



BATTLESTAR GALACTICA: THE HAND OF GOD

by

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Based on an original teleplay by Donald Bellisario

Battlestar Galactica created by Glen A. Larson

Chapter One

There main thrusters of the Battlestar Galactica was perhaps the one location of the great warship that seldom saw any visitors.

Located at the back of the battlestar, the huge engines propelled the ship through space at whichever speed her commander felt was necessary.

A by-product of the thrusters was the immense noise that, should anyone actually venture through these corridors without any ear protection, one's eardrums would be irreparably damaged. That was one of the main reasons why few came. Another was that there was nothing but thrusters in this part of the Galactica, so unless one was an engineer, why would somebody come?

Had anyone been in that area, they would have been surprised to see a small group of people making their way through the corridors.

Only the one in the lead seemed confident about where they were going, while the other three peered about them in mild apprehension.

Not for the first time, Starbuck wondered if Apollo had finally gone off his rocker. When his friend told him, Sheba and Cassiopeia that there was something he wanted to show them, Starbuck figured that it was something normal. Not to mention safe. But when Apollo handed them the ear protectors and told them to follow him, Starbuck wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

They'd been walking for about ten centons, and despite the ear protectors, Starbuck could still hear the dull roar of the thrusters.

It rattled his ears, and it made his body feel funny. He couldn't wait until they were clear of them.

And where do you think we're headed? he thought to himself, seeing

Apollo up ahead. There's nothing but thrusters, thrusters and more thrusters up here. What does Apollo have in mind?

Starbuck glanced at Cassiopeia, who was looking about in fascination. She'd never seen anything quite like this before, despite spending a fair bit of her childhood on her father's freighter. The ship probably would have been enormously dwarfed by the battlestar, Starbuck speculated.

Apollo stopped in front of a ladder, then turned to wait for the others to catch up with him. Sheba noticed that for once in his life, he was in a good mood. No, better than that. He was positively bursting at the seams with excitement, like a little boy who couldn't wait to show the adults what his latest feats were.

The black-haired captain shouted something, but his words were lost over the rumbling thrusters. Starbuck, Sheba and Cassiopeia had to join in a tight circle about him before they could catch anything he said.

"What?" Starbuck yelled.

"We go up!" Apollo shouted again, pointing to the ladder. To demonstrate, he grabbed hold of the rungs and started climbing.

Starbuck exchanged a glance with the women, and they all shrugged. Whatever Apollo has in mind, it had better be worth it! he thought.

The climb didn't take anywhere as long as the walk, but Sheba still felt winded as she followed Apollo. She looked up occasionally to enjoy the view, but when she looked beyond him, she didn't see any destination in particular. When he finally stopped to open a hatch in the ceiling, Sheba breathed a sigh of relief. Their journey was almost over.

Apollo climbed through the hatch, then reached out to help Sheba through. She found herself in an enclosed dome which appeared to have a circumference of four or five metrons, with an elevated console directly in front of the hatch. She tentatively lifted the ear protectors off as she walked to the far end of the dome, finding with some relief that the sounds of the thrusters were muffled by the deck, and as Apollo finished helping Cassiopeia and Starbuck through the hatch and shut it, the noise almost completely disappeared. All that remained was a slight ringing in their ears that Sheba hoped would go away quickly.

She waited until everyone had uncovered their ears before asking, "Where in heaven's name are we?"

"As high as you can get on the Galactica," Apollo replied, clipping the ear protectors to his belt before climbing up the small ladder to the console. He had an impish smile on his face as he started to activate the controls. "We're directly above the main thrusters. It's a great place to get away from everyone to think."

Starbuck wrapped his arms around Cassiopeia and nuzzled her ear while muttering loudly, "A cozy little place like this can be used for more than just thinking..."

"Starbuck," the blonde med-tech warned, though smiling widely at his suggestion. Sheba shook her head in mild dismay at their antics as the activity continued up at the control panel.

"Are you ready?" Apollo continued, not looking at them just yet, though as Sheba glanced back him, she could see that his grin had grown wider.

"For what?" she wanted to know.

"Watch."

With an exaggerated flourish, Apollo tapped a button on the console. There was a loud click above them, then like a great metal naranja, the metal hull broke away into four sections, moving back until the dome was completely uncovered.

Apollo anxiously watched for their reactions. To his amusement, they all jumped at the click, then stared in wonder as the star field outside became visible. Sheba and Starbuck gaped at the sight, while Cassiopeia became slightly timid and moved in closer to Starbuck.

Apollo couldn't help but grin even more as they took in the surroundings.

"This is incredible!" Sheba exclaimed, looking about her in awe.

"It's... bright," Cassiopeia added nervously, still holding onto Starbuck a little tightly. She had the feeling that at any micron, the vacuum of space would break through the thin shell that separated them from the outside, and would sweep them out into space. "And frightening."

Seeing Cassiopeia's apprehension, which was the complete opposite of

Sheba's reaction, Apollo couldn't help but laugh. "Don't worry, Cassiopeia. We're perfectly safe. The bubble's constructed of transparent tylinium."

"It's sure a lot different than a Viper cockpit," Starbuck said slowly, still taking everything in. "It's so open."

"It's like riding in the hand of God," Apollo said dreamily, looking up at the stars that were passing above them. Starbuck glanced back to see that he looked totally at peace, then Apollo quickly added as though feeling slightly embarrassed at his open statement, "Or at least that's the way I like to think of it. Do you like it, Sheba?"

She twirled around at the sound of her name, grinning at the beauty of the stars. For a micron, she found that she was at a loss for words when she saw the hopeful look on Apollo's face. It was almost like he needed to hear her approval of this little sanctuary before he felt totally at ease.

"Oh, Apollo, I love it!"

He just about beamed with her words as he beckoned to her. "Then come up here and try it! Come on." Getting up from the seat, he stood on the little ledge behind it as he helped Sheba up the ladder to the console. He quickly showed her everything there — basically a scanner with some controls to adjust the frequency, the switch for the dome, and a few others he still wasn't sure about, then left her there to fool around so he could go take in the sight.

In the meantime, Cassiopeia was wondering why a dome like this would be located in such an unlike spot on the top of the battlestar.

She knew that space was a premium everywhere in the fleet, and hadn't Starbuck said when they'd first met that there wasn't any place private in the fleet? How was it that Apollo had this secluded spot all to himself?

"Apollo," she began as he passed by her and Starbuck to the front, "What was this bubble used for?"

"It's a celestial chamber, the only one left on the Galactica. When the old girl was launched over five hundred yahrens ago, there were a number of these domes." Apollo sounded like a professor lecturing to a class of students as he stood with his back to them.

"Back then, the navigators used to come up here to take star sightings, to sort

of double-check the navigation computer. I doubt that anyone's been up here except us in a hundred yahrens or more."

Sheba glanced up from her examination of the console. "Well, all these instruments seem to work." To prove the point to herself, she switched between bandwidth on the scanner, but she only succeeded in picking up snow and static.

"Most of them weren't working when I first came across the dome, and the others weren't far behind them. I repaired them once they didn't." The almost dreamy tone returned to Apollo's voice as he looked out at the stars. "I like coming up here to shoot the stars the way my ancestors did."

Starbuck had to laugh. He'd always known that Apollo was the kind of person who, as a child, would sneak in space adventure stories when they were supposed to be studying, or would hide under the sheets reading those stories with a flashlight during sleep period.

"Sometimes, buddy, I get the feeling that you would have loved living in the past. Knocking around some planetary system in an old fashioned, sublight rocket."

Apollo couldn't help smiling at Starbuck's words. Not many people realized that he had a more light-hearted side to him, which included a love of history and a love of exploration. Starbuck had often seen that side of Apollo emerge in the many yahrens he'd known him, but he had the feeling that both Sheba and Cassiopeia were seeing this side of the black-haired captain for the first time.

"Well, it may have been slow, but it was more of a challenge." He sighed as he looked up, almost wishing that the technical age they lived in would disappear, and he would find himself on the deck of the ship that Starbuck had described earlier. It had been a boyhood dream of his, and the closest he'd ever come was once when he had the opportunity to fly one of the old tubs in the Caprican Air Museum during an Armament Day celebration. He had to resist the temptation of jerking back on the joystick to take it out of Caprica's atmosphere into deep space. "I think that living back then might have been more fun."

Something caught Sheba's eye as she listened to Apollo. The channel she'd been tuned on had flickered, showing a picture. She reached for the dial to adjust it, and succeeded in getting a somewhat cleaner and more complete picture. Sounds became emanating from the speakers, and she recognized them as voices. Frowning, she glanced up from the monitor.

"Apollo, what's this scanner set for?"

"Long range communications." He barely turned around as he spoke to her. "Only you won't get anything on it. Those gamma frequencies are outdated. We don't use them anymore."

His information only made her frown even more deeply as the transmission continued. It was clearer now, and it appeared to be something large hovering. She couldn't make out its exact shape to identify it, or what exactly it was hovering over. "Well, somebody does."

"What?" Apollo's expression matched Sheba's as he hurried back to her side to see what she was talking about.

"It's very weak, but we are receiving a signal," she said, feeling Apollo come next to her. He put his right arm on the back of the chair, barely brushing her shoulders as he steadied himself. To his amazement, he saw the same object as Sheba. He quickly hit the recording device that was located at the end of the console, then joined Sheba in trying to adjust the controls.

