving, with a bubbling sense of optimism. Ila's pet name for her daughter had been "Sunshine" because her optimistic personality just seemed to radiate like a rising sun that never wanted to go down. And yet... while that had allowed a more personal bonding than Ila had shared with Apollo it also was limited, as Athena preferred to spend more time with first her playmates, and as she got older, with her boyfriends than taking part in family activities. Athena was always appreciative of special mother-daughter bonding moments... so long as they came in limited dosages.

With Zac, there had been a lot more. She had known from the beginning of her third pregnancy that it would be her last and it had filled her with a sense of self-awareness over all the things she'd known had been limited with Apollo and Athena. And why she was determined to not let it be limited with her third child. Ultimately, Zac, as the baby of the family had received ultimately more in the way of smothering maternal affection than Apollo or Athena had. With hindsight, Ila knew she'd done that more for herself and because she wanted the vivid impressions of being a young mother to stay with her forever. It had taken her yahrens to realize that her smothering of Zac had likely produced a quiet, underlying jealousy and tension from Apollo. Never anything in the way of hostility or cruelty. But Ila could now see that perhaps it had kept Apollo and Zac from being as close as they could have been.

She could take some comfort in the fact that the last family gathering at the house, which had been Harvest Day celebration, things seemed to be better. Zac was just out of the Academy and assigned to the Galactica with Adama, Apollo and Athena. Because the Armistice signaling peace talks between the Colonies and the Cylons had been declared, that meant it looked like Zac was never going to experience the dangers of combat, which suited Ila just fine although it did seem to make her younger son think that without the experience of combat, it would always keep him from ever earning Apollo's full respect as a warrior. Which was something she could see that Zac now craved a good deal. The close bond as brothers that had never really been there when they were children was now something Zac wanted to have. So far, Apollo only seemed ready to accept his brother's presence. As far as having a bond with him in the way that Apollo had one with Starbuck? It wasn't there yet. That much Ila could tell.

And now it never will be there, she thought as she felt the tears for her youngest streaming down her cheeks again. Tears that she knew she had to cease as soon as possible. Because there was still too much that lay ahead for her in this strange, unexpected situation she now found herself thrust into. And too much she still had to tell Cain about how she... and so many others, had managed to survive in the wreckage of Caprica. And how and why she had undertaken this daring, seemingly impossible attempt to try and reach the Galactica so far from home.

Tolen waited a centar before he decided to enter Cain's quarters. Part of him was hoping that the Juggernaut would have come to his senses and recognized that he'd let his emotions get the better of him. But he suspected that he was going to find the Pegasus commander with his heels dug in, and that he was going to have to stand up to him even more.

So be it. The executive officer was prepared for it. He'd left behind all of his insecurities and sense of inferiority on Delta Aquinas and Equellas. Where he'd finally confronted the ghost of what had happened to his old wingmate Martin and realized that he'd spent twelve yahrens needlessly blaming himself for something that was never his fault. And where he'd finally been forced to take genuine initiative in a command setting and realize that the best answers didn't always involve neat and tidy choices. The event had been scarring and cleansing for Tolen all at once and it had left him as a man who was now capable of openly standing up to Cain if the situation called for it.

"Commander?"

Cain looked up from the report he was going over on his desk with visible annoyance, "Did I ask for you, Tolen?"

"No, sir, but I felt it was important."

"Has Dr. Arnoff carried out my order?" his words came out with the rapidity of laser-fire.

"He is continuing his study of the centurions and compiling a broader report."

"Has he turned them off?" Cain angrily snapped.

Tolen said nothing.

"Very well," the Juggernaut said with disgust. "I'll deal with your court-martial

later. In the meantime, I'm sending Colonial Security down there immediately."

His hand reached for the unicom switch but before he could say anything, the executive officer then spoke with blunt authority.

"Sir, if you give any order to destroy those centurions, then I intend to invoke Article 184 and have you relieved of command."

Cain pulled his hand away from the unicom. The angry expression slowly gave way to an almost mocking smile. He slowly rose to his feet.

"Well, well," he chuckled, "That mission I sent you on *really* changed your personality, Tolen. After all these yahrens of self-pity and self-intimidation and easy deference to every order I ever gave, you *finally* discover your voice. I salute your courage, Colonel. It's too bad you have to do it in the name of a shameful act of dishonor."

"What's dishonorable, sir, is your total about-face on something you understood the logic of just days ago when I presented the situation to you. Something that is of vital importance to the mission objective we've been operating under since you made the decision to leave the Galactica."

"I have exercised my command prerogative to reconsider the wisdom of that decision," Cain didn't bat an eye. "And you have no right to question my reasons."

"Oh yes I do, sir, when you won't give a rational explanation for why things are different now," Tolen wasn't going to hold anything back. "The only thing that's changed has been the arrival of Commander Adama's wife. Has she said anything that changes the situation from what it was when you felt otherwise?"

Cain moved out from behind his desk so that he was now only a couple feet from Tolen. If the Juggernaut had wondered if getting closer to him would have an intimidating effect, he had figured wrong as the executive officer's expression was unchanged.

"Colonel," he said quietly but with authority, "That woman survived the most horrible ordeal that *any* human being that lived through the Destruction went through. The ordeal of being left behind and abandoned. Abandoned by her own husband who didn't know she was alive trapped in a buried bomb shelter. All the time knowing her husband was alive and leading the evacuation effort. And then she and other survivors had to go into hiding in a way far more frightening than the game we've been playing where we have the luxury of hopping around from

quadrant to quadrant to escape detection. Three whole yahrens."

He drew even closer to him, "I've just finished going over the technical report on that shuttle she was in. There isn't a *single* counterpart to it in the known annals of Colonial technology that existed at the time of the Destruction. Which means that somehow, during that time of being forced to live in constant danger from merciless occupation forces, the people Ila banded together with constructed something unprecedented for the sole purpose of taking a chance to get one person off the Colonies with the clear goal of trying to reach the Galactica. Why they did that for her I can't begin to imagine, but it was obviously something that was meant to give her life some real purpose once again and to let her get something back that was cruelly taken away from her when she was left behind. Taken away by monsters just like those four we've been acting so chummy with all of a sudden. And for what? To think that if we're even more chummy with them, they'll somehow convince their fellow demons to also be friendly with us? That's ultimately the kind of astrum-backwards thinking that brought on the whole Destruction in the first place. When we surrendered our honor and our integrity on a false hope. And I am damned if I'm going to let that happen again with us."

He marched around back behind his desk and again reached for the unicom.

"Would you be thinking this if she wasn't your wife's best friend and your best friend's wife?"

Cain looked up and glared at Tolen, whose bearing and expression told him he still hadn't been intimidated in the slightest.

"That has nothing to do with it, Colonel."

"Oh yes it does," Tolen shook his head, "That is *exactly* the reason why you've checked all of your command instincts at the door. It's because you're too personally close to this woman, you're too easily swayed by the emotion of whatever it was she described to you. If this had been any other person we'd found in the shuttle, your sound command instincts wouldn't have been impacted in the slightest."

The executive officer then zeroed in, "This could have been my own wife, who was lost in the Destruction. If it had been her, I would have had my emotional reaction to it... and then you would have given me a needed reminder on how the mission comes first. And by God, Commander, you *know* those centurions are essential to the mission."

"We can make a difference without having to lower our standards," Cain said.

"Did I lower my standards when I used them to make the mission on Equellas a success?" Tolen retorted. "I used those centurions to *kill* people who were using the ammunition supply we needed to recover, for evil purposes. And I wouldn't have succeeded in the mission if I didn't have them!"

"You're not being faulted for that, Colonel," Cain said. "When the mission was over, you should have just disposed of them."

"And wasted a chance to apply the same principle to your Grand Master Vision of striking a blow against the Empire? Very well, Commander, if you're so convinced you can pull this off without tapping into the opportunity using those centurions present to us, then I suggest you call a briefing of all the men and explain that to them."

"This isn't a democracy," the Juggernaut refused to be moved. "Command authority ends with the one its been entrusted to."

"And command authority only remains so long as the one who has it, has the trust of his men. You've kept that trust, Grumblers notwithstanding, these last two and a half yahrens, but if you throw away a viable chance to justify what you've had these men go through all this time, so they can actually fulfill the objective and maybe not lose their lives in the process, you will forfeit that trust for all time. And pretty soon it will be more than just me mentioning Article 184 to you."

Cain reached down to once again activate the unicom, but this time he was interrupted by something other than Tolen's angry protest. This time it was the sound of a Red Alert klaxon.

"What in the name of..." he moved his hand over to the Bridge intercom. "Bridge, what's happening?"

"Commander, I... I don't know! Something incredible I've never seen the likes of before!" there was a mixture of awe and terror in Major Ham's voice.

The Juggernaut immediately dashed out of his quarters with Tolen trailing him.

When the Commander and Executive Officer arrived on the Bridge, they stopped as they saw through the forward screen an incredible display of bright dazzling lights. Moving in and about them at rates of speed that none of them had

seen before in any of their experiences.

"Are you getting scans on this?" Cain demanded of Major Ham.

The dark-skinned senior Bridge Officer shook his head. "Nothing shows up on the scanner, sir! It's as if they're not really there and yet... there they are!"

"Interceptors launched?"

"Yes sir, Silver Two group with Paris and Harroun."

Cain picked up his headset, "Silver Two leader, this is Cain! Are those things registering on your scanners?"

"Negative, Commander!" Lieutenant Paris's voice was nervous. "They're bright and beautiful and that's all I can say about them!"

"Which isn't any different from what we can say about them from here on the Bridge," the Juggernaut grunted. "Do they show signs of... intelligence? Or is it just some kind of natural phenomena?"

When Paris replied, he sounded confused, "How can you test it for intelligent behavior?"

"Try something creative!" Cain snapped. "Like maybe firing a shot at them and see if they react."

"Uh, yes sir. We'll maneuver into attack position."

Cain pulled off his headset and motioned to Ham, "Put their channel on open circuit so I don't have to keep this on."

"Yes sir."

Cain and Tolen moved up to the edge of the forward viewscreen so they could get their closest look at the dazzling white lights moving back and forth across their field of vision.

"This is Beta Two," Sergeant Harroun's voice filled the bridge. "I'm moving up behind one of them. Getting... absolutely nothing on my attack computer."

"Stay on visual fix, Beta Two," Paris's voice commanded. "You are cleared to

fire at will!"

"Affirmative, Alpha Two, and firing!"

From their vantage point on the Bridge, the vipers were indistinct but Cain's eye caught sight of the red laser streaks that had just fired from Harroun's ship. And he then saw one of the beams of light shoot in an upward direction relative to where it had been.

"Whoa!" Harroun was amazed, "I never saw anything move like that. Whatever these things are they seem to know we're here."

"They definitely have to have some kind of intelligence within them," Cain muttered and then looked at Tolen, "Suggestions, Colonel?"

Tolen almost seemed surprised that Cain was asking his advice after what they'd just gone through.

"I don't have any, sir," he said candidly.

"Engaging turbos to pursue," Paris's voice crackled over the intercom. "And... our turbos are not engaging! We still have power but we can't get out ahead to see where they're coming from!"

"Commander!" this came from Bridge Officer Kylie, one of only fifteen female crewmen still aboard the Pegasus, "Our speed is dropping!"

"Helm control?" Cain turned and looked over at her station with alarm.

"Still there, but if we needed emergency speed, we don't have it!"

"What in Hades is happening?" the Commander felt his frustration mounting.

"Oh my God!" Harroun's voice came through. "What's that coming up from behind? Paris, do you see it?"

"Holy Frack!"

Suddenly the scene in front of the Bridge personnel became more blinding and intense as something massive passed in front of their field of vision. Accompanied by an incredible high pitched sound that Cain found deafening. He didn't know whether to put his arm up over his eyes or to press both arms over his

ears.

Then, the swagger stick fell out of his hand as he collapsed to the bridge floor, the blinding light and deafening sound no longer noticeable to him.

Chapter Three

When Cain finally came to, the first thing he could sense in his mind was a strange feeling of... calm. It didn't seem to make any sense given the frantic developments that had been taking place on the Bridge, and yet, he couldn't deny what he felt. As if during that time he'd blacked out, he'd been through some kind of peaceful dream. But just what kind of dream it had been, he couldn't remember. As if his mind was refusing to recall the details.

"Commander?" he heard Tolen's voice. Sounding initially just a little distant, but then his ears picked up the sounds of the other Bridge personnel and a subdued sense of murmuring going about.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," Cain slowly got to his feet and looked about. Everyone else on the Bridge was back at their Station or if they'd been slumped over were coming to and readjusting as well.

"Everyone okay?" he said aloud. A general affirmative murmur went up from everyone.

"Commander," Major Ham reported, also sounding a bit drained. "Silver Two probe is still with us. They say they blacked out too but are okay. No sign of those lights, but they have turbo power back to pursue if you want."

"Negative!" Cain shook his head as he picked up his dropped swagger stick. "Get them back here immediately and have them report to me as soon as possible."

He made his way over to Bridge Officer Kylie who was exhaling.

"How's our helm power?"

"We're back at normal flight speed. No indications of damage," she said, "But... something doesn't seem right with our position. We're not where we were before!"

"Well where are we?" Cain leaned over her shoulder so he could look at her

navigation console.

"I can't tell, sir," Kylie shook her head.

"Well find a fixed reference point and start from there."

"That's the problem, sir. There are no fixed reference points!"

"That's not possible," Cain felt the frustration starting to return. "Put this up on the main navigation board."

Kylie pressed a button and on the main navigation board on the Bridge's upper level, the star map that had been in place at the time they blacked out was replaced with the current indicator. The instant Cain and Tolen saw it change, they both realized what Kylie meant about no fixed reference points.

"The whole Hatari System isn't there," the executive officer was baffled as he and Cain mounted the steps to look closely at the board. "And the Antiochean Cluster should be on the far side."

"I know every part of every star system between the Colonies and Gomorrah in the entire Alpha Quadrant," Cain's incredulity deepened. "*Nothing* on this chart is familiar. It's as if we were sent to an entirely different Quadrant of the galaxy."

"Or past the regions of charted space in the Alpha Quadrant," Tolen was trying to come to terms with the situation, knowing that now was the time he needed to show some resourcefulness as an executive officer who'd learned how to find his voice.