Still on the floor, Starbuck tried to peer around Apollo's body to get a glimpse of the picture. He only succeeded in seeing something obscured by the interference of snow. But both he and Cassiopeia could hear Apollo and Sheba's efforts with the consoles by slight crackles and hisses in the audio. Among the interference were snatches of what were now sort of identifiable as voices.

"What is it?" the blonde warrior asked, wishing he could help them.

Apollo shook his head in frustration as he concentrated. "I'm recording it and trying to get a directional fix."

The picture began to lose whatever resolution it had, and Sheba bit her lip angrily. "We're losing it!"

Then, with a burst of static, it faded into complete static, and a hiss came over the comline. Disappointed, Apollo leaned back from the console. "It's gone."

"Any idea where it came from?" Starbuck pressed, his curiosity piqued.

"Well, it looked like a ship," Sheba began, trying to recall the image, then she shrugged, "But it didn't look like any I've ever seen."

"I have." Apollo was still staring at the monitor, a slight frown on his face. From the micron he'd first spotted the object, he'd slightly recognized it. "From our history scans. It looked a little like something the Colonies used to fly a couple thousand yahrens ago."

"A couple of thousand...?" Starbuck repeated in disbelief. "What are we going to do with it?"

"I have an idea." Apollo took the tape out of its slot and stuck it in his belt, then reached past Sheba to start shutting down the console.

The most prized commodity that a Viper pilot could possess outside of ambrosia and flying was sleep, and it was something few got enough of. After the events of the past yahren and a half since the Colonies were destroyed by the Cylons, sleep became more and more precious until it surpassed ambrosia on the scale of important things. And any spare micron outside of duty counted.

That's what Apollo was betting on when he, Starbuck, Sheba and Cassiopeia entered the Viper pilots bachelor quarters on Beta deck.

Although it was a few centars into the sleep period, there were only a few bunks occupied. Apollo smiled slightly as he spotted the one bunk he was targeting. Boomer, the unwitting victim.

One thing most people didn't know about Apollo was that he was good at practical jokes. He just rarely had the opportunity to pull any, and they also didn't fit into his public image as the stern and humorless flight captain. The jokes had been a defense against Zac, his younger brother, who was the true master of jokes and would target Apollo with anything he could during their days of intense sibling rivalry.

Walking quietly so he wouldn't wake any of the other sleeping warriors, Apollo made his way to Boomer's bunk. His friend was sleeping on his side, a blissful expression on his dark face. Trying not to laugh as Starbuck stood next to him, and Cassiopeia and Sheba gathered at the foot of the bed, Apollo gently shook Boomer's outstretched arm.

"Boomer," he whispered loudly. He was only answered by a slight grunt from Boomer, who barely stirred at the touch. He shook him a little firmer the second time. "Boomer!"

Two more grunts from the sleeping man, who this time smiled broadly in his

sleep. He reached out and lightly patted Apollo's hand.

Sheba and Cassiopeia erupted into quiet giggles as Apollo shook his head.

"I wonder who he thinks you are?" Starbuck mused.

With a small click, Apollo turned on the small bedside lamp and shone the light into Boomer's face. The results were immediate this time as Boomer's eyes flew open, then squinted at the bright light. He fumbled for the switch, brushing against Apollo's hand as he turned off the light. Having his sight back, he looked back to see his friend's innocently grinning face.

"Apollo..." he groaned, then noticed Starbuck at Apollo's side.

It figured that the two of them would be in on his torment together. How would one of them like something put into their bunks, or something equally shocking like that. "You interrupted the best dream I've ever had! I'd just met this girl and I was just about to make a..."

Giggles at the foot of the bunk drew his attention, and he saw Sheba and Cassiopeia. They waved in shy greeting, then laughed at his surprised expression. Boomer was grateful that it wasn't easy for him to blush as he groaned, pulling the sheets up closer to his body as he turned on his side again and shut his eyes. Like Hades these four are going to get me out of bed.

"What's going on?" he asked, trying to get comfortable again. If it wasn't worth it, they'd pay for this one way or another. Already, he was making a mental note to give both Apollo and Starbuck at least one illegal rib block the next time they played triad.

"Boomer, we need your help," Apollo began.

He shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. I need sleep."

"Boomer, you're a whiz at long range communications," Starbuck added.

"Doctor Wilker's better," he pointed out. Why get me when a professional could do the job for them? Or if it were illegal, just get Starbuck to hack in for them.

"But Doctor Wilker's on the electronics ship," Sheba said, and Boomer couldn't help but wince at that. Touch,.

"Good for him." Better there than here being bothered by these four, Boomer thought as he kept his eyes tightly shut.

"Boomer, we picked up a transmission on a gamma frequency."

Oh, Apollo's excited. Too bad. He can come back later after sleep period.

"Good for you," was the jaded reply. You can come any micron now, sleep, he thought.

No one said anything for the next few microns, and Boomer began to believe that they had left. He'd won, and they were leaving him alone to sleep. He was about to smile in victory when he heard Apollo give a short sigh of exasperation. Realizing that he'd missed something, Boomer reluctantly opened his eyes. Frack, he's good at getting his way.

"A what?" he asked in resignation.

Apollo was now nearly bursting from the seams with enthusiasm, which Boomer realized was a rare sight with him. "A gamma frequency!"

Boomer didn't believe his ears for a micron. A transmission on that outdated comsignal? They had to be joking. But as he thought about it, he realized that it just might be more likely than he realized. Still...

"Gamma?" he blurted, bolting upright in bed. He said it louder than he'd intended, and he winced as the nearest sleeping warrior tossed slightly in his sleep. His friends needlessly hushed him as he continued in a quieter voice, "That frequency's ancient!"

Starbuck nodded. "Interesting, huh?"

"Might be," Boomer agreed, throwing back the sheets to get out of bed. No more sleep tonight, he thought wearily as his feet hit the cool deck. "Did you record it?"

Apollo nodded and handed the small, flat disk to him. "Right here."

"Why didn't you say so?" he demanded. He'd had the impression that the broadcast was going on at that centon, not that it was in hard copy and could wait for another few centars.

He was about to make his way to the exit when Sheba and Cassiopeia partially blocked the path. They both had smirks on their faces, and Cassiopeia seemed to be managing to control the laughter that Sheba was unable to keep in.

"Uh, Boomer," the med-tech began, giving him a wicked grin, "are you going to go to the lab looking like that?"

"Huh?" Boomer looked at her blankly, then followed her gaze to what he was wearing. If it weren't for the trunks, he'd be naked, and he felt his face flush again as he became suddenly very self-conscious.

"Uh... no."

Apollo couldn't help but laugh at Boomer's predicament, but as soon as he saw Boomer begin to turn in his and Starbuck's direction, he quickly got rid of his grin. By the time the two friends were facing each other, Apollo had a completely deadpan expression — or as best as he could ever come to one. Boomer shook his head as he saw the laughter in Apollo's green eyes, knowing what he'd been doing microns beforehand.

Without another word, he shooed the women out of the billet so he could quickly change into his uniform. By the time he was finished, Apollo and Starbuck were waiting for him at the entrance where the Viper helmets were located.

"I ought to slug you right here and now," he threatened the captain, who was back to grinning. "If I'd done that to you, I'd be on report right now."

"Maybe, maybe not," Apollo shot back. "Don't tell me that you didn't enjoy the attention."

"Oh, I soaked up every micron of it, Apollo," Boomer grumbled.

"Just keep your eyes open. Now, let's get this looked at before the Commander calls an alert. You owe me exactly eight centars of sleep, buddy."

Before the days of the Holocaust and Exodus, the Galactica's communications lab had been outfitted with the most up-to-date equipment the Colonies had developed. Since then, Wilker had been making periodic adjustments to the equipment that would have thrown off anyone not familiar with the sometimes eccentric engineer's habits, but Boomer knew the equipment as well as he knew the layout of his Viper's controls.

The lab was empty when Boomer brought his entourage into the darkened work area, and after turning on the lights, he sat himself down at the main terminal. Logging in, he inserted Apollo's tape and ran the transmission once.

The fuzzed image appeared on the numerous monitors, and Boomer sat back to examine what he could through the static. After a few microns, he gave his judgment. "It's some sort of space craft."

From his position directly behind Boomer's chair, where he was leaning against it with his elbows, Apollo exchanged glances with Starbuck before asking, "Can you enhance the signal?"

Boomer shrugged. "Maybe Wilker can with the computer, but the best I can do is try to clear up the audio."

He stopped the tape, then returned to the beginning. As he replayed it, he began typing commands into the keyboard. The sounds coming from the speaker became louder by a few notches, and the voices and noises were easier to hear. The voices were surrounded by what sounded like beeps at the end of their sentences, and Boomer guessed that they were male by their timbre. He vainly tried to make out words amid the jumble of sounds that were fading in and out.

"...downsandby ... eegle ... ileegle ... twy ..."

He cocked his head, then entered another command. A rush of accelerated noise came through the speakers, then he was rewarded with a much clearer sound. The words were still difficult to understand, and Boomer strained to make sense of them.

"...enderset resenge... downsanby... gofer eloheye..."

To his right, Boomer saw Starbuck and Cassiopeia shake their heads in disappointment, and he knew that Apollo and Sheba must be doing the same thing. He finally turned the transmission off and turned to in his chair to face all four of his friends.

"That's it," he announced.

"Do you have any idea where it might be coming from?" Sheba asked.

He paused to consider her question. "Well, it could be a harmonic signal, doubling or quadrupling at the original transmitting frequency. It's one of the

reason we don't use those old gamma frequencies anymore. But if it is a harmonic, then its origins could be relatively close."

There was silence, then Apollo voiced the question that everyone was wondering.

"And if it's not?"

"If that's a primary signal, then it's come a long way to be that weak." Boomer paused to make his next point. "It could be... intergalactic."

"Intergalactic?" Starbuck repeated in awe, as though only beginning to understand what that could mean. "Then we picked up something that could have been transmitted a hundred yahrens ago?"

"Or a thousand," Boomer continued, "Or ten thousand. There's just no telling how long that signal's been traveling through space."

"You mean that we could be looking at something from the past?" Cassiopeia summarized, looking amazed.

"Quite possibly." Boomer reactivated the transmission so they could listen and watch again. He was now almost captivated by the sight of the fuzzed, enigmatic shape that appeared amid the static. It seemed to have a bulky square shape in its upper contours while from what appeared to be the lower section, several arcs reminiscent of tentacles seemed to protrude. Behind the craft, the grayish brown background of an orbiting body, either planet or satellite was apparent.

Apollo's voice was quiet with awe and wonder.

"I wonder whose...?"

Chapter Two

Adama looked closely at the faces of the four warriors and the medtech who had come only a few centons beforehand. The story that Apollo had told about the transmission, backed up with interjections from the others, had fascinated the Galactica commander.

"It was on the gamma frequency?" he said, making sure that he had all the details correct.

"Yes, sir," Apollo replied.

"And you picked this up where? In the Celestial Dome?"

"That's right. The communicator was never updated for iota frequencies when the technology became available a few decades ago."

Adama nodded at the information. "And you say that you saw what might be an ancient ship?"

"That's what it looked like," Starbuck cut in. "The problem is that there's too much static to get any close detail of its structure."

"And where is this transmission now? I assume that you made a recording of it."

"In Doctor Wilker's lab, sir," Boomer answered.

"And you couldn't tell whether it was an harmonic or a primary signal?"

"No, sir. The transmission is too garbled to tell."

"Ah." Adama paced slightly in front of them, fascinated by the mystery presented by this occurrence. "Well, your guess is as good as mine, but let's check out Boomer's theory that it might be a harmonic signal from something close by. Did you get a position fix?"

Starbuck nodded as he made his way to the large star chart on the side of the bridge. He placed his index finger on its surface, then turned back to the group.

"As near as we can compute, it came through this quadrant," he tapped the area lightly, "something like this."

He traced a curved line from the original position to the middle of the map, which represented the Galactica's current position in space. Adama watched the movement carefully, taking note of the coordinates of each part Starbuck's finger passed through.

"Colonel Tigh," he said, speaking into the comlink he was wearing on his head, "Concentrated scan please."

Up on the command deck, Tigh glanced down at them, then passed the order

onto Omega. The bridge officer started the scan, then waited for further information to enter into the computer.

"Start quadrant epsilon-seven, mark four. Athena, are we getting any transmissions on the other frequencies from that area?"

While running a similar scan to Omega's, and waiting for it to complete, Athena looked at the quadrant that her father had indicated. It looked like just about every area of space that they'd been traveling through of late. Empty and boring.

"Nothing, Commander. All comchannels are clear."

Adama nodded at the information, then turned to the others. There was one more matter that needed clearing up. "All these yahrens I've commanded this ship, and I'd completely forgotten about that celestial dome topside, or else I know I would have ordered it dismantled during our last refit on Caprica. What were you four doing up there?"

His dark eyes went from one face to the other. Sheba and Cassiopeia were avoiding his gaze, while Apollo smiled slightly and looked past his father, refusing to speak. Adama found himself raising an eyebrow in amusement, then focused his gaze on the embarrassed Lieutenant Starbuck.

"Uh, just taking in the view, Commander," he said, wondering why the others were making it seem that something... odd was going up there. If that's the impression they wanted to leave, they could do it themselves.

"It's a very nice view," Sheba added, sympathizing with Starbuck's situation. Apollo and Cassiopeia were still being silent, and she wondered what they were thinking.

"Oh." Adama nodded, understanding that some things were just not supposed to be known by commanding officers. Silence fell between them for the next few centons until Tigh came down from the command deck.

"Sir, the only thing of possible interest in that quadrant is a solar system on the edge of our scanners located about here." Tigh indicated a position that was midway from the points Starbuck had traced earlier.

"Right on the line of transmission," Adama observed, then looked at Apollo. "It may indeed be a harmonic signal."

His son didn't seem convinced as he frowned at the star map.

"Maybe."

Adama looked back at his aide. "Any life forms?"

"Too far for that data, sir," Tigh replied, shaking his head. "We're barely picking up the major planets as it is."

Musing through the information, Adama gazed at the star map as he thought. Under normal circumstances, he would have ignored the odd occurrence and keep his attention focused on Cylons. However, since their enemy hadn't been seen or heard from in more than half a yahren, Adama decided that this was worth investigating. A transmission might mean a civilization capable of doing trade with, and the Fleet could always use new sources of food.

"Apollo," he began, "Take a Viper patrol into that quadrant. See if you can locate the source of that signal, but maintain caution at all times."

"Yes, sir." Apollo motioned for Sheba and Starbuck to follow him, and they quickly left the bridge.

"Boomer," he continued, "Keep on working on that recording until Doctor Wilker returns. If you're successful in clearing up any more of it, contact me immediately."

Giving the commander a quick nod, Boomer hurried after his friends. Cassiopeia stayed behind, looking at the star map as Adama went up to the command deck to supervise the launch. She was about ready to leave the bridge when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"What were you doing in that dome?" Tigh asked as Cassiopeia turned to face her. He'd noticed the reluctance that both she and Apollo when questioned by the commander, and he had to admit that the curiosity was piqued.

She flashed him a grin that didn't match the scorn in her voice.

"Colonel."

He watched her leave, then suddenly shuddered. Did he really want to know?

"I guess it's time to discuss discipline in the ranks again," he sighed, following

Adama's path back up to the command deck.

There wasn't much chatter among the three pilots as their Vipers raced to the star system. The excitement of the prospect of adventure made up for it, and more than once during the trip, Starbuck found himself waiting impatiently for their arrival. For a few microns, he wondered what they would find. Ever since the Fleet had moved past the last known charted region of space when they put Gomorrah behind them, Starbuck had always felt uneasy about the prospects of what lay beyond.

"There!" Sheba finally exclaimed. "I've got it on the scanner!

We'll be there within a micron."

"I'm picking up five planets in fairly widespread orbits," Apollo said, sounding completely serious now. The way he went between moods and attitudes sometimes made Starbuck wonder if there were actually two people living inside the same body. He really takes to heart the point of view that work and play should be completely separate, he thought idly, then realized that since both Apollo and Sheba were looking at the scanner, maybe he should, too.

"Got 'em," he said a micron later, looking at the layout of the solar system. Nothing special yet. The Viper's computer quickly ran through a few scans, and flashed their results on the small scanner screen. "I'm not picking up any life forms."

"Neither am I," Sheba replied, "but we're still a long way off from any of the planets' surfaces."

"Let's split up and take a good look at the first three", Apollo ordered, and before anyone could reply, his Viper veered off toward the outermost planet.

"Go for the middle one," Sheba told Starbuck as she headed for the second planet.

"I have a choice?" he grumbled.

Before Starbuck could even reach his destination, Apollo's voice was already coming over the comchannel again, this time with a description of his planet.

"First planet's a giant. Eighty percent compressed hydrogen, twelve percent helium. No life forms." He paused as his voice took on an appreciative tone. "It

sure is pretty."

"So's number two," Sheba continued. "Beautiful but deadly. The atmosphere's almost completely comprised of compressed carbon dioxide. No life forms."

"You don't say," Starbuck muttered as his Viper started scanning the planet before reaching it. He grimaced, then groaned slightly, as the results came on the screen. "Ugh. Leave it to me to get the ugly one. No atmosphere, just barren rock. Might make a nice resort. No life —"

He stopped as the scanner beeped, showing that something was being picked up. He requested more information.

"Wait a micron."

"What is it?" Apollo wanted to know, sounding concerned.

The scanner displayed the planet, and the rim of a potential target was appeared from behind it. Starbuck frowned, realizing that whatever it was, it was taking its own sweet time.

"I'm picking up something that's just rising on the backside of the planet." He waited a few microns as more of it became visible, then the scanner began processing it. To his relief, an identification came on the monitor. Then his relief quickly disappeared.

"Oh, no..."

"Starbuck?" Apollo's voice was simultaneously getting irritated and concerned at the lack of a definite answer. "For Sagan's sake, answer me!"

"Get out of here!" Starbuck shouted, pulling sharply on the joystick to get the Viper to do a sharp U-turn. He wanted out of there right now. "It's a Cylon basestar!"

"What?" Apollo sounded like he was completely stunned. "Are you sure?"