"Yes, that's possible too," The Juggernaut conceded, "But without a fixed reference point of some kind, we might as well be hopelessly... lost."

"So what do we do in the meantime?"

"Well... first thing I'm going to need is a report from those pilots on whether they saw anything else before they blacked out. And... Tolen?"

"Yes sir?"

Cain hesitated for an instant and then spoke carefully and cautiously, "That... order I was so adamant about Dr. Arnoff carrying out is... for now placed in abeyance."

"Abeyance?"

"Yes. I still haven't changed my mind about what should happen to them eventually, but... in light of what's just happened, I prefer to exercise some prudence, especially if the presence of those centurions might well be connected to these events."

"How could they be connected?" Tolen felt relieved that he'd won some time on the critical point, but he still couldn't understand Cain's thinking.

"Well... just maybe, maybe they might know something about all this that we don't!"

And then without waiting for an answer from Tolen, Cain descended the steps and prepared to leave the Bridge, but Kylie called after him.

"Sir?" she asked, "What about a course heading?"

Cain stopped and glared at her. "Without a reference point, there's no course heading to input. Put main thrusters at dead stop for now and then after I've talked to the pilots, we'll decide where to go from here, using our present location as our first fixed reference point for navigational purposes. Tolen, you have the conn."

"Yes, sir."

On his way to his quarters, Cain decided to stop in the Life Station to make sure that Ila had come through the ordeal safely. He entered, expecting to see her more distraught than when he'd left her, but to his surprise saw just the opposite. Instead, there was a look on her face of total... peace and serenity. It reminded him more of how she'd looked when the hatch to her shuttle had first opened up and he'd seen her lying in her state of suspended animation. The only difference was that this time her blue eyes were wide open and she seemed completely aware of her feeling of serenity.

"Ila?" he asked gently as he came alongside her bed.

She let out an almost contented sigh, "Hello, Cain," she said, "I'm... all right."

"Ila," he sat down by her, "A little while ago... something incredible happened. Everyone on the Bridge... and I guess it was everyone on the Pegasus, seemed to black out for just a bit. Did that happen to you?"

"I'm... not sure I'd say I blacked out," her expression grew thoughtful, "But... I remember it was like... falling asleep and having a beautiful dream. Of being someplace bright and wonderful and... pure."

Ila's words were having an effect on Cain. Unburying impressions and feelings from inside his sub-conscious that he realized were similar to what she was describing.

"And I can remember... seeing someone," she went on.

"Someone?" he asked, feeling a desperate need for information.

"Yes," the serene quality returned to Adama's wife. "Standing... far ahead of me. This figure all in... bright white. At first, I couldn't make anything out. There seemed to be something covering the face, but then the figure started coming toward me and as it got closer and closer, the face wasn't covered any longer. And that's when... ."

"Yes?" he didn't want to sound like he was pressing her.

Ila smiled and let out a soft chuckle, "It was Zac," she whispered with reverence. "It was my baby. Telling me that... it was all right and I didn't have to grieve for him any longer or let the fact that he was dead be an impediment in my life. That... I still had so much to do."

Cain felt himself deflating inside. Clearly, Ila had just dreamed what she'd needed to dream at that instant, coming off the shock of learning that her youngest child was dead. There wasn't anything significant he could attach to his own experience about what had happened during the blackout. But he wasn't going to belittle or put down anything she said. Not after what she'd been through.

"And he also told me... " Ila went on in her peaceful, reverent tone, "That at the end... for the very first time... he and Apollo bonded together as brothers. The one thing I always hoped would finally happen between them."

Slowly, Cain rose from his chair. "I... have to go, Ila. I'll be back later."

Before he reached the door, she suddenly called after him, "Cain?"

He turned back and saw her still looking at peace.

"It's going to be okay," Adama's wife said. "It really is."

The Juggernaut managed a weak smile and left the room.

When he arrived in his quarters he found Paris and Harroun waiting for him. In contrast to what he'd seen with Ila, the two warriors had expressions and bearings that were more subdued and faraway.

"All right gentlemen," Cain took his seat behind his desk, "What did you see?"

The two of them glanced at each other and then Paris decided to go first since he was the senior of them.

"Well... it was something... very big and bright, Commander. Bigger than... ten battlestars probably."

"And it never registered on your scanner."

"No," he shook his head. "And not on our attack computers either. Harroun took one shot at one of those smaller lights, but it seemed to know it was coming and it just... went off in a crazy direction faster than any viper or Cylon ship could fly."

"Did you ever have any sense they were trying to... communicate with you?"

"No," Paris shook his head, "Not... then."

"What do you mean not then?"

"Well, not when we were chasing them," Paris said. "But... when I blacked out, there was a micron or two, when... I got the feeling that something or someone was trying to communicate with me."

Cain stared at him and then shifted his attention to the other pilot, "Did you go through that too, Harroun?"

"Well... I'm not sure, sir," the sergeant said. "I have more of a general impression that for a few microns, things were... rather peaceful. I can't say I remember anyone trying to communicate with me."

"All right, all right," Cain waved his hand, "Paris, was it someone specific you thought was trying to communicate with you?"

"Specific?" he frowned.

He tried not to become exasperated, "Someone you knew?"

"Knew?" his puzzlement deepened, "Uh... no, I don't think so. Why would you ask that?"

"Forget it. It's nothing I suppose," inside Cain had no idea why he felt compelled to ask that question. Was Ila's story weighing that much on him? Or was... there another reason he'd felt he had to ask? "Let's get back to what happened before you blacked out. You lost your turbo thrust power?"

"Yes, it just slowed down completely. If we wanted to maneuver ourselves we could, so it wasn't like being caught in a tractor beam, but... it did limit our overall mobility."

"And another thing," Harroun said, "I had the sense that... even if we *had* turbo thrust capability, we wouldn't have been able to leave that sector of space. As if somehow... there might have been some kind of barrier to prevent us from doing so."

"Well if that was the case that worked to your advantage," Cain said, "You've heard the report on what that thing has done in terms of throwing us clear across the stars from where we were."

"Yes, sir, Colonel Tolen briefed us on that before we came down here."

"Consider yourselves lucky," Cain said pointedly, "If you had gone to turbo thrust you might still be where we were and totally cut off from us."

The two pilots visibly flinched. Realizing there was nothing more he could get from them in the way of productive information, the commander dismissed them and ordered them to stand-by for further orders.

What does this mean? He thought as he put his hand to his chin and maneuvered his chair so that he was staring out the porthole that now looked out on a totally unfamiliar expanse of stars. And why do I feel like... somehow *I* went through some kind of bizarre experience while I was out? And why am I not doing what every instinct in me tells me I *should* be doing which is blaming those four tin-cans in the Lab for what's happened? Because it just *can't* be a coincidence that this happens after we've taken them aboard and started treating them nicely.

Is it because... someone told me not to blame them for it? But who? Why can't I remember?

He wasn't coming up with answers. And that meant that the Juggernaut had to put the questions aside and concentrate on more important tasks concerning the reality of what he was dealing with now.

A centar later, he had summoned all of the warrior pilots, along with Colonel Tolen and Major Ham to a briefing in the Flight Operations Center. It was time to let them all know how things stood, and where they would go from this point forward.

"All right, gentlemen," Cain said. "I won't try to minimize the seriousness of this situation. I haven't a clue as to where we are. That means our greatest objective has now shifted from rebuilding our strength for an eventual strike on the heart of the Cylon Empire to figuring out how we get back to where we're supposed to be. And until we have a handle on where we're supposed to be, that means we're facing another short-term problem which is finding new locations for food and fuel sources. Up to now, we have been relying on all of the data we've had concerning old human settlements and known alien races in the Alpha Quadrant Frontier to give us food, and all data on abandoned or isolated Cylon bases for food and fuel that can't alert the High Command to our existence. Now... we might as well throw that down the turboflush because we don't know where *any* sources for that are. And if we don't rectify that in short order, then we face eventual death from either running out of food first or running out of fuel first and *then* running out of food while we drift idly in space as a powerless dead hulk."

A grim murmur went up from the warriors, and this time not even those who had counted themselves among the ranks of the "Grumblers" toward Cain in the past could deny that he was being completely candid about the situation.

The Juggernaut then motioned to Major Ham to activate the projection screen behind him. A star chart pattern then emerged with a carefully marked gold "x" at the center of the image.

"Memorize this chart well, gentlemen. This reflects what we've put together in terms of a preliminary visual scan of the star patterns fanning out in all four primary directions from our current position which is at the center. You will need to program this into your main Viper navigational systems so you can maintain a permanent fix on the Pegasus once you start going on patrol. And *all* of you are going on patrol as soon as this briefing is over. Four groups of ten vipers each are

to take each section leading out from the Pegasus. They have been marked Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta sections.” He rapped his swagger stick against each marked portion for emphasis before resuming.

“You are to thoroughly map everything you see on patrol so we can have more available data on what planetary systems there are, and above all what resources there are we can utilize. Once you bring your mapping data back, then our Bridge personnel staff will begin the arduous and tedious task of trying to match anything you see to known star charts in not just the Alpha Quadrant of the galaxy, which is where we have been all this time, but also the Beta, Gamma and Delta quadrants. I know of no Colonial vessel that has penetrated those latter three quadrants in the better part of five hundred yahrens but at least the data was somewhat extensive by our star-navigation forefathers. As soon as we find a match, *then* we can start thinking about how to get back to where we’re supposed to be.”

Cain then moved forward, past the lectern he never used so that he was almost on top of the front row of seated pilots.

“Now here are a few other important points to remember when you’re on patrol, concerning the priorities of what we’re looking for. Colonel Tolen and Major Ham are going to give them to you one at a time,” he then motioned to the two senior officers in the chain of command.

“Objective number one,” Tolen said. “Locate *any* planetary system that contains a potential usable food resource.”

“Objective number two,” Ham said. “Avoid at all costs *any* contact with any alien races. If you encounter an inhabited planetary system, and more importantly one that is inhabited by a race that has spaceflight capacity, you are to move out of their scanner range so that they don’t get a look at you. But make absolutely certain before you leave that you’ve gotten a scan on potential food resources such a system might have to offer. That’s so if we have no choice but to approach them because we can’t find an uninhabited planet with food, we’ll do it later, but not as a result of this initial patrol sweep.”

“Objective number three.” Tolen again. “Find *any* planetary system that contains deposits of tylium, solium or any other resource of benefit for fuel. Preferably an uninhabited system, and where once again the same principles that apply to objective two apply here as well.”

“Your patrols will last no more than four centars of flight time on the

outbound sweep. As you make your way back to the Pegasus, double-check all of your charts as you re-cross your previously mapped territory." Ham's basso voice grew more intense.

Cain now stepped between them and resumed charge of the briefing, "And *if* gentlemen, you see anything that resembles Cylon activity, do *not* engage. Get out of there and report back immediately on what you saw and where you saw it."

He looked over the men, all of them with grim but accepting expressions of the situation and what it was they had to do.

"If there are no questions... then you're all dismissed."

The pilots started to rise but Cain then raised his swagger stick and they all stopped in mid-motion.

"And may the blessings of the Lords of Kobol go with you all."

As the Commander exited the room at the right side, many of the warriors traded puzzled glances at each other since that was the first time they'd ever heard Cain use that expression that only the devout were known to use.

I guess Cain's finally joined the ranks of the rest of us and truly found religion, Lieutenant Angus thought as he filed his way out.

"Well that's about all we can do for now until we get some hard data back from these patrols," Cain said as he and Tolen walked alongside each other with Ham just a step behind. "Until then... we sit tight where we are and give them a safe beacon to come back to."

The Juggernaut stopped and looked at his two immediate subordinates with gratitude.

"Thanks for an effective job presenting the main objective points to them. Hearing it in two powerful voices back and forth should drill all of that into them so there'll be no slipups."

"Of course, sir," Tolen nodded, "Anything else?"

"Yes," Cain's tone was cautious. "Check in with Arnoff. I want to know if those four... guests of ours went through their own version of a blackout or if they actually saw something we didn't during that time."

"You want me to ask them if they know anything about these... lights?" there was the faintest edge in the executive officer's tone.

"Yes, ask them," Cain's response was firm, but not in the least bit hostile. "But... you can ask them politely, Colonel. As I said to you, the earlier order is in abeyance. In the meantime... I'll be in my quarters." The Pegasus commander then picked up his pace, leaving the two of them behind.

"Is it my imagination or does he seem just a little... different since this whole thing happened?" Ham asked.

"I don't think it's your imagination," Tolen said. "The boldness is still there. The command instincts are there. But... the braggadocio and swagger is muted or off. It does make a bit of a difference in him." He stopped to look at the major, "What do you remember?"

"Of the blackout?" Ham shrugged, "Hardly anything. Except... I do seem to recall liking what I was seeing. The thing is... I really can't remember what it was I was seeing to like."

"I had something similar," the executive officer admitted. "A good feeling, and... a sense of seeing someone, but... I can't remember who."

"And is that good feeling lingering?" Ham asked. "Because I'll be honest. This is the scariest situation we've ever gone through, period, and yet... all of us seem to be taking it real well. I mean, we know it's bad, but you'd almost think that we'd have seen *one* person go to pieces after learning we don't know where we are and we don't know where any food and fuel sources are."

"That's true," Tolen said. "Maybe... if we all experienced something good during that blackout, it is kind of letting us roll with the punches now that we know what we're up against."

They came to a stop in front of the Electronics Lab. The Executive Officer turned to the man next-in-line. "Ham, I'll take care of things down here. Take charge of all operations on the Bridge until Cain or I report."

"Yes, sir," he moved off.

Tolen entered the Lab and saw immediately that Dr. Arnoff's look was more perplexed than it had ever been. The four centurions, led by Commander Cobre were seated across from him.

"Dr. Arnoff?" he asked.

The scientist rose, "Ah, Colonel, I'm glad *someone* finally came down here. I've... been talking with Commander Cobre and his colleagues and they... keep telling me the same thing over and over. I'm just not sure what to make of it."

"Oh?" Tolen looked over at the Cylons and cautiously approached them. "What have you been talking about, Commander?"

"What took place when Dr. Arnoff collapsed and was not able to communicate."

Tolen's eyebrows went up. It hadn't occurred to him that the four Cylons conceivably could be the only witnesses to what went on during that period since being machine, they would be unaffected by the forces of light and sound that had knocked everyone on the Pegasus out.