"Looks like a basestar to me, buddy, and my Warbook happens to agree with me!" He fired the turbos to their maximum speed. "You're doubting me? What do you want me to do? I'm not about to wait around to ask 'em, either!"

"We're following your lead, Starbuck," Sheba said, interrupting whatever

Apollo had in mind to retort. Without saying another word, the three Vipers resumed a course back to the Galactica as fast as they could go.

Chapter Three

Although he'd only been sitting in the lab for under a centar, Boomer was already frustrated. Since Wilker was away, his chief assistant was helping him with the transmission. Fairfax, a thin and balding young man with an annoying habit of sniffing even though there was nothing wrong with his sinuses, was leaning over Boomer's shoulder, offering suggestions and giving instructions that weren't really helping. For a few microns, Boomer couldn't believe that he was the nephew — and the namesake, no less — of the great Columbia commander who had died shortly after the Annihilation when he had singlehandedly rammed a basestar that failed to escape the orbit of Carillon before the planet blew.

He was aware though, that the younger Fairfax had never gotten along with his legendary uncle. Since Commander Fairfax had never married and had no children, the Columbia commander had always hoped that his nephew would carry on his tradition by joining the military himself. When the younger Fairfax had chosen a different path in the realm of science, the commander all but disowned him from that point on. The rupture was so great that even in the brief time after the Holocaust, when the commander had been staying aboard the Galactica, the two had purposefully avoided each other. And when Commander Fairfax had been posthumously awarded the Star of Kobol following his death at Carillon, the younger Fairfax had initially refused to attend the ceremony to accept the award on the family's behalf. It took an angry order from Adama to finally force the younger Fairfax to do otherwise and show up.

"I suggest using the RGB settings," Fairfax was saying, using an authoritative tone that was beginning to rub Boomer the wrong way. "That might help clarify some of the picture."

"In which way? That'll only make it darker or lighter." Boomer winced as Fairfax sniffled. "That won't help much. It's the snow that's interfering with it. How about the image filters?"

"Which one?" Fairfax reached past him to access the selections.

"I suppose that we could smooth some of it out, and maybe sharpen the details of that object. What do you think it is, anyway?"

Patience, Boomer told himself. "It's a ship."

"Ah. Well, we can sharpen the details of the ship." He entered a command. "How's this?"

The image flickered on the screens ahead of them as the changes were implemented, but to Boomer's horror, the static smoothed the entire picture out until there was nothing visible. "Frack! Undo it now!" he exclaimed. To his relief, the fuzzy vessel returned. "I don't think that's the way to do it!"

"Sorry." This time, a bit of sheepishness came into the tech's voice, but then there was the annoying sniffing again. "Let's try something different, then."

"How about the audio again?" Boomer suggested, not eager to continue working with the blond man for much longer. He wished that something, anything, would distract him so he could leave this for Wilker to go through when he returned. "When's the Doctor coming back aboard, by the way?"

Fairfax shrugged as he moved back from Boomer's seat. "Whenever the technical problems on the Electronics Ship are cleared up. Wilker just moved a lot of his pet projects there, like the androids and those Cylons he was messing around with; and since he did, I've rarely seen him around here. That ship's been his second home since just after Baltar's escape."

"Oh. Hey, do you think it's possible for us to send this over for him to take a look at?" Boomer felt optimistic for the first time.

"A file this big? Can you imagine how much bandwidth that'll take? Dream on, Lieutenant." Fairfax reached for some equipment on a nearby table. "Here, let's try this. It's something Wilker was working on before he went to the electronics ship. It's designed to clean up the comlines for the bridge, but I'm sure that it'll work with the recording."

Boomer stared at the clunky piece of machinery for a few microns, wondering how it would work and if it would be a bother to install.

No, judging by the way Fairfax was holding it uneasily in his hands, Boomer knew that it would be a royal pain in the astrum.

"Uh, look, Fairfax. I don't think —"

A familiar noise cut through the room, and the lighting changed from the

standard white lights to the red illumination of the red alert. Boomer felt the hairs on the back of his neck go on end as he heard the klaxon go off.

"What's going on?" Fairfax asked, frowning as he looked about him.

"Do you think the Cylons have found us again?"

"Are you a wagerer?" Boomer muttered, pushing back his seat and waiting for the command for the pilots to go to their ships.

"What? Uh, not really. Why?"

"Because you'd make a ton of cubits by placing a wager on that."

Adama waited impatiently in front of the star map on the bridge for Apollo, Sheba and Starbuck to arrive, as the nervous activity around the bridge continued as it had ever since they'd received the message from Apollo reporting the coordinators of the basestar.

"Keep on it, Omega," he heard Tigh say up on the command deck, as the *Galactica's* scanners tried to verify what the pilots had reported.

The colonel stared at the monitors for another micron, then shook his head. "Commander, we're still too far out to pick up the basestar on our scanners, but nothing has left that star system but our patrol."

"Good," Adama said, studying the layout of the star map. "Then they can't scan us either. Now, if we can only make sure that the patrol wasn't picked up on their scanners."

"I was out of there before they reached orbit," Starbuck's voice called from the entrance as he, Sheba and Apollo hurried onto the bridge. "The micron the Warbook identified it, I was out of there."

"After all these sectars, I thought we'd finally lost them for good," the Commander sighed with disgust.

"We all did, Commander," Sheba said, not wanting to go into any of the details from the last time the *Galactica* had crossed paths with the Cylons. It only served to remind her of the whole unpleasant experience surrounding a mysterious figure who'd called himself Count Iblis.

"What about you two?" Adama asked her and his son.

"We were blocked out by the other two planets," Apollo reported, looking nervous at the sudden appearance of the Cylons. "I don't think they could have scanned us. Even if they did, it would have been only a minor blip on their scanner if they weren't in orbit yet."

"Thank God for that, but that doesn't help our situation." Adama sighed, then muttered again, "Lords of Kobol, I really thought we'd lost them for good." He had always been convinced that after Count Iblis's incredible demonstration of power that hurled the pursuit force that had stalked the Fleet from the beginning all the way across the stars, that another, more benevolent power had seen to it that the Cylons would never pick up the Fleet's trail again. Now, he was learning the painful lesson of how prayers often didn't stay answered forever.

Tigh came down to meet them at the star map, a grim expression on his face. "It gets worse, sir. They couldn't have picked a better place to pick a trap." He illustrated his next point by pointing to the star map. "That solar system is on the rim of this galaxy. We'll have to backtrack a long way to get a fleet the size of ours around her without being picked up."

"That's why they're sitting where they are," Adama agreed, then frowned suddenly as he looked at his son. "Apollo, that transmission you picked up. They're enticing us in!"

"You think that signal originated on that basestar?" Apollo asked, not quite believing what he was hearing.

"I think that's most likely what the source of the transmission is."

"Would you mind telling me how a Cylon basestar in the middle of nowhere has the initiative to create a signal that we might never have picked up in the first place?" Apollo shook his head. "I don't think that's realistic."

"The signal came from this area, and that's where you've found the basestar. It's an elaborate lure. Precisely what I'd expect from the Cylons."

Apollo shook his head. "I'm not so sure."

"Whether it is or not isn't the question," Starbuck cut in. He couldn't believe that Apollo was arguing the nuance of why the Cylons might do this when they had a basestar practically breathing down their throats. "What are we going to do?"

Tigh shook his head. "I just explained, Lieutenant. There's nothing we can do but turn back and then try to pick up our main Epsilon 22 heading again from another angle once we've gotten around them."

"Turn back?" Starbuck couldn't believe his ears. "Come on, there has to be another way."

"We're always open to suggestions, Lieutenant, and I don't hear you making any."

Adama was silent for a few microns, then slowly spoke. "Yes, there is an alternative." he then took a breath as he uttered a sentence that he had regarded as an evil temptation in the early sectors following the Holocaust. "We can attack."

Tigh stared at Adama as though the commander had lost his mind. Before he could make any comments, Adama started moving up to the command deck, and Tigh had to hurry to follow him. He shot a glance at the pilots to follow him.

"Adama, we haven't dared tangle with a basestar by ourselves since we fled the Colonies!" he protested, trying to keep up.

Starbuck was about to retort with a comeback about how he, Apollo and Commander Fairfax had taken out the one at Carillon through the late commander's brilliant decoy of making the basestar think that six squadrons of Vipers were about to attack. But before he could, Sheba had jumped in first.

"My father did." there was an almost defiant, proud edge in her tone. Tigh shot her a look that told her not to encourage Adama, but the commander simply nodded.

"Yes," Adama was smiling ironically, as he recognized the pride in her tone. "He did."

"And the Pegasus hasn't been heard from since." the executive officer added pointedly.

Sheba had to force herself not to react to the colonel's comment. She believed with all her being that the Pegasus was still out there somewhere, and that she'd see her father one day. Whenever someone referred to him as being dead, as Tigh seemed to be doing, she felt herself immediately going on the defensive.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Apollo giving her a sympathetic look,

then she felt a slight touch on her hand. When she turned her head to look in Apollo's direction, he was back to paying attention to the commanding officers, but she knew that it had been him.

"The difference, Tigh, is that Commander Cain attacked two basestars. We'd be taking out only one," Adama continued, then looked back at the navigational chart that for now showed only the solar system. "One baseship only, tells us a lot. Obviously, when the Cylons lost our trail they had to have spread their basestars throughout all the star systems on a wide perimeter in order to find us. That means that this basestar may be the only one in this area of the galaxy. Eliminate it and we might buy more long-term security than we could ever have bargained for."

"Possible." Tigh conceded, "But maybe it's not the only one nearby. What's to stop it from alerting its sister ships about our presence as we attack?"

"Tigh, you're missing the point. Do you realize that this is the first time we have the clear advantage? We have the surprise, and relatively equal numbers." Adama's tone became more firm, reminding Tigh of the times when he'd been wingmates with the then-Captain Adama in Blue Squadron aboard the Battlestar Cerberus.

"But even if we didn't have the advantage," the commander suddenly let out a sigh that was both weary and angry, indicating how the many long sectors of resisting the temptation to attack during the last period of Cylon pursuit had at last taken their toll, "I'm tired of running."

A bittersweet smile formed on the executive officer's lips. He too had been resisting the temptation for so long, even up to this very micron and in a flash, it had taken its toll on him as well.

"Adama," Tigh said quietly, "So am I."

"Then we're agreed." Adama turned to the three warriors who were standing on the steps just below the upper level. Despite their surprise at the turn of events, Apollo, Starbuck and Sheba all appeared to be enthusiastic about the idea. "We're going to take her on, and we're going to win."

Unwitting to any plans that the Colonials had made, the occupants of the Cylon basestar went about their duties the way they did every cycle. The ship had been experiencing mechanical problems of late, which was to be expected from an

aging ship that had seen action against the humans for nearly fifty yahrens. And most of it was with the same commander, an IL series Cylon named Beta. An older and outdated model than those IL's serving in command posts in the more central part of the Cylon attack force, or even those stationed at outposts like Gomorrah and Atilla, Beta and the basestar had been slated for decommissioning when the final strike against the humans had been dealt a yahren before. With the escaped and elusive Galactica fleet now somewhere in deep space, both the Imperious Leader and the traitor Baltar had sent out all extra ships in pursuit of the Fleet. Now, for the last six sectars, when a new redeployment of the Cylon Fleet had been ordered after Baltar's ship had lost the Galactica's trail (and had seen Baltar himself mysteriously disappear), Beta's ship had been sent to the most distant edge of the galaxy along the perimeter.

Although it had meant potentially a few extra yahrens of life at the most, Beta resented his posting. The basestar's aging sensors and communications needed replacing yet again, but they'd been sent out before any upgrading could be done. It was a problem that was hampering their search for the humans, a problem exacerbated by their orders to remain in a fixed position in this distant star system. Had Beta been human, he would have sighed loudly. The situation wasn't as bad as he sometimes wished it were. The basestar had been updated with new lasers, after all. They still had relatively modern Raiders, and their Centurions were in working order.

Making his way through the ship, Beta headed for the basestar's control center. He took his time, checking through the panels and such as he passed by. Most of the basestar's immense bulk was taken up by the four bays, followed by the engines, eventually leaving only a small portion for the decks that housed the Cylons themselves, along with a resources such as the prisoner's cells, the repair stations, and other areas.

We're so behind compared to the newer basestars, Beta thought. I wonder if it's easier for us to fall apart in the line of duty instead of being taken apart back home.

Unlike the humans' battlestars, where the bridges were located on a higher deck, if not the top deck in the forward section, basestars' control centers were at the bottom-most part of the ship. An interior passageway called the central core, whose name basically explained itself, connected all the decks together by a system of ladders.

It didn't take long for Beta to reach the bottom. When he arrived, the

centurion on guard at the entrance gave him a stiff salute. Beta didn't bother returning it as he strolled through the short hallway that separated the central core from the control center.

On both sides of him were computers, which included some of the most basic instrumentation that the basestar needed, like the scanners. The command center was a somewhat grandiose name for a small, featureless room that housed three stations, some monitors embedded in the walls, and five centurions. Beta strode into the middle of the room where his customary place was.

One glance at the monitor that showed the outside environment told him nothing about their current status. He turned to the centurion at the navigation station, whom he'd come to term One and spoke in a somewhat haughty voice.

"Have we achieved orbit around the planet yet?"

"Achieved ten centons ago," One replied, not looking up from its console.

"Ten centons? Well, that's long enough to make sure that we don't fall out of orbit again. How are the long range scanners? Are they even working?"

Two, the centurion at the helm console answered this time. Its voice had a slightly different pitch from One's, making it easy for someone to distinguish the difference between the centurions, but not too much. His basestar had been without the services of a gold-plated Command Centurion for so long, that it had all but obliterated the differences among Centurions to Beta.

"Fully operational. Nothing definite to report."

The phrase caught Beta's attention. Centurions, especially these models, were notorious for not reporting everything they were supposed to. It was a flaw in their programming that had yet to be worked out. Perhaps that's why they're on this basestar. Cylon Command is hoping that they'll be destroyed along with this old ship.

"Definite?" He inserted a scolding tone to his voice. "Are you saying that there's something indefinite to report? Continue, please."

"A momentary blip prior to achieving orbit. Our scanners were not fully operational."

"Are they ever working?" Beta sighed. "Have you picked up anything since

coming into orbit and getting the scanners completely on-line?"

"No."

Beta took a micron to muse upon the situation. A blip, Two had said. Given the poor state of their scanners, a blip might have been just that. But with their assigned mission of trying to locate the Galactica and her fleet if they ventured into this area of space, the blip might have been a patrol ducking out range in an attempt to evade detection. As commander, Beta couldn't allow that to slip by without being properly investigated.

He turned to the centurion at the last station, whom he called Three. "Launch a rotating schedule of fighters to patrol and circumnavigate the outer edge of this planetary system. If this is a blip, then we will not have anything to worry about. If the blip is a Galactican patrol, I want to know about it immediately. I do not want those humans appearing out of nowhere to catch us by surprise."

"By your command," Three replied, its voice the highest of all the centurions. It coded in the command that would sound the proper signal through the basestar's meager comlines. Faintly, Beta could hear the alternating pitch that sent a certain group of centurions down to the bays for launching.

Satisfied that everything was going as well as it could be, Beta turned to leave the center. There was a lot that needed to be done if the basestar was supposed to meet with a battlestar and survive.

Chapter Four

It was amazing what the power of a pointer could do, Tigh mused as he waited for the assembled pilots to quiet down so he could begin his lecture. Partially hidden in the back was Adama, who was waiting for his cue to enter in the briefing.

Tapping the pointer in his hand, Tigh had the illusion for a few microns that he was like Commander Cain, who never went anywhere without his swagger stick. The two articles were light yahrens apart, but having them gave one a sense of power — real or illusory.

Tigh gazed out at the warriors, noting that they were mostly the senior pilots who would later be passing the information onto the junior pilots as soon as they were allowed to leave. Directly in front of him were Sheba and Apollo; and off to the right were Starbuck, Boomer and Jolly. Tigh knew from experience to expect trouble from the assembled three. Like schoolboys looking for mischief, they

couldn't resist making commentaries as the briefing progressed.

It was time to begin, Tigh decided. Turning to the scaled model of a basestar to his immediate right, he rapped the model. It caused some pilots to jump, then a slightly nervous chuckle started.

"This," Tigh began, tapping the model a little more gently, "is our target. The basestar is currently in the quadrant two hectares from here, but we're quickly approaching it. No one here, except perhaps for the exception of Captain Apollo and Lieutenant Starbuck, has seen a basestar from close up, and thus isn't familiar with the technology or the external prowess of a basestar."

"Whaddya know," Starbuck muttered, and he saw Apollo give him a pointed look. "We're famous."

"Basestars are the Cylons' equivalent of a battlestar," Tigh continued, ignoring the lieutenant. "They both have some of the same functions, the most obvious of which is the fighters. We carry them, we fuel them, and we repair them."

"But it's in the area of shipboard weaponry where the two differ. Battlestars are equipped with numerous defensive laser turrets, placed strategically on the hull. We also have a maximum of four missiles, each one capable of destroying a basestar with a precise shot fired from close range."

He took the pointer and tapped it on the upper half of the basestar. "The Cylons have the advantage here, in defenses. Not only does she have three hundred fighters," he couldn't help but notice the wincing that several pilots made, "but she has two long-range mega pulsars, the equivalent of our missile launchers, here and here," he indicated two locations on either side of the ship, "and over a hundred defensive laser turrets distributed about her hull."

"Both on the inner part and on the upper parts," Apollo added.

"Face it, Colonel, she's an orbiting killer."

"Exactly," Tigh nodded. "Capable of destroying every ship we have, including the Galactica."

"It's great having Apollo and Tigh in the same room," Starbuck muttered to Boomer and Jolly. "I love the air of optimism they give."

He was answered by them rolling their eyes at him, then all three straightened

up when Adama chose that micron to step to the front.

"The Colonel and I have tried a new kind of strategy in light of this... unusual situation," he began, standing with his hands clasped in front of the pilots. "We have the element of surprise in our favor, and we're going to make the most of it.

"All Viper squadrons will launch before the Galactica is within the basestar's scanning range. Your job will be to draw out her fighters so we can continue unimpeded with our part of the plan." He paused to make a point, hoping to boost their enthusiasm. "You'll be outnumbered two-to-one, but you're used to that."

"Only two-to-one?" Starbuck continued in a hushed voice. "We faced worse odds than that at Caprica!"