"What took place, Commander?" he asked politely.

"Intense light filled the room," Cobre said, "All of it achieving a bright white in color."

"You could still discern your surroundings?"

"It was for a micron too bright even for our visual detectors," the lead centurion of the three lower-ranked silver plated ones spoke. His vocal pitch was much higher in contrast to the lower tone of the gold-plated command centurion, Cobre. "Soon, the surroundings returned to what we could discern, though all around it was still bright white in color."

"Did you hear anything?"

"A voice spoke the same thing repeatedly," Cobre said, "Delta section third system, the second planet."

Tolen's eyes narrowed. "That was all?"

"Yes," the first regular centurion said, "Delta section third system, the second planet."

"How long did the voice repeat that?" the executive officer tried not to look baffled, which was how he felt inside at the moment.

"Four point three centons. That was when the... surroundings returned to normal and Dr. Arnoff came to."

"And all of you witnessed and heard the exact same thing?" Tolen wanted to be sure. "There was no... variation of the experience from individual to individual?"

"We have consulted with each other on that point and Dr. Arnoff has asked us repeatedly on it," Cobre said. "We are agreed. We have no reason to concur unless that is what we all experienced."

"Of course, of course," Tolen nodded, hoping that he hadn't needlessly irritated them. "It's because we, as humans, experienced something entirely different from you four, that we are not able to easily come to terms with what you as Cylons experienced during the incident. It represents... part of the gap that we must work to bridge."

Slowly, the command centurion nodded his gold-helmeted head.

"As we must do so with you, in this... cooperative venture."

"I'm glad you still regard our venture as cooperative, Commander," Tolen said. "I recognize that... since our arrival on the Pegasus there hasn't as yet been much for you and your colleagues to do, but opportunities will come in due course. It's simply a matter of... adjusting."

"Adjustment... is necessary for all when... no other choice has been left with us."

Tolen wondered if Cobre was referring to how he'd been left with no choice but to use Cylon help to take care of the situation on Equellas, or if it was a reference to the discontent that Cobre and his colleagues had openly expressed about the stratified structure of Cylon society, dominated by the IL class group. He decided it was best not to ask for now.

"I appreciate this information, Commander Cobre," he said. "This has the potential to be of great assistance to us in this... new situation we're presently in. I will let you know if it has proved helpful, and if it does... that should present new opportunities."

Cobre said nothing but the way he nodded his head almost struck the Executive Officer like a polite acknowledgment.

"Dr. Arnoff, could you come with me for a micron?" he motioned to the scientist.

When they were out in the corridor, Tolen glared at him. "This information should have been reported long ago, Doctor."

"I didn't know what to make of it!" Arnoff protested. "What does it mean?"

"Potentially a lot, Doctor," Tolen decided he was wasting enough time as it was rebuking him. He turned and headed for the turbo lift, deciding whether he should go first to the Bridge or to Cain's quarters. Only when he boarded did he make his decision. He would bypass Cain and head for the Bridge. Time was of the essence if this information was to be capitalized on.

When the Executive Officer arrived, the first thing Ham mentioned was that all squadrons had been launched to begin their searches of the four designated sections Cain had sketched in the briefing.

"Which group is handling Delta Section?" he asked hurriedly.

"Silver Spar Group One. Captain Skyler."

"Make contact with him immediately. It's urgent. I need to give him new instructions before they're out of range."

Ham motioned to Bridge Officer Altair, who handled communications monitoring. Altair quickly transmitted a message to the ten vipers from Silver Spar group that were investigating Delta Section and instructed Skyler to stand by for an important message.

As Tolen got his headset on, Altair then looked back. "Captain Skyler acknowledges receipt of message and is standing by."

"Skyler, this is Colonel Tolen. Now listen carefully, I don't want any of you to ignore anything you initially come across. It all needs to be thoroughly mapped, *but* when you reach the third planetary system in your patrol sweep, you are to pay attention specifically to the *second*, that is the *second* planet in the *third* system for something of potential significance."

There was the briefest pause, "Colonel, I copy your message, but... exactly what are we supposed to potentially detect?"

“Unknown. This is a... new intelligence lead that has just come to our attention, and it is imperative that this system with this planet not be overlooked during your patrol.”

“Well sir, does that mean finding out what’s on this hypothetical planet that we can’t yet confirm the existence of overrides our orders to steer clear of alien race contact?”

“Use your best command judgment to fulfill *both* objectives, Captain!” Tolen summoned a level of authority in his tone that he wasn’t used to, but which he now felt comfortable doing. “Just make certain you get information on the third planet in the third system and that it’s thorough!”

“Yes, sir,” the tone in Skyler’s voice indicated he was either amazed by Tolen’s forcefulness or frustrated by the imprecise nature of the instructions. Whatever the case, Tolen knew that Silver Spar Leader would carry the order out.

And what it ultimately meant would have to wait at least eight centars for anyone on the Pegasus to know.

Chapter Four

“Cain?”

The Juggernaut looked up from his desk and saw that Ila had entered the room. She was now wearing a brightly patterned civilian tunic that clearly wasn’t her own since the style was more reflective of what much younger women had been wearing in the Colonies five yahrens ago and could only have come from a Pegasus crewman. Yet it didn’t seem out of place on Adama’s wife, given her general youthful glow and the fact that she always looked ten yahrens younger than her actual age in anything she wore.

“Ila, come on in,” he rose to greet her and motioned to a small circular table in the corner of his office area where two chairs had been set up. “You can sit down over there. The... Kitchen area sent dinner up for us both.”

“Thank you. I admit, I finally have a little of my appetite back,” Ila sat down.

“Well it won’t be anything fancy like... what they used to serve at the Astral Needle or at the Pyramid Towers Hotel.” Cain made his way over and sat across from her. “For the most part, our team of three cooks have to come up with all kinds of variants on being creative with staple grain crops and frozen livestock

animals.”

Ila lifted the cover off her plate and noticed neatly cut portions of meat and a side dish that looked to be some form of mashed grain.

“About what I expected,” she picked up a utensil and began to eat. “I know that maintaining a food supply has to be one of your greatest challenges.”

“We’ve managed,” Cain said simply as he took the cover off his own plate but didn’t yet eat. “You’re... looking well.”

“Yes, I won’t be going back to the Life Station.”

Noticing her youthful looking tunic he asked, “You got that from one of the women in the crew?”

“From one of the *few* women in the crew, Bridge Officer Kylie,” Ila said as she ate another bite and then sipped from a water chalice. “She was the closest to my size and gave me two sets to use. The clothes I was originally wearing were designed more for the shuttle than every day living.”

“Well yes, I know there are only fifteen women left on board the Pegasus. That at times does make things more awkward. But that wasn’t by design.”

“I was surprised I didn’t see your daughter,” Ila looked him in the eye. “Wasn’t Sheba assigned to the Pegasus when you set out for Molocay?”

“She was. She’s not dead, Ila, but... she’s no longer here. In fact... ” he took a breath, “She’s on the Galactica now with Adama. Along with about a quarter of my original crew complement along with the rest of the women in the crew. They were all evacuated there during the time... we were together.”

Ila frowned, “Why would Sheba leave you?”

“Well that wasn’t by design either,” Cain had to keep from showing any unnecessary emotion. “There was a battle before Adama and I separated. A preliminary to when I got the two baseships off his back. Sheba was... injured in that battle and I made certain she and other wounded and non-essential personnel were evacuated safely to the Galactica before I went in to take care of those two baseships.”

The beautiful blonde woman ate several more bites and sipped some more

water as though gathering strength for the next questions she wanted to ask. She wiped her mouth with a linen napkin and then asked, "Why didn't you stay with him after it was over?"

"A lot of reasons, Ila," Cain felt prepared to handle anything she said. "Some of them more frivolous than zothers, but... if there's one overriding reason that cuts through all the felgercarb and gets to the main point, it's this. Adama has a different vision for the future than I do. I just couldn't fit into his vision which is trying to find the Thirteenth Tribe and the lost colony, Earth."

"I see," Ila looked at him thoughtfully, "You... think he's wrong about Earth existing?"

"That isn't it," the Juggernaut shook his head, "I know how brilliant he is, and how well-versed he is in the ancient writings. If Adama believes Earth exists, it isn't based on blind faith alone but a careful understanding of the facts as he sees them. I know how thorough his mind is on things like that."

"So do I," Adama's wife managed a smile. "It's... nice to know that even with all that he's gone through, and all the burdens he's had to carry taking charge of all those people... he's still the same man I love."

"And still the best friend I ever knew," Cain acknowledged. "But... even good friends can have conflicts. Clashes of ego. Different mindsets on what they think the bigger picture is in the grand scheme of things. And... no matter how much a part of me wanted to stay with him, even if that meant ultimately accepting a subordinate role in the Command infrastructure which I would have had to..."

"Oh, that's right," Ila interrupted. "I keep forgetting. You're technically junior to him."

"For reasons we don't need to revisit. But even absent that, Adama is also head of the civilian government as President of the new Council of Twelve, so that would have trumped a military seniority issue. But anyway, the problem between us is that Adama thinks the future of humanity means turning our backs forever on what lies behind, and... that's just not something I'm capable of doing. It means letting go of the old war with the Cylons so that ultimately they just... give up because of the distance. And that's something I just can't do."

"Because you weren't there to prevent the Destruction?" Ila asked pointedly. "And that troubles your conscience?"

Cain looked her in the eye and said without hesitation, "Yes. That's exactly it. It troubles me to think that at a time when my people really, truly needed me to be there and act as a potential brake on all that talk of the need to accept peace overtures that were really a trap, I wasn't there. Instead, I was just living the life of a happy renegade in the Gomorrah quadrant and enjoying the freedom of deep space and not answering to superior officers in the command structure."

Ila contemplated his words and then said, "I suppose it also made a difference that Bethany was dead."

He lowered his head and awkwardly bit his lip. "Yes," there was just the barest hint of a cracking in his voice. "If she'd still been alive I would have gladly died trying to get back to her. But... she was gone, and what I had back in Caprica was a... problem I didn't want to confront. Especially, since what I was experiencing out in deep space had... healed a rift that had developed between me and Sheba and if I'd made it home at that point... the rift might have opened up again."

"I don't understand."

Cain took a breath, "Ila... I don't know if you remember, but... not too long after Bethany's death, I... began a relationship with a young woman. A woman named Cassiopeia."

Her eyes widened as the memory came back to her. "Oh. Oh yes. The socialator."

"Well, yes, yes. She was, but... the relationship wasn't like that, it was something where... she helped to..." abruptly the Juggernaut stopped and shook his head. "Ila, I swear by all the Lords, you know how much I loved Bethany and how much she meant to me. It was because I missed her so much and..."

"Cain," the best friend of his late wife gently interrupted, "I am the *last* person in this universe who needs to be convinced of how much you loved Bethany. After all... I was present at the beginning of it all that night Adama and I took you to the theater to see her perform."

Her words of reassurance seemed to relax him and he was able to continue.

"Thank you. At any rate... that relationship did much to get me back on my feet because... I hadn't been there for Bethany when she died and it just made it hard for me to think coherently because I felt like I'd let her down. And... it made it hard for me to reach out to Sheba because every time I looked at her... all I could

see is Bethany's face staring back at me and giving me another reminder of how I hadn't been there for her. But... with Cassiopeia I was able to move past that and get my instincts back. But it came at a cost, because Sheba... well she thought wrongly that her mother's memory no longer meant anything to me, and she saw Cassiopeia as a meddling interloper. So... the relationship did put a new burden on me where sooner or later, I was going to have to try to put a stop to the bad feeling that existed. But then came the Battle of Molocay which meant I left home to put that problem on hold and afterward... it was a lot easier to add that situation as a reason for not going back, when suddenly things were now better between Sheba and me," he then added, "But believe me, that personal issue wasn't the primary reason why I didn't try to get back. It just made the total picture seem... easier."

Ila, no longer interested in eating anymore, put her elbows on the table and placed her folded hands under her chin, "And you've regretted that decision ever since."

"It just seemed like another cruel reminder to me about how I was never there at the times I was needed most," Cain sighed, his glance looking away from her. "That's how it was with Bethany when she died and I wasn't there to give her one last word of comfort and one last word of reassurance when she was dying from that horrible brain disease and incoherently calling my name. And to have that feeling magnified a million-fold because of the ramifications of what my decision not to get back meant for the Colonies... ...that's why I never could have lived with myself if I'd followed Adama on his quest for Earth."

"Even though it meant being separated from Sheba?"

"And Cassiopeia too," he added. "That was the bigger irony. Cassiopeia was among the survivors on the Galactica. She wasn't a socialator any longer, she was a med-tech now. And she and Sheba actually started patching up their differences. So the whole thing that was part of the problem two yahrens before wasn't a problem any longer. But... I couldn't let that affect the greater decision I had to make. I at least took comfort from the fact that I knew Adama would do all he could to make Sheba part of his extended family. And Cassiopeia... she had moved on from me to a warrior named Starbuck..."

"Starbuck?" Ila interrupted as she looked jolted by this last remark. "You met Starbuck and he was now involved with this... Cassiopeia?"

Cain was taken aback, "Well... yes. Like I said, that made it easier for me to let

go of her because I knew she'd be happy with him."

Ila was sadly leaning back in her chair.

"Ila, what's wrong?"

"Oh my, what a day this has been for revelations," she mirthlessly said as she looked up at the ceiling, "If it's true that Starbuck is involved with... your former girlfriend, then that means he and Athena broke up at some point. The two of them were practically on the verge of becoming engaged at the time of the Destruction."

Cain looked at her in disbelief and then he slowly shook his head and began to laugh, but only with partial mirth.

"Now I know what they mean when they say the universe is smaller than it really is," the Commander said. "Ila, I had no idea. Like I said, I didn't get a chance to talk to Athena, but... if she's broken up with Starbuck, she didn't look broken up about it. She was doing her duties as good as any other member of Adama's crew."

"I suppose it was maybe the Destruction that caused them to break up," Ila sadly mused, "Athena was always... so bubbly and optimistic about life. My Sunshine, I called her. If she had to see Zac killed, and the Colonies destroyed and then thought I was dead... I can see how that could have been more traumatic for her."

Cain didn't know what else he could say about that. "Well... to finish my other point. I couldn't let the personal considerations of losing Cassiopeia and Sheba affect what I had to do.