"We lost at Caprica, remember, buddy?" Boomer shot back. "That's why we're out here and not back home."

"I was trying to be optimistic. Shoot me because I'm trying to raise morale."

"Only thing you're going to end up with is a raised amount of deep probes courtesy of the colonel if you don't be quiet."

Adama ignored their exchange as he continued.

"I intend to take the Galactica in at an arc, from the opposite direction. If we're lucky, the basestar will be so occupied watching you that we'll be on her before she's aware of us, and we'll get the first strike." A slight grin appeared on the Commander's face. "After that, it's a toe-to-toe slugging match. Because we have the element of surprise, it might be possible for us to destroy the baseship without resorting to our missiles. Since they are the one element of weaponry we possess that is totally irreplaceable, I don't intend to use one unless it becomes absolutely imperative."

"Bad analogy," Starbuck said. "Slugging matches involve getting bruises, and I don't think we want any of those."

"Quiet, buddy," Jolly urged.

"Are there any questions?" Adama asked, looking about the room.

His gaze rested a few microns longer on Starbuck, who cringed slightly at the attention, then he nodded. "Well, that's it. Thank you, and may the Lords of Kobol

guide us all with this battle. Colonel, a few final words?"

"Thank you, Commander." Tigh's tone changed from the instructional one he'd used earlier to one of command. "Squadrons will assemble at their Vipers at 1750. The launch will be at 1800. Prior to this, the Officer's Club will be open to all officers, regardless of rank, for one centar and one drink, on the Commander. Commencing now."

A few warriors cheered for a micron at Tigh's words before straightening to attention as the commanding officers left the room.

The moment they left, excited and nervous chatter filled the room.

"Well, if the Commander's buying, I won't insult him by not drinking!" Jolly announced.

Boomer shook his head in mock disdain. "If anybody's buying, you're drinking, Jolly!"

"So?" the large warrior ignored Boomer's jibe with good humor.

"Are you coming? I don't want to be the last one there. If the drinks are basically free, we'll just get the vapors in the barrels if we're late."

"Or somebody's going to take our table." Boomer laughed in agreement, then looked to their other friends. "Coming, guys?"

"I won't miss this," Sheba said, coming over to them. "Shall we go?"

"Sounds good." Starbuck motioned to the door. "There's an ambrosa down there with my name on it."

They started following the other warriors to the Officer's Club when they noticed that they were missing someone. Starbuck turned back to see Apollo examining the model basestar with his back to them.

Seeing the frown on Starbuck's face, Sheba followed his gaze to Apollo. Feeling concerned, she called, "Apollo, aren't you coming?"

He didn't turn to face her. "I'll be there in a bit. Save me one, okay?"

"Uh, oh," Starbuck whispered. "I don't like this. I'd better talk to him. We'll

meet up with you in a centon, once I talk him out of whatever he's thinking."

Leaving the others behind, Starbuck headed back to the model and the solemn warrior standing next to it. He stood next to Apollo for a few microns before finally speaking.

"I should know better than to ask, but what is it?"

Apollo sighed, not taking his eyes off the model. He absent-mindedly ran his fingers along the edge of it as he spoke. "I was just thinking."

"That's what I was afraid of," Starbuck said, almost tempted to groan. "We ought to put a restriction to the amount of time you're allowed to think. It'll make all our lives easier, and quieter."

"If we could just figure some way to knock the scanners out in her control center," Apollo mused, "the Galactica would be sure to get in the first strike."

"It's a terrific idea, but unless you'd care to tell me how, I don't see anyway of that being done. Now, let's head down to the Officer's Club."

"But it would have to be from the inside." Apollo sounded as he hadn't heard Starbuck speaking at all. "I don't see anywhere on here that might show where those scanners are located on the exterior."

"Oh, sure." Starbuck was determined to make Apollo forget about the basestar until the battle began. "It's simple, really. All we have to do is fly a Viper through a hundred fighters, land on the basestar without being shot at, find the control center, blow it up, and take off again."

"Starbuck," Apollo exclaimed as he turned to face his friend. "You're right!"

Starbuck stared at him dubiously and then let out an exasperated grunt, "Yeah, of course I'm right. Apollo, will you come back to reality and get moving?"

"No, seriously. We can do it." Apollo replied, a smile on his face. "If we use Baltar's Cylon fighter."

Any protest died on Starbuck's lips as he saw that Apollo had a point. A good but very dangerous point.

"I thought you'd see my point," Apollo said triumphantly. "Come on, let's tell

the commander."

Reluctantly, Starbuck followed Apollo out of the briefing room, all the while praying that someone would put an end to this madness.

The more Starbuck thought about it, the more he realized that he had a bad feeling about the entire situation. He wished that Apollo would wake up to it, but his friend was oblivious to any seemingly rational thought.

To Starbuck's relief, the micron Apollo finished giving the proposal to Adama, the commander said with great finality, "No."

Apollo couldn't believe his ears. "It's the only way to ensure that the Galactica gets in the first strike," he explained slowly, trying desperately to get his father to see his logic. "That's the key to victory, and you know it, Father."

"Of course I do," Adama replied. "It's something that both Tigh and I have discussed, and we feel that the strategy we've planned will work in our favor."

"But what if it doesn't?" Apollo shot back.

Shaking his head at Apollo's words, Adama continued, "Have you thought this plan of yours out completely? Let's say you make it inside as planned. Then what? What's the security like in the landing bay? How many centurions are there between you and the control center?"

In fact, do you even know where the control center is located?"

Starbuck wasn't surprised to see Apollo stop in the middle of a protest as he realized that Adama had zeroed in on an area his son neglected to consider. He fumbled for a few microns, trying to think of any alternatives.

"No, I don't, but..." He suddenly grinned as inspiration struck him. "Starbuck! When Baltar captured you, you were taken to his basestar. You know where the control center is, don't you?"

He threw his friend a desperate but hopeful look, and Starbuck found himself wanting to rub it off Apollo's face. No, even better. He wanted to slug him for bringing him into the conversation.

"Uh, Apollo, I think you're forgetting something," the blonde warrior pointed out. "I was their prisoner, not their guest of honor. They didn't exactly give me the

grand tour."

The desperate look turned to one of pleading. "Come on, Starbuck, you had to have seen something."

"Seriously. The only places I saw were the holding cells, the landing bays, and Baltar's throne room, but none of those places had direction signs. Not that I can read Cylon or anything, you understand." Starbuck frowned as he realized that there was one piece of information that Apollo could use in his desperate attempt to get the mission authorized. "Well, there's always the central core, which connects those decks together, but I have no idea where the control center is."

"Then make an educated guess!" Apollo hissed quietly out of the side of his mouth.

The two fell silent as Adama moved from his position in front of his star field window to face the warriors directly. His face was contemplative, and Starbuck felt his hopes for the mission being scrapped crumble as the commander prepared to speak.

"You know," he said slowly, looking each of them in the eyes, "I think your plan will work."

"It will?" Starbuck was taken aback at the sudden turn-around from Adama's firm rejection of the plan just microns earlier.

"Yes," Adama nodded, "but relying on your memory is the wrong way of approaching this problem."

"Oh, frack," Starbuck muttered, earning a glare from Apollo. He could feel his friend's anticipation building exponentially. "You're not serious, Commander."

"I am." The older man headed for his desk, where the communication unit was located. He entered the code for the bridge and waiting for a clear signal to come through. "Bridge, this is Commander Adama. I want a shuttle with a full security team to launch for the Prison Barge, with orders to bring Baltar back to my quarters. I expect to see him here within a half centar. Adama out."

He looked up from the communicator to see both his son and Starbuck giving him stunned looks. Adama had the feeling that while Apollo was appreciative of any help he could get for this mission to get off the ground, going to Baltar wasn't something he really wanted.

Starbuck, he knew, was just horrified.

"Baltar?" the lieutenant repeated, looking disgusted. "What do you want that piece of bilge scum for?"

"Someone has to tell you two where the control center is located," Adama told him. "Otherwise, the mission is going to take more time than we have to spare."

"But going to Baltar..." Starbuck shuddered slightly. "I don't trust him as far as I can throw him. It's only been a sector since he staged a prison break, for Sagan's sake."

"I agree with Starbuck," Apollo began, "And as much as I realize that Baltar's the only one who really knows his way around a basestar, the thing I want to know is whether he's really going to help us. And is the information going to be correct? What if he sends us into a trap? He's perfectly capable of doing that, Father."

"I think I just might have a way of getting him to agree", Adama said, feeling a sense of distaste going through his body that he knew he was going to have to keep submerged at all costs. "And if I'm right, he won't be able to resist it."

Everyone at the table had already downed their allotted drink by the time Apollo and Starbuck finally made their way into the Officer's Club. Boomer looked up at them curiously as the two sat at the vacant spots at the crowded table.

"So?" he wanted to know. "What kept you two?"

Apollo didn't say anything as he sipped his ambrosia, and Starbuck found himself in the spotlight as the attention was focused on him. He swallowed slightly before speaking.

"Uh... well, we got an idea that'll make sure we win the battle," he began, shooting a glare at Apollo. It was worthless when he realized that he wouldn't get a reaction out of him. "We had to run it by the Commander."

"What kind of idea?" Sheba asked.

"We're going to get rid of its scanners by taking them out manually." Starbuck glanced around the table to see their reactions, which he wasn't sure that he wanted to see. "Apollo and I are going to board the basestar."

A stunned silence came over the table. Boomer felt his jaw go slack, while

across from him, Sheba turned very pale. The others stared at the two warriors with shock.

"You're what?" Boomer couldn't believe what he'd heard...

"We're taking the Raider over," Apollo verified, setting his mug down. "Starbuck and I are leaving half a centar before you guys launch."

"That's crazy!" Jolly exclaimed, looking at each of his friends.

"It's worse than crazy! It's... well, it's suicidal!"

"But it'll make the battle that much easier," the captain said, his voice firm. "If the basestar can't scan the Galactica, then we're sure to win. Otherwise, we might not have a base to return to when the battle's over."

Sheba finally found the strength to speak. "Apollo, Starbuck, no one's ever boarded a basestar and left with information as detailed as what you need to know to complete this mission. What if you get lost? You might never make it back..."

"Well," Starbuck said, forcing a grin onto his face, "That's why we're getting help."

"From whom? There's no one here in the Fleet who can help you."

"Oh, frack, guys, you aren't..." Boomer interrupted both himself and Sheba when he suddenly realized what was happening. "You are, aren't you?"

"What, Boomer?" Jolly asked.

"You're going to Baltar?"

Both Apollo and Starbuck solemnly nodded, and they were both avoiding Boomer's gaze. "Oh, well, isn't this getting rosier by the micron!"

"Where else are we going to get the information?" Apollo asked gently.

"Sure, but really! I mean only a sectar ago he was ready to kill me and Sheba both in that prison break he pulled off. And before that, when we tried to get information about Charybdis from him—"

"We know that," Apollo interrupted, "but this is my father's call, Boomer. The

only way the mission can work is if we go to Baltar. Right now, Bojay and Brie are taking Castor and a full security team over to pick him up."

"Well at least with Castor watching him I can be assured he won't get a chance to escape again like he did with Reese and his Council Security dimwits." Boomer sighed as he looked up, as though pleading for patience from above. "And you're going in the Raider? That's fine for when you're going, but coming back?"

Starbuck flashed him a grin. "I'm the least worried about that. Hey, it should be fun."

"Yeah, it probably would be for you, too." Boomer sighed again, then abruptly stood up. "I'm going to head back to Wilker's lab. He's supposed to be back sometime today, and I really want him to look at that signal. And I've got some... other work to do. I'll see you guys later."

Starbuck watched his dark friend leave, then turned his attention to the rest of the group. "Is it just me, or is there a pretty tech that Boomer has his eye on in Wilker's lab?"

"That's rude," Sheba said, frowning at him. "Has it ever occurred to you that Boomer might just have other priorities than you?"

"Sometimes, but then again, Boomer's not exactly Sire Excitement around here, is he?"

"No, but neither am I," Apollo said, giving a slight smile. "And I think I'm going to follow the Sire's example and go get ready for the mission. I'll see you in the bay in half a centar, Starbuck."

He followed Boomer's lead out of the Officer's Club, passing his sister Athena as she made her way in. He didn't stop to say anything, and as Athena approached the table to take Apollo's empty seat, she noticed the forlorn expression on Sheba's face.

"I heard Father's orders on the bridge, first about Baltar, and then a few centons later about the Raider." She targeted Starbuck with a cool gaze. "What's going on? I passed Boomer on the way here, and he wouldn't say anything. He basically told me to ask you."

"Heh," Starbuck laughed weakly, thinking with irony how rare it was for Athena to initiate conversation with him about anything. The effects of their

breakup still loomed large within the Commander's daughter.

He quickly gave her the brief outline of the plan. When he was finished, she was staring at him in semi-horror. "What, it's not that bad, is it?"

"He's finally going to go through with it," Athena whispered, glancing back at the doorway. "Felger, I knew this was coming."

"What?" Sheba felt her blood run cold as she listened to Athena.

"Apollo's death-wish."

Starbuck snorted loudly before taking a large sip of ambrosa.

"His what? Come on, that's a bunch of felgercarb if I've ever heard anything."

"Wait," Sheba ordered, "I want to know what this is about."

"Well, I don't." Starbuck put his mug heavily on the tabletop as he stood. "Apollo's probably the sanest and most cautious warrior on this battlestar, and I have no idea where you came up with the idea, but he doesn't have a death-wish. Not Apollo. Come on Jolly, let's go brief the rest of the squadrons."

He stormed out of the lounge, followed by the portly lieutenant, as Athena shook her head. "Sheba, I'm not kidding. Apollo seriously has a problem."

"About Serina?" Sheba had a wry expression on her face. "I know about that. Starbuck told me the story once."

"Serina's the entire problem," Athena sighed. "When she died, Apollo somehow deluded himself into thinking that the best way to cherish her memory was to keep completely to himself, especially when it comes to letting himself enjoy life. And especially with any other women. He still probably thinks that, even though he really has an interest in you."

Sheba felt her face blush slightly. "I... guess I knew that. Starbuck's always hinted at it, and I've noticed Apollo watching me every once in a while. But he's never actually done anything about it, at least not that I can think of right now. Has Apollo actually told you that himself?"

"Not in so many words." Her grin was mischievous, then faded as she continued. "But back to the death-wish. He tries to make up for what he thinks he

could have done on Kobol — save Serina from the Cylon, even though she was out of reach and it was a surprise attack.

He tries by trying to get himself killed, so he can be with her again. Haven't you noticed?"

"Not really..." Sheba said, knowing she was fudging the truth just a bit. For a long time, she had always sensed a reckless attitude in Apollo to do all the tough jobs imaginable, whether it was trying to put out the fires on the Galactica after the Cylon suicide runs, or even volunteering to head up Starbuck's defense when the blonde warrior had been accused of murder. The only difference was that Sheba had never tied in Apollo's reckless nature to do all the tough jobs to any kind of death wish.

"Think about it." Athena went on, "What dangerous mission hasn't Apollo been on? Just in the short time you've been here? The whole escapade when the Galactica was on fire; the Terran incident; and now this. And before all that, there was the Arcta mission, and he placed himself in the most dangerous part of it, too."

"Wouldn't that be considered as simply fulfilling his duty as a Colonial Warrior?" Sheba wondered, knowing it wasn't true. Even so, to hear these sentiments coming from someone else was an eye-opening experience for her.

"There's a point where you draw the line, Sheba. Apollo crossed it a long time ago. In fact, you'll probably notice that during dangerous missions, pilots make morbid jokes about what they're doing, just to alleviate the tension. But according to Boomer, Apollo never says anything. He only concentrates on the mission, which says to me that he's not frightened like most warriors are."

"Has anyone tried talking to him about this?"

"What would they say? Apollo would laugh it off, or yell at them to go away. Maybe he isn't even aware of it, but one thing my brother definitely doesn't like is people prying into his private life. And that includes Starbuck and Boomer and me. Even our father."

"I see." Sheba looked off at the direction where Apollo had left, her lips pursed in thought. "And he's still doing it? Even now, even with his feelings for me?"

"Yes. Sheba, I don't want to make it sound that Apollo's completely cold, not at all. He's just confused, and he's trying to resolve it the easiest way he knows —

subconsciously or not.”

Sheba continued to stare at the doorway as she absentmindedly ran her fingers through her light brown hair. For a few microns, her brown eyes narrowed in thought, as she recalled something she’d vowed during the shuttle trip back to the Galactica following that last encounter with Iblis, when they had suddenly come to with dazed memories of what had gone on before. A vow that she wouldn’t press Apollo about her feelings for him unless events dictated otherwise. From what Athena had just told him, and in light of what was happening, it was now fast becoming clear to Sheba that events were forcing her hand at long last.

She got to her feet and Athena noticed right away how her bearing was full of determination.

“I’m going to talk to him,” she announced. “But I’d better get Cassiopeia for back up. Something tells me she’s going to want to talk to Starbuck as much as I want to talk to Apollo. Thanks, Athena, for your information. We should have these talks more often.”

A determined stride in her walk, Sheba quickly left the Officer’s Club. Athena watched her go, then sighed loudly. “I hope you do, and for Apollo’s sake, I hope he listens.”

Adama was deep in thought as he stared out of the star field window in his office, waiting for the security team to bring Baltar there. He wasn’t sure about anything at that micron. He wasn’t sure about sending his first-born son and a man he thought of as a son into the depths of the basestar. More importantly, he wasn’t sure if he should trust Baltar and his information, and whether it was worth the price he’d be offering. Once before, in the darkened tomb of the Ninth Lord of Kobol, he had listened to Baltar make an offer to set a trap that would destroy the entire Cylon Empire itself. He had turned to him with more anger and hate than he had ever felt for another human being, pointed at him and said coldly, “I trusted you, once.” The legacy of how Baltar’s treachery had resulted in the destruction of nearly all that he had cherished in his life, especially Ila and Zac, had been too much for him to contemplate trusting anything Baltar would have to offer again.

But now, events were forcing him to take the repugnant step of trusting Baltar. He could only hope now that events would vindicate rising above his instinctive distaste.

He sighed loudly, longing as he sometimes did for the yahrens before the

Destruction, when all he had to worry about was the battlestar he commanded and the Cylons they were going to fight. He didn't have over two hundred civilian ships back then to be concerned about, and he still had the warm and loving support of Ila behind him.