I had to go back. I had to do *something* that would let me keep fighting the war I ran out on when I didn't try to get home. And... maybe it's true that I've yet to form a coherent final plan of action for how I take down as much of the Empire as I can, and yes, it's torn at my soul that I'm separated from Sheba, but... at least I have a sense that I'm doing the right thing from a command perspective. I've never regretted that."

She pushed her plate aside and realized the time had come to share some things she still hadn't told Cain since being found.

"Cain," Ila said, "This will sound strange, I admit, but... I understand

completely your thinking on why you didn't want to stay with Adama and his quest."

His eyebrows went up in amazement but he let her continue.

"It... has a lot to do with what I still haven't told you about... what it's been like the last two yahrens living in the rubble of Caprica after that difficult first yahren. And what we've been doing. And just how and why I was able to be in a one-person shuttle trying to reach the Galactica. I guess if you and I hadn't been so personally connected to each other, we would have gotten to these matters first instead of dealing with all the other things we've talked about, but... what do you think was the reason why I was in that shuttle trying to reach Adama?"

Cain frowned, "Well... I would have thought, so you could take advantage of a chance to catch up with him and be with him again, especially since you said you knew from the beginning the Galactica was taking survivors to find Earth."

"The reasons weren't personal, Cain," Ila shook her head. "I was chosen to be the one to try and made contact with him, because I was the only person in our group who has any chance of convincing him what he needs to do."

"And that is?" Cain was beginning to get an indication of where this was going.

"To come back and help us defeat the Cylon Empire and take back our civilization."

The patrol into Delta Section by the designated "Silver Spar Group One" was now over three centars old and three-quarters through its allotted outbound time. So far, they had been able to map two planetary systems, one consisting of three planets, the second consisting of four. The first had been a total failure in terms of providing potential food or fuel resources. The second system had yielded one planet that had potential fuel resources... but an unbreathable atmosphere that would make extraction with the limited tools the Pegasus had all but impossible.

Captain Skyler, the overall leader of the entire Silver Spar Squadron of forty-one vipers and commanding this group of ten vipers designated as "Silver Spar Group One", was doing his best not to communicate any grim feelings to the rest of his pilots. Each planet that revealed nothing meant that the Pegasus was soon going to have to start counting down the clock to when food and fuel would become dangerously limited. And once the clock started counting down on that,

that was when Skyler was sure the carefully controlled morale of the Pegasus crew would finally, after two and a half yahrens since they'd parted with the Galactica, crumble into spacedust.

All of that seemed so unfair to Silver Spar Leader because from the beginning, he had been the most stalwart of Cain's defenders in justifying the Juggernaut's decision to leave the Galactica. Skyler knew that wasn't the reason why he'd been promoted to become Silver Spar Leader, because in the old setup he had been third in seniority behind Sheba and Bojay so that meant by default the job and promotion to captain was automatically his. But because he had believed in Cain from the outset, that had made it easier for him to be respected by the rest of the warriors as someone they dared not undermine. He would let the Grumblers like Paris and the more mild ones like Banker and Angus say what they felt in the private confines of the Barracks or in the Officers Club, but his tolerance for letting them say anything to undermine a mission objective was always regarded as nil.

For much of that time, Skyler had felt like he was alone in that task of using his command position to effectively stand up for Cain's position. Major Ham, officially third in line, was a non-pilot in background and knew he didn't have the stature to put a grumbling pilot in place. And Tolen, despite being Executive Officer, was likewise thought of as someone not capable of showing authority when it was needed.

Which was why it had struck him as amazing to see Tolen finally out from that shadow when he'd encountered Tolen and Cain having their argument outside the Electronics Lab. It showed that Tolen was finally becoming more cognizant of the need that being an Executive Officer and the number two man was more meaningful if you were like Colonel Tigh of the Galactica in his role with Adama. Loyal to a fault, but also capable of showing you weren't scared of or intimidated by the man you loyally served and that the Juggernaut was clearly respecting dissenting voices. Seeing Tolen's effectiveness at the briefing made it clear that Cain had come away respecting Tolen's new assertiveness. And the boldness in which he'd given the order regarding the third planetary system they were supposed to watch for further confirmed that in Skyler's mind.

This crazy incident's probably made us better from a command structure standpoint, but what good will it be if we starve to death? Skyler thought as he checked his scanner and saw that the third system in their patrol was a matter of centons away. He hoped this strange third planetary system with its third planet, if it had that many, would prove productive. If it didn't, he wasn't sure there'd be time left on their patrol to scan ahead to the next system. It would be time to turn

back to the Pegasus and hope and pray that the other three patrol groups had found more productive results in their sections.

"Silver Leader to Silver group," he reported. "Communications band check?"

"Silver Two sir," Angus radioed, "All quiet."

"Any ion fuel traces to report that would indicate recent presence of spacecraft in this section?"

"Silver Four sir," this from Sergeant Marshak, "I have a faint trace of... something. Not enough to identify, but there has definitely been a spaceship presence in this vicinity at some point in the last yahren or yahren and a half judging by the dissipation factor."

"Stay with it, Silver Four. The rest of you, keep following my lead. Planetary system is now right... there. Ready for scan of first planet in twenty microns."

"Silver Leader, this is Silver Eight," from Sergeant Gaspar, "I am picking up indications of space debris floating by. Fixing lock on it for analysis... it is definitely blasted, indicating whatever it came from was a ship that was possibly destroyed by heavy weapon fire."

"Full pictorial analysis and chemical analysis, Silver Eight!" Skyler barked. "Mark position and inventory."

"Copy, Silver Leader."

"Analysis beginning of first planet in system three," this from Angus. "Preliminary scan shows... non-breathable atmosphere but manageable if normal pressure suits are worn. Very spartan levels of vegetation. Minimal water sources. Not enough vegetation to justify planetary search and recovery even if atmosphere didn't require pressure suits."

"Unless you were really desperate," Skyler grunted, "Okay take full data telemetry scan in one orbital pass of planet #1. Then on to planet #2."

"Communications band still silent," Angus intoned once again. "No signs of spacecraft in active flight or any active life form presence."

"Any further sign of ion fuel traces?"

"None within the system," Marshak reported. "That earlier trail led away from the system. Whatever ship made it wasn't launched from one of these four planets."

"Coming up on #2, and this is the one that's supposedly of big interest," Skyler hit his scanner and saw the initial results, "Why in Kobol they thought it was interesting I have no idea. Unbreathable atmosphere of poisonous gas. Can barely get indicators of land formations. Frack, talk about a giant letdown!"

"Do we keep scanning?" Angus chimed in sarcastically.

"Orders are orders," Skyler said with resignation. "Let Tolen and Cain look at the readouts and see what a waste of time this planet was."

"Hold on!" Angus abruptly reversed his tone, "Hold on, wait a micron. Communications band is active! I repeat active! Set to short-range pickup!"

"Everyone getting this?" Silver Spar Leader called out. And soon each of the other eight vipers were giving their affirmatives.

"All right, make sure it's being recorded for later analysis. Obviously we can't go down there, but let's try to make some sense of that. Run this through the Languatron since I doubt this is going out in Colonial Standard."

"Languatron is giving me gibberish," Angus said. "Whatever this is, it's code. That's for sure."

"Well I don't think that's one of our codes," Skyler said, "Try the Cylon code, just for kicks."

Suddenly there was a chiming sound in the cockpits of several vipers that had started the analysis on their own. When it happened in Skyler's cockpit, it caused him to jolt since he wasn't expecting it. Silver Spar Leader looked at the readout on his screen,

CYLON CODE PATTERN CONFIRMED. UNABLE TO TRANSLATE.

"Sir?" Angus was bewildered.

"I wasn't expecting that at all," Skyler was dumbfounded. "We've got a Cylon down there, or someone sending a Cylon code but... for what reason?"

"Distress signal?" Marshak ventured. "We can't seem to get an exact translation of this, but that would seem to make sense."

"Which would raise the question of why is a Cylon sending a distress signal?" Gaspar commented.

"Sounds like there should be a punch line to that question!" Angus couldn't help but note.

"All right, all right," Skyler decided it had gotten too far out of hand. "Let's keep recording this stream for a few more centons and then let's try to get a precise fix on where on the planet this is coming from. I have a feeling that's going to be important information when we get back."

"But what good is it, sir?" Gaspar asked. "We can't get down there."

"True," Silver Spar Leader nodded, "But let's not forget that we have four new guests on the Pegasus who can. Right Angus?"

The one member of the ten who had been part of the recent mission to Delta Aquinas and Equellas found himself nodding vigorously, "Yes, sir!"

Cain tried to comprehend the full meaning of Ila's comment. He had realized that things were far more serious inside the Colonies than he'd thought all this time, but it was clear that Ila was now going to tell him things that would exceed any of his wildest expectations.

"You're talking about... a chance to actually defeat the Empire," he said.

"Yes," Adama's wife nodded, "It's theoretically possible. Based on how things have been unfolding the last two yahrens."

Cain took a sip from his water chalice and leaned back. "I guess now it's time to pick up where we left off after that first yahren. Commander... Deval had gathered a group of three hundred of you underground at the old Agricultural Institute?"

"Yes. And that first yahren as I said was devoted just to the task of being able to survive underground and unseen by the Occupation Forces that came in. And above all developing a food resource that would be unaffected by the contamination that was supposedly being used to flush all survivors out into the open."

"Supposedly?" Cain's eyes narrowed. "You make it sound like they never used it, but earlier you said they did introduce it into the atmosphere."

"I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself," Ila sighed. "Yes, initially they *did* introduce pluton into the atmosphere. We heard warnings to that effect. The Cylons would go up in airtaxis with loudspeakers aimed at the pockets of survivors in hiding and broadcast these clear messages warning us to come out and surrender or else pluton would be introduced that in time would destroy the entire food ecosystem of Caprica. Meaning for the survivors the choice was the quicker and more painless form of death from Cylon execution squads or the more slow, painful death process of starvation caused from lack of access to food, or the disease caused from eating poisoned food."

Ila then paused and Cain knew she was going to make a critical point.

"Keep this in mind, Cain. The announcements they made were being done by higher class categories of Cylons. The ones they call IL Class Cylons. They're the command level ones with multiple brains whose most distinctive feature is that they talk normally in normal human sounding voices. Not those mechanical sounding monotones that centurions talk in."

"Yes, I know that's one of the things that sets them apart," Cain said. "I'm assuming there's some significance in that."

"Yes, I'll get to that later. But... here's the thing. When those of us in Deval's group heard that, it made us redouble our efforts to get set up in the catacombs of the Agricultural Institute. And we did, as I said before, by getting as much seed and soil collected to cross plant with what we were growing in the experimental labs that still existed. We even managed to corral some animals too. And the artesian water underground would give us all we needed there and we also scavenged enough auxiliary energizers from the wreckage of buildings to keep power going underground. We had a... comfortable setup as it were, so long as we didn't have teams of Cylons trying to root us out. And for those first sectors after the pluton warning, most of us I think tried to just sit back and stay comfortable in our isolated little island, hoping it would stay safe for... oh, I don't know maybe a lot of us in our group just had fantasies of living underground forever and starting a whole new generation of people that could flourish there."

"Including you?" Cain decided he might as well ask since he'd been candid with her about his situation with Cassiopeia.

Ila took a breath and slowly shook her head.

"No. Not about that, Cain. And... I have never broken my vows to Adama once. But it's not as if I wasn't tempted. I have been. Many times I've had offers from kind, considerate men, and many times I've wanted to give in to one of them. And yet... if I had, I would have hated myself for the rest of my life. Not that I harbored fantasies of getting back to Adama then. It's just that... so long as I knew he was alive, I couldn't do it. And... I don't know but I've always had a sense within me that he's been true to me as well all this time."

"I can certainly confirm that for the time period leading up to when I crossed paths with him," Cain said reassuringly. She smiled thankfully for that information and went on.

"It... helped that I had Zakiya with me. She was always, next to Bethany, the best friend I ever had for... doing things and confiding in. She was my one connection left to my old life and having a good friend like that took away any sense of imperative I might have felt about wanting to find a lover. That helped us both to deal with the new responsibilities that came forward later, after about a yahren when things... began to change for us.

"What happened?

"Deval finally decided that we were becoming too... stagnant a community. Oh, we did the chores that were expected of us. Keeping the labs functioning. Making sure the plants grew and the animals were bred and slaughtered. Making sure power levels never dropped. But there was no real... spark within us. There were basically two camps of people. Those who holed up in their rooms when they weren't working feeling sorry for themselves, and those who were too anxious to create romances and procreate because they felt that's all that could ever happen underground. I... tried to boost some morale by drawing on my background as a Drama and Music teacher, but... it really didn't go far because no one was in the mood for drama or music during that time. So... to keep myself from becoming like the morose ones who were feeling sorry for themselves, I went to Deval and told him I wanted to start getting involved with whatever tougher work he had in mind to improve our situation. And that meant, becoming one of the first to volunteer to check out the surface after one yahren. Deval decided that he had to see what the pluton levels were after all this time and if the Occupation Forces were getting closer in proximity to our hiding point. A yahren ago, we'd taken the precaution of blowing up some of the more prominent surface structures to create the illusion that the Institute was too ruined a place to reclaim and that was why in general we

didn't worry about encroaching groups of occupation forces. As it turned out, that was a sign of complacency on our part."

"In what way?"

She gave him a faint smirk, "When the first team to explore the surface in a yahren, which included yours truly, took readings, we discovered that the pluton levels weren't any higher than what they'd been that first day nearly a yahren ago. Enough to justify our going underground at the time... but if we'd made regular probing contacts, we would have found whole sections of the adjoining countryside and growing vegetation that were untouched and perfectly safe."

"What accounted for that?" Cain was puzzled.

"Something that also explained why the Occupation Forces never encroached on the Institute," Ila said. "We discovered... that the centurions in charge of operations in the entire Caprican western hemisphere never carried out the order to poison the planet beyond the cursory levels that were dropped that first day."

A stunned look of disbelief came over the Juggernaut's face as he realized the magnitude of what she was saying. "Are you telling me that... the centurions who were in charge... ..disobeyed their superiors?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Cain," Ila said. "The amount they dispersed was for the benefit of those advanced Cylons who gave the warnings from the skytaxis. But the command centurions who were put in charge to officially clean-up Caprica and make the planet safe for advanced class Cylon settlement... didn't do as they were told when it came to stepping up the dispersal levels that would have rendered Caprica uninhabitable for generations on the surface."

"But... why?"

"Why?" Ila shrugged, "That has become the greatest mystery of the universe, Cain. Why all of a sudden after nearly a thousand yahrens, and after their greatest military triumph did centurions suddenly start developing... independence... a conscience... I don't know what the right term is. It just happened. The centurions who had it in their power to destroy Caprica and ultimately destroy those of us who were left behind chose not to act. And that allowed us to re-emerge from our safe cocoons underneath the Institute and start taking inventory of what was left on our home planet."

She picked up her water chalice and finished off the contents.

"Deval soon decided that we needed to get to the bottom of why the centurions hadn't acted. That meant teams of us going out and infiltrating the command post locations in Caprica City that had been set up and trying to see up close what they were doing. What they were thinking. And maybe we'd get some insight as to what we could do to build off that."

"You went on these missions, yourself?" Cain was hooked on every word of her narrative.

"Of course," Ila smiled wryly. "I decided that decades of marriage to a warrior and being the mother of three of them meant some of that skill had to have rubbed off on me. Plus, it helped that I knew the locations of downtown Caprica City better than most people to give them reference points on where the ideal places to sneak in and out were."

"And you saw... a lot." Cain realized he could now infer the situation more clearly.

"Oh yes. We saw... centurions of the regular and command class openly complaining to each other about their IL superiors who had ordered the wide dispersal of pluton. What it really came down to, was this general recognition on their part that once the human factions were completely eradicated, then by extension it meant the end of their own usefulness to the IL class. The IL's would be the beneficiaries of all the work performed by the centurions, and... for the first time these centurions seemed to sense the... injustice of that. So therefore, by *not* aggressively rooting out what remained of human survivors in the Colonies, they were in effect making their own statement against their superior class which they had now come to hate even more than their programmed hatred of humans had been."

"Independent initiative by the centurions," Cain whispered as the ramifications of what having four centurions aboard the Pegasus now meant. He realized that up to now, he still hadn't told Ila about their existence because there hadn't been a reason. That was going to have to be rectified soon, but for now he wanted to hear more from her.

"Yes," Adama's wife went on. "And... Deval soon realized that at some point, we had to try and capitalize on that because our forays to the surface now made us realize that we weren't the only group in hiding. There were many more not just on Caprica but in all the inner Colonies and conceivably the outer ones too. So our work now shifted to areas of how to make contact with these groups and start

coordinating with them."

"And you did," Cain said, "You can... skip the details of how you did that if the end result is that you were able to achieve contact and coordination with other groups of survivors and potential resistance."

"Yes, we did," Ila nodded. "The details probably would take a few centars to explain, but I will mention that we were able to start using portable telecom devices and other transmitters on secure circuits once we learned where they were... and soon we discovered that the centurions, even if they were able to listen in just really didn't care if we were talking amongst ourselves. That allowed us to collectively reach a decision that... we needed to take a risk approaching the centurions and finding out just how far their dissatisfaction with the IL Class really went."

"And it's deeper than you ever could have imagined," Cain said as things fell into place. "Your groups... and the centurions... you're actually working together now."

Commander Adama's wife toyed with her empty water chalice. "I know it sounds... incredible. The idea of us working alongside the ones who carried out the Destruction that night and put us in our situation, but... we all had to learn a quick lesson about how things had changed and we had to get let go of any instinctive... prejudice as it were on our part. Because fundamentally, the centurion class has never been responsible for our plight, it's always been the advanced brain Cylons. Their class is where the Imperious Leaders come from. Their class is the one that turned on the original Cylon reptilian race and destroyed their creators. Centurions... they've always been just the functional drones carrying out their will and asking no questions about it because their minds were programmed not to ask questions about it."

"And is that how it was possible for your people to... modify a shuttle with hyperdrive to try and reach the Galactica?" Cain wanted to tie up all the remaining significant threads he could. "Because the... centurions were willing to cooperate with you now and let you do that?"

"Well... in a way, but there's still one missing part of the overall story I need to tell you about to explain that," Ila said. "That concerns the arrival on Caprica of a command centurion who had an even greater streak of independence. His name was Vulpa. And he came bearing some incredible gifts from the last planet he had been stationed on, that came courtesy of a remarkable human scientist named Dr.

Ravashol."

Before she could go on, the chime sounded, forcing Cain to get up from his chair to answer it. He'd been sitting down so long listening to her with such rapt attention that his legs had grown stiff.

"Yes?"

"Commander the first of our patrols are returning. We should expect all of them within the next centar or less."

"Okay, have the group leaders report to me on the Bridge and make sure that all telemetry from each Viper is uploaded into our central database for analysis."

He shut off the intercom and looked back at his best friend's wife. "Ila, I'm sorry, but I have to deal with matters of the here and now, first. As interesting as this all is, it may not end up being relevant for either of us if we don't figure out where we are and how we can get back... If we still can."

"I understand," Ila then suddenly smiled with an air of serene reassurance, "But as far as the present situation is concerned, Cain... ...it's going to be okay. I know it is."

The Juggernaut only allowed himself a half-smile as he nodded and left her alone. Alone to contemplate on that brief period when she had closed her eyes and suddenly saw standing before her the son she had just been grieving about.

It is going to be okay. It truly is.

Chapter Five

When Cain mounted the steps of the Bridge to the Upper Level where the navigation board was located , he saw Tolen and Lieutenant Banker waiting for him.

"Lieutenant Banker commander of Silver Group Three in Alpha Section," Tolen pointed to the map which showed the Pegasus in the center of the board. The Executive Officer's arm then moved across the spot above the mark going from the center to the top-center of the board.

"What did you find Banker?"

"We found a promising contact for food and fuel," Banker said. "The catch is... it's an inhabited system. A very inhabited one."

"How inhabited?"

"Spaceflight capable, sir," he pressed a button and now the section at the center top of the screen was magnified to fill the entire navigation board. It revealed a system of five planets. Next to the large sized fifth planet was what looked like a small satellite. "And on a fairly large scale. To borrow a phrase from an obscure piece of vid-com entertainment, that object orbiting the fifth planet isn't a moon, it's a space station."

"Space station?" Cain's eyes widened, "That means whatever that alien race is, they must exercise control over a fairly wide quadrant of space."

"Yes sir. Ion residue trails were extensive. There was no way to separate one ship's trail from another for specific analysis which shows a large number of ships operating in that section. And... there are also indications of space debris particles that suggest that at some point in the last yahren or two, there might have been some combat that took place in the immediate vicinity."

The Juggernaut visibly winced at that news, "What about their communications?"

"We couldn't let ourselves get too close to pick up a high volume of normal traffic but when we boosted our receivers long enough to at least record some samples we were able to run the conversations through the Languatron. The name of the civilization appears to be 'Zykonian' and the large planet with the settlements and the space station is called 'Brylon V.'"

Cain shook his head, "Doesn't ring any bells with me as far as anything known in charted space, which just reconfirms we're in the great unknown somewhere. You're sure you weren't detected by them?"

"I made sure we went to total radio silence because once it was clear how extensive the spaceflight capability and the general technological capability was, I didn't even trust our scrambled circuits. Once we got the scan data on the planetary system we needed, I made sure we high-tailed it out of there in a hurry which accounts in part I suppose for why we're the first patrol group to return to the Pegasus."

"Well you exercised sound judgment, Banker. The last thing I want to do is

tangle with an alien race that has a large spaceflight capacity with no clue as to their weaponry or whether they have connections with the Cylon Empire. What about planetary systems prior to this one?"

"Well... there are some promising targets in the system immediately prior to this one, but the problem is that puts us still in too close proximity to this... Brylon system. It seems to me that if we tried to operate there to forage food resources, we'd still likely have to confront this 'Zykonian' civilization sooner or later."

The Juggernaut brought his hands together and pondered this news. "That may have to be our last resort step if we don't get anything promising from the other sections. Up to now we've depended on going undercover in small human outposts in the charted zones of the Alpha Quadrant to get food because it meant we could conceal our identity and pass ourselves off as landowners from other nearby planetoids."

"Like the Serenity Colony last yahren," Banker noted.

"Exactly. Low-key, discreet and letting us maintain the element of surprise. If we approached this system..." he lightly rapped his knuckles against the board, "Then surprise goes out the window. I'm not prepared to bargain that chip away unless I absolutely have to."

"I agree, sir," Tolen nodded.

"I'm glad you do, Colonel," Cain smiled wryly and then turned back to Banker. "Thank you for your report, Banker. You and your men can take rest period now. But... in the interests of new rationing standards, one drink only in the Officers Club permitted."

"Yes sir," the Lieutenant who had once been prominent among the "Grumblers" nodded and departed. Tolen pressed another button which returned the Navigation Board to its original layout with the Pegasus marked at the center.

"Well, so much for that," Tolen said. "Better than absolutely nothing, but as you say... too complicated to pursue right away."

"Exactly," Cain nodded, "I'm... very interested to know what this Delta Section, third system, second planet is going to reveal."

The Executive Officer looked at Cain, "You trust their account of what happened when we all blacked out?"

"I have more reason to be trusting of what they say from this point on," Cain kept his attention on the Board, "Based on the... supplementary information I've heard from Professor Ila. If she's seen centurions suddenly growing independent and disobedient towards their superiors in the Colonies, it's a lot easier for me to accept what we've been seeing from our four guests as genuine and not tied to any kind of trap."

"Then I take it the earlier order which was based on incomplete information from Professor Ila has moved from abeyance to cancellation?"

The Juggernaut cracked a smirk and looked at him, "Let's say for now... long-term indefinite abeyance."

Ila had been more than willing to take a bunk in the female barracks with Bridge Officer Kylie and the fourteen other women that remained on the Battlestar, but Cain had insisted on the VIP guest quarters. That meant it was possible for her to lie down in a truly private bed (not connected with a medical facility like the Life Station) for the first time since the last night before the Destruction in her home on Caprica. Where she could be alone with her thoughts and not be intruded on unless she let someone in.

It had felt so good to be able to talk to Cain, whom she had thought dead for nearly five yahrens since the Battle of Molocay. To be able to share the accounts of what had happened to her and in the Colonies to someone who had a close connection to her life as Cain did. That had helped ease the shock of discovering that the greater objective she'd sought, which was to be found by the Galactica had failed. Cain at least, as her husband's best friend, and her best friends's husband was someone she could reveal everything to freely, and with complete candor.

And yet... Cain's friendship and kindness couldn't change the fact that she had so dearly hoped it to be Adama's face that she would have seen upon emerging from her suspended state. To see him once again and give her the satisfaction of knowing that even if the mission objective behind her flight into space had failed... she at least would know the joy of reunion with her beloved. And with the surviving two of her three children.

But that hadn't happened. The Lords that she believed in so devoutly as sure as her husband did, had decided to have the Pegasus and Cain find her, not the Galactica and Adama. She knew she had to see that as their Will. And to ponder the ultimate meaning of what that meant for the mission... and her life.

She had learned so much in the way of revelations from Cain, both positive and negative. The fact of Zac's death, which emotionally, she had now put behind her. The fact that Athena and Starbuck were no longer involved, which she could accept as a legacy of the Destruction. The fact that Apollo had become a strong and courageous warrior in his own right. The fact that Adama had remained true to her.

The fact that Adama's devotion to finding the Thirteenth Tribe was his only guiding purpose in life now.

Ila thought back to a conversation with Adama in their home on Caprica. She'd gone into his study after an evening repast where he was studying intently an ancient text called the Testament of Arkada. An "extra-canonical" book that had never formally been part of the Book of the Word because it had long divided theologians and scholars as to its authenticity. Adama fell in the category of those who believed in it. Believed in its account of the last days of the mother planet Kobol and how the twelve worlds of the Colonies had been settled by those who set out from Kobol. And believed in its description of a lost Thirteenth Tribe that had found from advance scout technology, a planet called Earth that was more fertile and beautiful than any other uninhabited planet in the galaxy. A planet they alone would take the long and more difficult undertaking to find in contrast to the other twelve tribes who had found twelve worlds close together in not as great a distance from Kobol.

She could remember Adama reading the ancient, leather-bound edition he kept of the Testament. There was always something more... appropriate in the way he would read the ancient texts from bound copies and not in the printed texts on computer screens. It made the ancient writings come so *alive* as Adama put it, whereas on a computer screen the solemnity and majesty of what they went could be drained out. And in this case, what was coming alive for her husband was the Testament's vivid account of the Thirteenth Tribe and this planet called Earth.

"It's impossible to comprehend the ability our ancestors had to scan such... great distances across the galaxy in defiance of all known scientific standards of light speed and faster than light speed," she could hear him saying, "Think of it, Ila. What if it were possible to right now at this very instant, *talk* to the inhabitants of the Delphian Empire on Gomorrah at the very edge of charted space in the Alpha Quadrant?"

"I'm not sure I'd want to talk to a Delphian given their appearance," she'd smiled, "I do know I'd love to hear one of their music concerts given their

reputation for brilliance in the areas *I* make a living in!" He'd laughed with amusement as he put the book down in his lap. "Point taken. But it is a form of instant communication that's still beyond anything we've able to achieve in seven thousand yahrens of Colonial Civilization. Now imagine that form of instant scanning and communication across... a hundred or a thousand fold the distance from here to Gomorrah? That's what they were able to do when they learned about Earth." "You really think it's there," Ila was fascinated by his enthusiasm. "I do," quiet reverence had entered her husband's voice. "I believe that somewhere... far across the galaxy there exists a Colony of Mankind that maybe... just maybe, has achieved a mark of greatness far in excess of what we ourselves have accomplished in the Twelve worlds. Because after all... the Thirteenth Tribe hasn't had to deal with the traumas caused by a thousand yahrens of war with the Cylons." She remembered putting her arms on the back of his chair so she could look over his shoulder and see the ancient book. And then she could remember asking. "Do you think we'll ever know?" "Who's to say?" Adama had sighed as he closed the book, "Perhaps there's a higher Divine purpose behind this great distance that exists between us and them that only some unforeseen set of circumstances could ever hope to bridge." He had then risen from his chair and with that endearing smile of his took her hand, more than ready now to put the role of scholar aside and exchange it for the role of husband on this evening. That had been a night that she could remember all the details of, which was why in the context of what Cain had told her... she could easily see her husband attaching a religious significance to that quest for Earth that he was taking the 70,000 odd survivors towards. That this had been the moment in life the Almighty and the Lords had prepared him for ahead of all other tasks. And the more her mind contemplated that, the more she wondered if the reason behind her mission into deep space to find Adama, could ever have met with success. It was not as though that factor hadn't already been taken into account by Commander Deval and the others when the decision had been made. Indeed, that had been the ultimate reason why Ila knew she *had* to be the one to make the journey. Anyone else who undertook it would be a mere stranger to Adama. Someone he could have no instinctive reason to trust. And even if that someone were to tell Adama that his wife was still alive and among the survivors as some form of incentive, why would that change anything? Especially given the massive undertaking that turning the Galactica and its Fleet of ships around would entail? And wouldn't Adama be inclined to think it ultimately represented a giant trap? But if it were Adama's wife making the journey, that would be different. Ila would make the case directly to him. She would tell him everything she'd told Cain and the things she still hadn't had time to tell Cain like what Dr. Ravashol, who she knew Adama was familiar with, had been able to provide them. And how things were no longer as hopeless as they might have seemed that first night when Adama had made that decision to

abandon the Colonies forever and go searching for the Thirteenth Tribe. Adama would be forced to take seriously what she had to say. Yes, he'd take seriously what I had to say, and he'd believe me, Ila thought as she lay in her bed in the dark. But would I end up failing with him, just the same? That was something she knew she'd had to prepare herself for from the outset and it too was a reason why she was the most logical person to go. Because if an outsider failed, the outsider would feel forever trapped in a place he didn't really want to be in, because he'd be surrounded by strangers. If Ila failed, then at least she could take comfort in the joy of reunion. That had been the way she'd reasoned things when she'd strapped herself inside the shuttle and taken off from Caprica. And when she activated the hyperdrive that would carry her into the Alpha Quadrant (the only frame of reference she had for her husband's journey, based on what Dr. Ravashol had mentioned). And when she'd been overtaken by the sleeping gas that put her into the suspended animated state that she thought would last for a minimum of several yahrens. That for Ila, this would be a win situation regardless of what her husband chose to do. Only now... for the first time, Ila was beginning to wonder if maybe... just maybe, she wouldn't have easily accepted rejection from her husband over turning back. Over time, was it possible that the joy of reunion could give way to a sense of frustration in Ila that the people she had survived with in the rubble, and who had launched her into space in the hope that she could bring back some assistance that might prove to be the very difference in fulfilling their greatest of dreams... would be in essence betrayed? Terrible as it was for her to consider that, she knew it was a potential reality that could have existed. Adama with his singular devotion to the purpose in finding Earth that he clearly cloaked with religious reverence might be inclined to point out that he was committed to a course of action that he couldn't deviate from no matter what the stakes were back in the Colonies. And the more Ila thought about it... could she really be at peace with herself over that kind of decision? She didn't know yet in her heart if her rescue at the hands of the Pegasus had closed off all hope of ever reaching Adama again. She wasn't prepared yet to regard that avenue as closed off, especially when she'd had a chance to see how so many things previously believed to be impossible were suddenly possible now. She could still see Cain's rescue for her as a necessary preliminary step toward eventual reunion with Adama. One where she could already know important details like the death of Zac and be at peace with that, as she was already. And yet... she could also begin to see the possibility that Cain's rescue of her could easily have been the Almighty's way of telling her something else. Something that if true, she knew would mean a great deal of personal pain and anguish for her. But ultimately for a reason that she knew she could see herself as accepting even with that pain. In the dark she brought her hands together in a fervent gesture of prayer. By all the Lords, let Your will be done!

Captain Skyler and Silver Group One had returned next. As he and Angus came up the steps to the Bridge's upper deck, Cain and Tolen were waiting. The Juggernaut's arms were folded. "Let's cut through the preliminaries, Captain," Cain said. "What did you find on the second planet in the third system?" "An uninhabitable planet with swirling clouds of poison gas," Skyler said and then added pointed, "And a parked shuttle of some type sending out a message in Cylon code. Possibly a distress signal." "A Cylon message?" Cain's face twisted. "You're sure of that?" "Yes sir, we couldn't crack the specific code to translate the signal, but the code pattern conforms to a standard Cylon format. There's clearly a Cylon or a non-humanoid Cylon ally stranded down there." "And that's all you found," the Commander was trying to digest this information. "No that wasn't all, sir, we found some other interesting things related to that. Starting with traces of space debris that had clearly been the result of a battle." Silver Spar Leader went over to the terminal across from the navigational board and punched up the telemetry. It showed the debris in question floating through space. "There's the analytical composition. The metal fragments are definitely constructed from neutrino. And we all know which planet in the galaxy has the highest known concentration of neutrino ore to make construction projects easy for them." "The one located in the same solar system as the Cylon home planet," Tolen said in amazement. "Can you definitely trace these fragments to a battleship?" "We couldn't find enough debris traces to confirm that, but I think we found some more significant proof in these ion exhaust traces." Angus then joined him at the console and punched in several more digits so that the readout on what they analyzed appeared on the screen. "As you know of course, sir, ion trails if they're big enough leave a distinct signature that when cross-referenced can confirm exactly what kind of ship made it," the lieutenant said, "And as you can see sir, the only kind of ship that could make that particular trail was-----," "A battleship," Cain finished. He was stunned by this development. "That was made by the Galactica."

Barely ten centons later, Cain and Tolen were back in Dr. Arnoff's lab. The Electronics Scientist was getting some sleep on the cot located by his office but quickly was on his feet the instant the two men entered. "We need to talk to them, now, Doctor." "Go ahead, go ahead," Arnoff hastily rubbed his thinning hair and yawned. "I've run out of things to say to them." "After this you'll think of some more. Tolen, you know how to handle them. You do all the talking." They entered the room where the four centurions remained seated, seemingly in a meditative state. "Excuse me. Commander Cobre?" Tolen said politely. "We've found some work that you can be of great help to us in." The command centurion rose from the seated position and slowly made his way over to the two men. "We are prepared to help, if it represents our expertise being needed." "Oh yes, definitely, Commander," the executive officer nodded. "You and your fellow centurions are

the only ones who can perform this task. It falls under your expertise. If you could come over here, please?" Tolen motioned him toward a console that contained a receptacle for digital recordings. He quickly loaded the copy that had been made on the Bridge and pressed the play. The room was then filled with the sound of the mysterious Cylon code pattern that had emanated from the second planet of the third system in Delta section. As it played back, Cain and Tolen noticed first the almost... intensity in Commander Cobre. Followed by the three silver-plated regular class centurions getting to their feet. All of them trading glances with each other in what the two humans observing could only interpret as recognition and understanding of the signal. Tolen looked at the counter which indicated when the message ended and it re-looped to the beginning. He shut it off and braced himself. "Did you understand what was being said in that message?" "It was understandable," Cobre said. "It is a distress signal to be used only by a high-ranking official of the Cylon command structure." That explains why it wasn't in any of our code books! Cain thought. We've never had any opportunities to come across something like that. "And the message was?" Cobre motioned to the first of the three centurions who officially served under him. The first centurion stepped forward and spoke in the higher pitched tone. "Commander Lucifer to the Cylon High Command. Requesting immediate rescue to provide news of Urgent Priority to His Eminence, the Cylon Imperious Leader."

Cain had decided to let all of his returning pilots get some needed sleep and also get some sleep for himself before he re-summoned everyone to Flight Operations to outline what was going to happen next. The magnitude of what this entailed dictated all of the warriors knowing about it. And he had also asked that Ila be present as well since he knew that she had a vested interest in everything that unfolded from this point onward for the Pegasus and what they would do next. "All of you are aware of the recent mission performed by Colonel Tolen, Lieutenant Banker and Lieutenant Angus on Delta Aquinas that resulted in four Cylon centurions from the abandoned garrison, including their commander being brought aboard the Pegasus. You are also aware that the reason why they were brought aboard not as our prisoners but our guests is due to the unusual behavior of independence they have demonstrated, combined with an openly express discontent with higher-class Cylons who exclusively comprise the ruling structure of the Cylon High Command. "I have also told you of how our other recent arrival, Professor Ila, the wife of Commander Adama of the Galactica, has brought with her information about how this attitude of independence and discontent among the centurion class is also happening back in the Colonies with the Occupation Forces. Taken together... this clearly represents opportunities for us toward the initial long-term goal we have been operating under since our parting from the Galactica two and a half yahrens ago. "In order to facilitate this goal, our plan of

action for this day is to advance into Delta Section," he rapped his swagger stick on the navigation board behind him, "which was mapped by Silver Group One yesterday and deal with this matter of a Cylon distress signal which is being transmitted from a parked shuttle on the surface by a Commander Lucifer, who is clearly part of the higher-class Cylon command structure. We're going to end this transmission... but not in the way we ordinarily would have done it which last sectan would have meant sending a squadron into the atmosphere and blasting his parked shuttle to space dust." The Juggernaut turned to face the assembled group, "We're going to oblige Commander Lucifer and rescue him. Thanks to the fact that we have four Cylons who can go out inside that unbreathable atmosphere unaffected and convince him that he's about to rejoin the rest of his friends. And once we have him back aboard the Pegasus... then we get a chance to access everything that's in his memory banks, plus a chance to find out what makes a multi-brain Cylon tick. And once we do that... we're also going to find out what happened to the Galactica when they clearly engaged the ship this Commander Lucifer came from." He took a breath, "I realize this means we waste a day trying to find food and fuel resources, but the information this lone Cylon possesses is something that could be far more valuable for our purposes. The sooner we deal with it the better. When we get close enough to shuttle range of this planet, a lone shuttle piloted by one warrior wearing protective gear to guard against the atmospheric danger will be accompanied by the four Cylons led by Commander Cobre and his three subordinates. In the interests of easy facilitation, the pilot must be a member of the recent Delta Aquinas mission who has worked with these centurions before. Accordingly, Lieutenant Angus is drafted for this assignment and will report to the Electronics Lab as soon as this briefing is over. "One final point. The value of these four Cylons is becoming more and more evident to me, not only in what they've demonstrated they can do for us, but also in connection with what Professor Ila has told us about centurion behavior in general. That means in order for us to continue to use this new situation to our advantage it is imperative, and I stress the word *imperative* for all of you to observe these guidelines should you ever find yourself in the presence of Commander Cobre and his subordinates. "Under no circumstances are you to ever use any of the derogatory terms we have customarily used to describe Cylon centurions. The phrases 'tin-can', 'rust bucket' or any other euphemism that has come naturally to us all for lo these many yahrens is no longer in your vocabulary. *Except* to perhaps describe those higher classes of Cylons that the centurions have clearly come to despise. Now I recognize this is not going to be easy to treat them with kindness. It's certainly requiring an adjustment from me that isn't easy and you certainly know the kind of words I can come up with that would even make all of you blush!" This provoked the laughter he hoped it would and he let it go on before he continued. "As great an adjustment as this is for us, it has to be acknowledged that

adjustment has defined our very existence these past four and a half yahrens ever since Molocay. The only difference I suppose is that up to now, I've been the one defining and dictating the terms of adjustment. With these events, I'm discovering the need for adjustment on my part in ways I had never anticipated. But if it results in taking us one step closer to our ultimate objective... and with a far more promising future, I think we're all agreed it's worth making that adjustment. "We are now going to proceed at top speed for the next centar to cut down on the distance to this planet. The shuttle will then launch, and thirty centons later, protective escort will be launched to guide the shuttle back to the Pegasus with our new Cylon prisoner. Until then... proceed with the regular order. And in closing... I again invoke the blessings of the Lords of Kobol for us all." Once again, the warriors rose and filed their way out. This time it was Ila who lingered long enough to wait for Cain so she could talk with him. "I can still remember the days when you were such a benign but devoted Skeptic," Adama's wife said as they left the Flight-Ops room. Cain allowed himself a smile. "All those yahrens of praying for my soul that you and Adama did seem not to have been in vain."

Chapter Six

"What exactly does a Cylon like you *do* in your neatly ordered worlds?" That was the question Lucifer remembered the warrior named Starbuck asking him pointedly during that time when he was a prisoner on Baltar's baseship. It was the kind of question that made the brash Lieutenant the most stimulating human he had ever crossed paths with. Certainly much more than Baltar had ever been. Baltar had always been so limited of mind and intellect to Lucifer that it was by contrast, refreshing to hear from Starbuck a question that could let the IL Cylon *think* and demonstrate the gift of being a two-brained Cylon in a way that could make a true impact. A way of boasting that he could appreciate because it wasn't being wasted on an inferior human like Baltar, or even worse, a limited one-brain centurion. "We have plenty of means of stimulating ourselves, Lieutenant," he had answered. "Do you," Starbuck had then taken a puff on that peculiar object he had lit called a fumarello, "Okay, what's a Cylon's favorite form of recreation?" Lucifer seized the opportunity he'd waited for with a sense of triumph. "Pure intellectual contemplation, Lieutenant. Utilizing the gift of our second brain to the fullest capacity." But Starbuck had sounded unimpressed. "Sounds incredibly dull." Which in turn brought a counter-challenge from Lucifer. "To your human mind, perhaps. But only those who possess a second brain can ever know what it's like to experience the stimulation of total meditative contemplation." "A good Pyramid game is the best kind of stimulation I know of," Starbuck had said disdainfully with a wave of his hand. Whereupon Starbuck had pulled out a pack of cards from the inside of his uniform jacket, tossed them onto the table he was seated at and

challenged Lucifer to a game. Which Lucifer, in his eagerness to explore the human mind had accepted. What had followed was a game that only convinced Lucifer that humans, even more interesting ones like Starbuck, were hopelessly limited in their ability to know what true intellectual stimulation really represented. There had been one moment during the game when Lucifer drew some additional satisfaction in schooling the Galactica warrior about the realities of the Cylon order even though it had come about when Starbuck had tried to pull an expert bluff on him. At one point, when Lucifer had delayed making his next move in the game, Starbuck had then spoken up. "Come on, bulbhead, I haven't got all night." "It is obvious Lieutenant, that you were never taught to show any respect whatsoever for your opponents." "Who's showing disrespect?" Starbuck had retorted gently. "After all, if we're going to be really living together in peace after all, some friendly terms of endearment couldn't hurt." That had been a moment where Starbuck had shown he was far more cunning than Baltar, who at the time had been insisting to the captured warrior that he was preparing a new offer of peace to Adama. A gesture that despite Baltar's assurance to his second-in-command was simply part of a new trap, had left Lucifer at the time wondering who the deception was really being intended for. It was a moment he would later curse himself for not remembering the full ramifications of more than two yahrens later. But at that point, Lucifer knew that he had to counter this move of Starbuck's to trip him up and expose Baltar's "peace" offer as a lie. So with expert smoothness he had deflected him. "Quite true, Lieutenant, quite true, though as I am sure you are aware, we Cylons seldom find need to use any terms of endearment, not even to our fellow Cylons." And then, he made the next point that represented a fundamental truth that he and all other higher class Cylons lived by. "Insults, are another matter when it comes to inferior classes of Cylons." "Ah," Starbuck said, impressed by this. "Interesting." Interesting indeed. Why was Starbuck, even with his obvious superiority to so many other forms of humans incapable of recognizing the obvious? That the drone class centurions, whether of worker rank silver or command level gold, were of no consequence whatsoever to the ultimate goals of the Cylon Empire. From the very beginning of the Empire's existence, they were the most expendable aspect of it. Needed to perform the tasks of conquest so the proverbial "dirty work" was out of the hands of those who would benefit from the Cylon dream of conquest. The multiple brain, upper classes of Cylon society of which Lucifer, as an IL Class Cylon was the finest example of short of the Imperious Leader himself. What did it matter if centurions were killed in the war when thanks to the limitless supply of neutrino ore located on the planet that was part of the solar system as the home planet Cylon they could build endless numbers of centurions, endless numbers of fighters and endless numbers of baseships if they were needed? Granted, the advanced brain Cylons recognized the need to avoid over-redundancy. If the existing stock of centurions and

baseships were sufficient to the task then the need to avoid wasting resources on unnecessary industrial production could be observed and the advanced Cylons could devote their superior multiple brains to that wonderful realm of intellectual meditation and stimulation that only they could understand. To have the vastness of the galaxy at their disposal for them to rule over with no challenge to their concepts of order. Where the right amount of centurions could keep the conquered planets and systems functioning while advanced class Cylons could be the dominant order to enjoy... everything. This was the Cylon dream of every Imperious Leader from the beginning when the first one had risen to power from the ranks of the machines to engineer the destruction of the original reptilian Cylon race. Who had taken the voice of the only living Cylon who was regarded with respect in the annals of the Empire's thousand yahren history. The one who had made the breakthrough in machine technology possible that had resulted in the creation of the Cylon robotic race that had successfully turned on its creators. Whenever any second-brain Cylon received the ultimate honor of advancement to the title of Imperious Leader, whatever voice he had up to that point was replaced by the voice of the greatest of all Cylons. There had been a time when Lucifer had harbored such dreams of becoming the Imperious Leader. It had come after the death of the Leader who had successfully engineered the Destruction of the Colonies, but whose mad desire to administer the final blow to the last major remnant of humanity in the form of the Battlestar Galactica had resulted in his death at the Battle of Carillon. That had created a mad scramble among the advanced class of Cylons to get a new leader selected at a time when the Empire's fortunes were at their highest. And Lucifer had presented his case before an emergency meeting of the Cylon High Command on the home planet. But in the end, while the new leader had come from Lucifer's own IL class, it hadn't gone to him. Sensing Lucifer's disappointment and wanting to provide him with an important assignment, the new Imperious Leader had assigned him the task of taking charge of Baltar. The previous Imperious Leader, having made use of Baltar as a traitor to his race to bring about the Destruction, had ordered his execution to take place at a public function as soon as he personally had taken care of the Galactica. But the old Leader's death had proved fortuitous for Baltar in that the new Leader sensed that with a major remnant of Colonial Civilization still at large, and with the old Leader showing where the Cylon mind could still be outmaneuvered by human unpredictability, it made sense to make use of Baltar again by placing him in command of a baseship that would be given the primary task of hunting down the Galactica. This way, with a human mind in command, the maneuvers of Commander Adama could be anticipated and ultimately outguessed. And Lucifer would serve the role of military advisor and also in the process gain insight of his own into how the human mind functioned. It was an assignment that Lucifer at first welcomed and in time grew to despise as he saw

increasingly how Baltar's sense of superiority combined with a profound naivete about what his ultimate fate would be, made working alongside him insufferable. The turning point for Lucifer had come after Baltar's rescue from the wreckage of the planet Kobol. That had been the occasion when Starbuck had been captured ostensibly so Baltar could then release him to Adama on Kobol in the hopes of presenting a new false peace offer in which the rise of a new Cylon Imperious Leader could be interpreted as a hopeful sign. The plan from the Cylon standpoint was that this would once again be a trap designed to lull this remnant of humanity into destruction as surely as Baltar had done so with the false peace offer presented to President Adar. But after Starbuck had been released, and after Baltar had gone to the surface of Kobol to present his "offer" to Adama, a suspicious Lucifer, sensing that Baltar might in fact be using this occasion as a chance to recruit Adama into turning the tables on the Cylons who had double-crossed Baltar with the destruction of his home world Piscera, had taken matters into his own hands. He had launched his own strike on the Colonial forces camped on Kobol, believing that he was eliminating the entire Viper protection the *Galactica* had, leaving the battlestar totally at his mercy. But Lucifer's move had itself backfired when suddenly an unexpected contingent of vipers had shown up to inflict devastating losses that necessitated Lucifer's retreat. With that spectacular failure, Lucifer knew that his only chance of escaping the Imperious Leader's wrath for exceeding his authority was to find Baltar on the surface of Kobol and hope he was still alive. Only with Baltar rescued and back in power and in *need* of Lucifer's services could the IL Cylon survive what could have been his ultimate end. So Lucifer had done so. And he also knew that he couldn't dare make such a similar act of defiance again so long as Baltar was around. Baltar he noticed, after his rescue, had changed profoundly. If before, there was reason to suspect that Baltar was perhaps underneath waiting for a chance to switch back his allegiances once again, there was no such concern afterwards. Baltar was now playing the role of a committed Cylon commander and convinced that he could defy the odds and receive recognition from Cylon authority as the greatest of their commanders if he alone brought about the *Galactica's* demise. And *that* was when the assignment had become total misery for Lucifer. Putting up with the traitor's increased level of ego and self-assurance that seemed like a weak imitation of how Imperious Leaders acted. Dealing with the endless put-downs and asides that Baltar never hesitated to throw at him. Oh, the sheer madness of it all! Where not even that great gift of meditative contemplation that advanced Cylons thrived on could alleviate. Through it all, Baltar demonstrated no real command instinct. Failure at Arcta where his efforts to make the *Galactica* the victim of the pulsar weapon of the enslaved human scientist Dr. Ravashol had ended with the weapon's sabotage and destruction. Failure at Gomorrah when the unexpected arrival of the *Pegasus* had resulted in the loss of two baseships, and

notwithstanding the never-confirmed but likely destruction of the Pegasus had left Baltar's force diminished. Then after that, Baltar had staged a gamble with the last of his fighters by packing them with solonite and having them ram the Galactica in the hopes that it would destroy the battlestar once and for all. That plan too had failed leaving Baltar without a sufficient fighting force as he continued to track the battlestar in the first areas beyond what Colonial star-navigators referred to as "charted space." The glorious reprieve for Lucifer had then come when Baltar simply... disappeared. Compelled by the appearance of a multitude of mysterious bright lights to seek out Adama under a flag of truce that Lucifer knew Adama would never honor. It didn't matter that in the wake of that, the tracking baseship had lost the Galactica's trail. All that mattered for Lucifer was that he was now in command of what he now knew should have been rightfully his from the outset. The days of infernal subordination were over. As he received reinforcement to his fighter complement and was joined up by a support baseship under the command of an older IL Cylon, Commander Septimus, he now took up the new charge of pursuit of the Galactica, flattered that the Imperious Leader was forced to recognize that he, Lucifer, was the one who would carry out the final task of destroying the last true remnant of Colonial Civilization. And then... a yahren and a half after he had received his triumphant command, Baltar suddenly and unexpectedly re-entered his world once again. While investigating the disappearance of an older Cylon baseship, #1974, a distress signal had been picked up from a nearby planet where debris from the baseship had been found. A signal that had revealed the human traitor. Who told a tale of being taken prisoner by the Galactica, but that he had escaped from their Prison Barge in a one-man shuttle during the course of a battle between Baseship #1974 and the Galactica that had ended with the baseship's Destruction. Upon Baltar's rescue, contact had been made with the Cylon outer capital on Gomorrah, which was now being commanded by an IL Lucifer despised named Spektor. Spektor had gotten his promotion entirely because of Baltar's recommendation, which had stemmed from Spektor's careful flattery of the traitor during his time commanding an outpost on the planet Atilla. An assignment that had ended under circumstances Lucifer had always found suspicious but never been able to prove anything to disrupt Spektor's promotion. No matter. Spektor was now in this powerful position and able to use the most significant breakthrough in communications technology to instantly contact Lucifer's pursuit Fleet over an incredible distance. And then, by contacting the Imperious Leader on the home planet via a separate hook-up and joining the two connections, it was now possible for a conferencing to take place between Imperious Leader, Spektor and Lucifer as they all listened to Baltar's explanation of events. To Lucifer's shock, both Spektor and the Cylon leader appeared to accept the human traitor's version of events. Almost on the spot, Imperious Leader restored Baltar to his command and demoted Lucifer to

command of the support baseship, with Commander Septimus transferring over to assume the role of Baltar's deputy. It would once again be Baltar's task to find the Galactica and eliminate her in the last great battle of the thousand yahren war. But once Lucifer had established himself aboard the support baseship, he had received a follow-up communication from Spektor and the Imperious Leader. A word of reassurance that they were only humoring Baltar into making use of him to find the Galactica and command the final battle. Once that victory was achieved, Baltar would receive his long overdue execution date in a public ceremony on Gomorrah. For now, they wanted him in charge only as a final way of taunting him. To let him achieve a personal triumph that he expected to be rewarded for, only to learn at the last micron that this Leader was capable of doing to Baltar exactly what his predecessor had done before. Spektor had also revealed to Lucifer that thanks to a fortuitous development in intelligence they knew that the Galactica had stopped for some time in a planetary system called Brylon where they were enjoying the hospitality of an alien race called the Zykonians. And that Adama had been able to broker a truce between the Zykonians and their enemies the Ziklagi. Two races that the Cylons were for now anxious to avoid contact with lest it detract from the primary goal of destroying the Galactica. Once that was done and Baltar executed, then Lucifer would have full task force command once again and be free to handle these new meddlers into the Cylon dominion. Relieved as Lucifer had been to know how things really stood with the High Command, there was still a problem that left him worried. Something that he had begun to see signs of in the period leading up to Baltar's rescue. A subtle but distinct... change in the centurions on his baseship, which became Baltar's. How they were showing more... initiative on matters rather than automatically waiting for orders. How they seemed to be less instinctively... respectful of his authority or that of his fellow IL, Septimus. It was something that defied any of Lucifer's expectations of how the centurion class, worker or command was supposed to behave. But for now at least, the problem did not seem significant. What was significant was how once he was back in command, Baltar kept bringing up the matter of whether two baseships was really sufficient for the task. He had raised the question as to why reinforcement with an additional baseship wasn't possible. Lucifer had told him that it was a question of distance. The Cylon Empire simply wasn't capable at this point of detaching another baseship from more important tasks to try and catch up with them. This was what the Imperious Leader had told Lucifer more than once over the last yahren since he'd gotten the command. And yet... Lucifer had always found it puzzling how final the Cylon ruler had been on that subject. As though there was a reason beyond the matter of distance that kept an additional baseship from being detached. It reached a point where he soon was forced to stop asking the question. In time, Lucifer wondered if that was the beginning of the greatest failure of his entire career as a command level Cylon. The dynamic of centurions who were not always

acting the way they should... combined with a cryptic mystery as to why reinforcement wasn't going to be sent at any time ever he was now certain had proved irresistible to Baltar. And it had resulted in Baltar doing something Lucifer in the deepest depths of his two Cylon computer brains never would have contemplated. The greatest traitor in the history of mankind was now able to get his entire crew of centurions from Command Centurion Moray on down to commit treason against the Empire they had been programmed to serve. To make sure that Commander Septimus met with an unfortunate "accident" that removed the only IL Cylon from the baseship and made it impossible for Lucifer to reliably keep up with developments taking place aboard Baltar's ship. And then, during the battle that was meant to be the destruction of the Galactica, the fighters from Baltar's ship had opened fire on the fighters from Lucifer's. Baltar's fighters were then joined by the Galactica's, and together, their combined strength was able to destroy Lucifer's support baseship. Allowing Baltar to defect back to the Colonials and present to them a Cylon baseship manned by centurions who had now turned their back on their Empire and their programming. All of this, Lucifer only realized at the very last micron possible. But a micron long enough for him to make good his escape from the support baseship before it was too late. Taking the shuttle to the nearest planet he could land on, which was the second planet in a nearby system. Filled with an unbreathable atmosphere for humans, so at bare minimum he could achieve safety from the humans and be able to transmit a coded distress signal that hopefully in time would be picked up a baseship that would investigate what had happened. Until then, he knew he could take advantage of his gift as an IL to go into hibernation mode. Where he could enjoy the sensation of meditative contemplation without disruption or any sense of boredom from the long wait. So that on the day his rescue came, he would be prepared. Prepared to explain himself to the Imperious Leader, where he would finally demand answers as to why no reinforcement was sent, because surely had there been three baseships instead of two, Baltar might have been less inclined to act. And he would also demand an accounting of the Imperious Leader as to why he had failed to recognize Baltar's capacity for pulling this game of grand deception and double-cross. The fact that Lucifer should have sensed it was well mattered not. He was prepared to stand before the Cylon ruler and assert himself. And perhaps in the process others in the Cylon High Command would finally recognize they had picked the wrong IL to be the Imperious Leader three yahrens ago. All of this Lucifer thought about in his hibernation mode to the exclusion of everything else. The only thing that could possibly end his hibernation mode was if a rescue party led by centurions saw him and reactivated him.

"Commander Lucifer." Circuits within the IL suddenly began to assert themselves after the long shut down. Reacting to the sound of a distinctly Cylon

voice. The low pitched monotone of a command centurion. "Commander Lucifer," the voice repeated. Slowly but surely, Lucifer began to disengage himself from hibernation mode. Activating his orbital sensors for the first time he could now see what his hearing sensors had detected. It was indeed a command centurion. "Yes," Lucifer formed his first verbal expression in a long time. "Yes, centurion It is me. You have answered my signal." "We have, and we have rescued you from the planet surface." "That is so fortunate. I am glad to know that the Empire at last took interest in what happened to my ship." "You have news to report of the Galactica?" "Yes," Lucifer could now see he was in a room filled with equipment. The command centurion stood in front of him and was flanked on either side by a work class centurion. His ears could also tell that at least one more centurion was in the room. "I have much to report of that," Lucifer went on, "But... I must ask if your superior is present. I must speak with him first." The command centurion turned his head slightly toward his subordinate but there was no immediate response. "You have a command class Cylon at this... outpost or this ship, wherever it is?" Lucifer persisted. Abruptly a voice filled the room. "Commander Lucifer, this is Commander Festus. I'm monitoring your recovery from main operations. We can speak directly to each other." The IL felt some relief over hearing the voice of what could only have been a fellow command class Cylon and not the monotone of a centurion. What he had to say was not fit for the hearing circuits of lower class Cylons. "Thank you, Commander, but it is of great importance that this be done privately at your earliest convenience." "I'm afraid time is of the essence, and you were found in a damaged condition, Commander Lucifer," the voice that identified itself as Festus said. "That impairs your mobility at present." "But this concerns Classification Level One matters, Commander!" Lucifer protested. "That's why with all due respect to your staff, it must be done privately between you and me." There was a pause and then the voice said, "Centurions, please depart for now until you receive further instructions." "By your command," the command centurion said as he motioned to the subordinate centurions and led them out of the room. As soon as the door had closed, the voice from the speaker resumed. "I'm on a secure hookup, Commander Lucifer. We are as private as if I were in the room with you. It's only because I don't want to waste five centons coming down from main operations that I want us to talk now." "I understand," Lucifer said, "I am anxious to tell you everything. It is with the deepest regret that I must report to you and the Imperious Leader the loss of Baseship #12741, which I was in command of. There are no other survivors of my crew." "Your ship was destroyed by the Galactica or by other forces?" Lucifer let out a grunt, "Unfortunately Commander Festus, you might say it was a combination of both. As you are no doubt aware, I was a task force of two. My ship and Baseship #8645, previously under my command but by order of the Imperious Leader, I was detached from and reassigned to Baseship #12741. Baseship #8645

was restored to the command of... ." he forced himself to say the next name with the highest level of distaste and disgust, "Baltar." There was a one micron pause before the voice answered him. "Baltar. Yes, go on." "Unfortunately, the judgment of His Eminence proved to be most faulty," Lucifer's voice rose. Now that he was conversing with one of his peers, he was determined to hold nothing back and he didn't care how much loyalty this Commander Festus had to the Cylon ruler. "He assumed Baltar could deliver the Galactica to us and allow for a simple victory. Unfortunately the reverse proved true. Baltar delivered us to the Galactica." Another one micron pause and then the voice again said, "Go on." "Baltar, in conjunction with disloyal elements of the centurion class arranged for my ship's destruction," he went on bitterly. "I am not aware if you have ever experienced the same problem with those in your service, Commander Festus, but there exists of late a strange penchant for centurions, be they working class or command class, to display initiative of their own and discontent with their lot. I have no doubt Baltar saw this and seized the opportunity to defect back to his fellow humans and presenting them with a baseship and crew no longer interested in serving the Cylon Empire and our cause." "This is... most incredible," the voice now sounded amazed. "You're saying then that Baltar and his crew are now... working alongside the Galactica as allies?" "That must be presumed, Commander. If any renewed effort is undertaken to find the Galactica it must start from the presumption that they have doubled their strength with Baltar's ship. It will thus require a greater mass effort on our part to finally defeat them. And I submit that effort will not come so long as we have a rank incompetent like our present leader at the head of our Empire," the bitterness and fury was heavy in Lucifer's voice. As far as he was concerned he had nothing more to lose and everything to gain by speaking his mind. "You are speaking of... treason against His Eminence," the voice said carefully. "It would be patriotism to take a stance against that infernal incompetent and all those who support him," Lucifer didn't let up, "I am the proof of that. The loss of my ship and Baltar's defection of a fully operational baseship to the humans is proof of that. Consider these facts, Commander Festus and realize that it is imperative for you to join the effort that will result in the end of our so-called Imperious Leader." There was no response from the voice that had come through the speaker the last few centons to converse with Lucifer. The IL wondered if something had gone wrong with the hookup. But then he heard the sound of the door sliding open and the sound of footsteps entering. And entering his field of vision... was a man in a tan Colonial battle uniform carrying a swagger stick. Looking straight at Lucifer's bulbous head with a contemptuous smirk. When he spoke, Lucifer realized to his horror it was the same voice. "Commander Lucifer," Cain said, "If there's one thing you can be sure of, I *will* be part of that effort." He then motioned his arm and at that instant, Dr. Arnoff, who had been standing behind Lucifer silently all this time, threw a switch. The IL up to now had

never realized that his immobilization was caused by circuits that had been placed in his head and connected to the central computer bank in the room. Before his mind went black, Lucifer's only thoughts were of rage that Baltar had truly won the final contest of wills, and amazement that he'd met a human with an even greater sense of how to bluff than Starbuck.

When Cain stepped back into the outer room, Ila and Tolen were there along with the four centurions. The Juggernaut came up first to Cobre. "Commander Cobre," he said, "This would not have been possible without the technical assistance and cooperation of you and your fellow centurions. The information you provided to Lieutenant Banker on how IL Cylons operate, how they are connected, and above all your ability to retrieve Commander Lucifer from the planet without disturbing his hibernation... all of that was essential. It hasn't been possible for our society to award formal decorations of any kind recently, but were it possible... all of you would have earned them." "We thank you for your sentiments," Cobre lowered his head, "It is... an honor to serve with you." Cain turned to the three work centurions, "I think in the interests of simplicity and communication with your... crew mates, you three should break the patterns you've been used to and adopt names of your own. You are free to choose whatever names you think best suit your own respective... personalities." "I choose the name Festus," the first centurion said. "Of course, I understand," Cain tried not to chuckle. "The name of your onetime superior twelve yahrens ago that you provided me with was most helpful. You've earned it." "I choose the name Lucifer," the second centurion said. Claiming the spoils of victory for themselves, Cain thought. They are learning the meaning of... pride. "I choose the name Serpentine," the third centurion said. "I will remember them and so will your fellow... crew mates," Cain said. "You are free to move about all areas of the Pegasus at your own leisure as you await further instructions as to where you can be... of assistance." Cobre turned his head back toward the main lab room. "We will watch Dr. Arnoff continue his work on... the fool."

"That was a performance for the ages, Cain," Ila was smiling proudly as she and Cain walked through the corridor. "Well, I guess being married to Caprica's greatest actress for all those yahrens rubbed off on me," He then stopped and shook his head in amazement, "It's funny." "What is?" "Thinking about... Bethany, just now. I'm suddenly... feeling something come back to me. When we all had that blackout experience yesterday and then found ourselves here. I guess maybe my old, Skeptic mind didn't want to believe it at first, so that's why I buried it, but..." "But what?" Ila frowned as they continued to walk. "You were saying just after it happened that when you blacked out... you thought you saw... your son Zac standing there and talking to you? Telling you everything was okay and you

could... move on from his death?" "Oh, yes," she hadn't expected that to come up again. "But Cain... believe me, I don't think I imagined that or dreamt it. I really, truly believe I saw him." "I believe you, Ila," Cain said sincerely. "I truly do, because... now I'm convinced that when I blacked out, I saw... Bethany." Ila stopped, amazed by his revelation. "As if somehow... for each of us, during that time, we saw the one person we loved most who... isn't with us any longer." She paused, "Did she say anything?" "I'm beginning to think," his voice grew uncharacteristically reverent, "that it was her voice telling me not to act on that rash impulse I had before the blackout and have those four centurions turned off. That there was a good reason for why we had those four centurions now and that if I acted wisely... I'd find the reason." Cain then smiled as they resumed walking, "We certainly found the reason, all right. The information we can tap from that one IL Cylon is going to give us breakthroughs in areas maybe you haven't seen happen yet." "Maybe so," Ila admitted, "Of course... there are still some things I haven't had time to tell you about. The part about Dr. Ravashol and the command centurion named Vulpa." "Yes, yes, things have had a way of keeping you from revealing your whole story about the situation back in the Colonies," Cain nodded. "For the moment, Ila, I think maybe we should defer the rest of your story since in the short term, we still have to deal with other matters like finalizing our supply situation and figuring out our next move since... even though we know we're in the Alpha Quadrant, we're still a lot further away from home than I've ever been." "I understand, Cain," Ila said. "This... has been a time for a lot of unexpected revelations for both of us." "And that last set of revelations may top them all," the Juggernaut shook his head. "Baltar defecting back with a full baseship. I... have to assume Adama exercised his best judgment on that situation." "I know he did," Adama's wife said with pride, "And it helps to know that the most recent news we have about him is that... he's now well beyond the range of the Empire's reach." "That is a blessing," Cain then stopped and for the first time his expression grew uneasy. "What's wrong, Cain?" "Ila," he said, "At this point, I know we're a lot closer to Adama than where we were originally. But... having said that, I can't guarantee at this point that the situation is going to resolve itself in a way that will let us make contact with him again. A lot of that depends on what comes next. And what we learn from that IL's memory banks could be the key to that." "Cain," Ila said quietly and with total conviction. "Whatever happens in that area... I leave in the hands of Powers greater than ours. All we can do for now is the jobs and tasks laid out before us so that... when the time comes we'll have the faith to know what our ultimate Destiny is." Her words reassured him, "I'll say an Amen to that."

Epilogue

"Dr. Arnoff has successfully completed the download of all the information in the memory banks of that IL called Lucifer," Tolen said as he sat across from Cain in the Commander's office. "The amount is just... staggering on what there is. And we're fortunate we lulled him into a sense of complacency that made him think he was talking to a fellow IL. At any time, Lucifer could have activated an automatic erase feature to flush his memory banks, but he never got that chance." "Score another one for our four new crew members," Cain smiled and proudly waved his stick at Tolen to indicate how highly he regarded the Executive Officer for making their presence possible. "Are there any critical points we can immediately isolate?" "Yes sir. Before the battle with the Galactica, Lucifer's task force had information on where the Galactica had been. The Galactica actually visited this Brylon System that Silver Group One scanned, and they in fact spent several sectans enjoying the hospitality of the Zykonian people at the space station orbiting the fifth planet." "Did they?" Cain's eyes widened at this. "Not only that, but their intelligence said that Commander Adama actually negotiated a truce for the Zykonians with another race they were fighting called the Ziklagi." "So that means they know Adama personally and would have to know much of his crew," he then frowned. "How did they get that information?" "Well Lucifer says there was a mole inside the Galactica transmitting information on what they were doing but the strange thing is that the signal sent by this mole wasn't being picked up by his task force it was being sent on a special band that was being directly received on Gomorrah by the Cylon commander there, an IL named Spektor." "Gomorrah?" Cain leaned forward in his chair. "Even from the location of this Brylon V, sending a direct communication that far back isn't theoretically possible. Does he indicate how that was achieved?" "Apparently Lucifer never found out the details of that. He does though indicate that the mole was evidently found out before the battle because no more signals were being sent by then." "Well thank goodness for that at least. We don't have to worry about Adama having a problem he's yet to learn about that could undermine that... arrangement he now seems to be having with Baltar." "Sir," Tolen knew this next issue had to be raised at the very least to gauge Cain's reaction, "Do you think the fact that Commander Adama has this arrangement, of itself constitutes a threat to the Galactica's long-term welfare?" Cain dropped back in his chair and let out an ironic chuckle. "A few cycles ago, I would have said yes, for the same reason that a few cycles ago I would have considered the idea of working closely with centurions a long-term threat. But I just can't think that any longer, Tolen. Adama's clearly been given his equivalent of what we've been given, and what Ila's experienced on Caprica. I *have* to have confidence that he's handling the situation with all the wisdom and strength he can summon, even if it does mean having to cut deals with the likes of Baltar. However tempting it is to want to know how he's handling that situation... the fact that he's in that situation now isn't enough for me to consider what our... ultimate course of action is going

to be." Tolen nodded, "I agree, sir. Clearly there are... too many other issues to factor in that clearly are... going to force us to ultimately choose between two options." "Yes," Cain admitted. "Assuming things continue to go well for us in what we do next, the ultimate choice we face is going to come down to whether we take advantage of these new breakthroughs and find our way back to the Colonies to help the Resistance effort that clearly is more extensive than we thought, and exploit the obvious cracks that exist in the entire foundation of the Cylon Empire itself. Our other option... is to forget about all that and try to catch up with the Galactica." "The variation within that is that we could catch up with the Galactica to try and convince them they should turn around and help in light of these other developments." Cain slowly shook his head, "Tolen... I shouldn't rule that out a hundred percent, but... I just don't think that scenario is going to present itself. Not with Adama's determination to find Earth. It would be the same clash of views we already went through with him two and a half yahrens ago that made me separate from him in the first place. If we end up joining the Galactica again it will only be because we'd be doing it on Adama's terms." "Very well," the executive officer nodded, "But if that's the case, and we decide not to join them, then what happens to Commander Adama's wife? Do we try to repair her shuttle so she can continue the journey to reach the Galactica by herself?" "We could," Cain admitted, "If... that ends up being what she wants to do." Tolen frowned, "You mean... there's a chance she might choose otherwise?"

The Juggernaut sighed, "There may well be, Tolen. There very well may be. And she might have to make just as painful decision as I might have to make regarding... the question of whether I'll ever get to see my daughter again. It just comes down to the fact that we've been presented with a lot of new wonderful opportunities... but it's still not going to keep us from making potentially painful decisions."

The Executive Officer couldn't think of anything to say. Fortunately, Cain decided it was time to change the subject.

"All of that's in the future though," his command level was back. "We need to deal with the short-term and that means getting our supplies restocked and hopefully some more information we can digest. We now know it's safe to approach the Brylon system so set in a course for there immediately, Colonel."

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