"So much has changed in the past yahren," he said to the empty air. "I wonder if anything will seem normal again, outside of running and hiding like we've been doing."

Turning away from the star field, Adama moved to the basestar model that had been moved here. Its miniature size didn't convey the same imposing threat that the life-sized version did, and he looked over it again. Was there a part of it he couldn't recognize, or couldn't identify at a micron's glance? He was relieved to see that there wasn't, but he nevertheless continued his examination. It was enough to make him inwardly curse at how inefficient Colonial Intelligence had been for so many yahrens in their ability to determine the specific nature of Cylon weaponry. That fact alone more than explained why turning to Baltar had become the only potential solution.

The doorchime interrupted him a few microns, and Adama glanced at his chronometer before answering. It was a little more than a half centar, he noticed, but he decided to let it go this time as he called,

"Enter."

Sergeant Castor opened the door, then motioned for Baltar to enter. The older man stepped inside the office, looking about him in jaded curiosity as Castor followed him in. The Colonial security guard stood to attention in front of Adama.

"Prisoner here as requested, sir," he announced.

Adama looked at Baltar for a micron, seeing that the traitor wasn't looking at him, then turned his attention back to Castor.

"Remove his shackles, and wait outside until I call for you."

"Yes, sir." Castor quickly followed the Commander's orders, then shot a semi-disgusted look at Baltar before he quickly left.

For a few microns, neither man said anything. Baltar continued to look about the office, and Adama watched him carefully. Finally, the traitor's eyes rested on the basestar sitting close to the desk, and a large grin appeared on his face.

"Toys, Adama?" There was a mocking note to Baltar's voice, a sound that always seemed to be there when the two spoke together. It slightly grated at Adama, but he was determined not to let it bother him as he went to the table close to the model.

"Would you like a drink?" he offered, picking up the flask of red ambrosia. "It's a Sagitarian vintage, but it's all that we have."

That wasn't quite what Baltar was expecting, and he nodded slightly. His brown eyes were narrowed as he watched the commander pour out two small glasses.

"What do you want, Adama?" he asked as a glass was handed to him.

The tone he used now was completely lacking in the mockery he'd used only a centons ago. He was intrigued, and he wanted to know what the commander had up his sleeve.

"Information."

Baltar watched him go back to his desk, then glanced at the model that was displayed so prominently. He smiled suddenly as realization came to him. "They found you, didn't they?"

"Quite the opposite. We found them."

The traitor shrugged, not touching the wine. "It's the same result in the end."

Adama's voice was as determined as the glint in his dark brown eyes. "We're going to destroy them."

"My dear old friend, you've gone space happy during this past yahren," he said, not helping the humor that was coming into his voice.

"Destroy them? A basestar? That's not very likely."

"With your help."

"And why would I possibly help you?" Baltar scoffed, "First you returned me to the ranks of the regular prison population after I reluctantly saved your son from Charybdis, then you sent me back to isolation after my...escapade of a sectar ago. To be truthful Adama, I think I prefer isolation to mingling with other prisoners, so

if that is what I gain from helping you, I think I shall pass on that."

"I'm offering something else, Baltar," Adama found it difficult to look at him, but kept his tone gentle.

"Like what?" Baltar resumed his mocking edge, "I repeat. Why should I possibly help you?"

There was a long pause as Adama simply looked Baltar in the eyes, then very quietly — and deliberately, Baltar realized — said, "To regain your freedom."

For a few microns, Baltar believed that he hadn't heard correctly. Why would Adama set him free, just for a bit of information? He was the most hated man in Colonial history, he knew, and not exactly the kind of person one wanted running amok through the universe.

"You're taunting me," he accused, setting his untouched glass down heavily on the desk as he glared at Adama.

"No, my offer is completely sincere. Your freedom in exchange for the information we need to take out that basestar."

"And how exactly do you define freedom?" Baltar asked.

Adama sucked in his breath slightly, "We've been passing a large number of habitable planets within shuttling range of the fleet. I intend to set you on one with adequate provisions and shelter."

Baltar felt his mouth tighten into a frown. "How fitting. I'm to be marooned."

A somewhat sympathetic smile appeared on Adama's lips. "It's better than being marooned in your isolation cell on the Prison Barge."

"Of course, why didn't I think of that? At the very least I'd have more walking room." Baltar said sarcastically, and then gave him a quizzical glance, "Would my provisions include communications?"

By the annoyed expression on Adama's face, Baltar knew that his protest had gone too far with his sarcasm. His hunch was verified when Adama replied with a very short and final, "No."

"Come now, Adama. Even a marooned man must have some hope of eventual

rescue, no matter how slight his chance may be.”

“Very well,” Adama reluctantly agreed, but quickly added with a warning in his voice, “But only sufficient for short-range communications. If you are to be rescued one day, it will not be the result of broadcasting a long-range signal to the Cylon Empire.”

Baltar knew when to draw the line at protesting. He’d been a trader, after all, in the yahrens previous to going into politics. He’d never known Adama to play these sort of games, but he could see that the Commander was doing very well.

“Thank you. Now, when am I to be set free?”

Adama had been looking down at the monitor installed on his desk, but at Baltar’s last question, he looked up to meet the traitor’s gaze once more.

“After the basestar has been destroyed.”

“Ah, but what if the baseship destroys you, and me along with you?”

“That’s the risk you’ll have to take.” A slight smile appeared on his face. “Of course, you can always ensure that you give us the best information possible for the warriors to succeed.”

“Now, old friend, can you guarantee all this?” Baltar prodded, a sudden sense of uneasiness coming to him. The recent developments were too good to be true, and he knew that there had to be a catch somewhere. “Your colleagues on the Council who sentenced me with such great relish will undoubtedly view any decision to release me in a most unfavorable light, in particular those who were also my... uninvited guests during that incident of a sector ago.”

Adama tried not to laugh at how Baltar kept using euphemisms for his escape attempt. Perhaps it was just the traitor’s way of taking the sting out of something that had failed by not referring to it in simple terms.

“How can I be certain you will keep your promise?” Baltar finished his thought.

“You need not worry about the Council,” Adama said, thinking of the disgusting irony of how Baltar would be pressing the point about keeping one’s word, when it was the foolish trust in his word that had led to the destruction of the Colonies. “As military commander, the state of martial law guarantees me the right to release any prisoner by decree. Including you.”

Realizing that he had no more questions, Baltar paused a few microns to run through the details of the agreement. He could always try negotiating for more later, when Adama was appreciative of the results of Baltar's help, and when the commander would hopefully be in a better mood. Finding that he found most of the conditions acceptable, Baltar allowed himself to nod.

"You drive a hard bargain, Adama," he said. "I'm beginning to believe that you're in the wrong profession."

Adama didn't appear to react to the compliment, which was exactly how Baltar meant it. Instead, he asked, "Do we have an agreement?"

Without any hesitation, Baltar reached out with his gloved hand, a gesture he knew that wasn't threatening. Adama's eyes rested on the hand, then up to Baltar's face, searching for any hint of deceit.

After a long pause, he rose from his seat to grasp Baltar's wrist, as the traitor did the same to him. Together, they sealed the trade with a firm shake.

Chapter Five

It didn't take a genius to figure out where Starbuck and Apollo would be, and Boomer found them on the first try. They were prepping themselves in the Raider, trying to get the feel of the alien fighter.

Or at least Apollo was. Starbuck was sitting in the co-pilot's chair, staring in blank confusion at the controls.

"I don't know about this," Starbuck was muttering. "Apollo, does that look like a scanner to you?"

"What?" Apollo looked up from the computer where he was jotting down notes about the control panel, a slight frown on his face as he looked at the piece of equipment Starbuck was pointing to. "A scanner?"

"It's either that or a monitor for their version of the IFB."

"Oh, so very funny," Starbuck retorted. He looked back as he heard Boomer's footsteps on the deck directly behind them. "Boomer!"

Finally, some company that thinks that I'm more interesting than a console."

"It's not that I don't find you interesting, Starbuck. The consoles just aren't as annoying as you are," Apollo said wryly, not looking at him as he continued with the computer. Very tentatively, he adjusted some of the controls on the console, then sighed in relief as they held. Satisfied, he looked back at his friend to greet him.

"Hey, Boomer. You look like a man with a mission."

"More than we do? That's amazing." Starbuck grimaced as he looked back at the console. "I've never been so nervous with a ship since I was a first-orbit cadet. Aren't you nervous, Apollo?"

"No, not really. I'm actually finding this kind of fun."

"You would." Starbuck shook his head in semi-disgust. "So, Boomer, what brings you down here to spend time with us brainless fools?"

"Now that I can get a word in edgewise, I've come bearing gifts."

Boomer chuckled at the anticipating sparkle in Starbuck's blue eyes.

"You see, when you two are finished romping through that basestar, you're going to fly out right into the middle of a dogfight. We don't want to get you confused with the other Cylon fighters, so I rigged this."

Starbuck frowned as he looked at the piece of machinery that Boomer held in his hands. It was about a third of the size of their hand-held scanners, and its face reminded him of their languatrons. He activated it for a micron, and a loud alternating beep sounded through the cockpit. "What is it? Please don't say it's a miniature CORA, whatever you do."

"No, though that might make things interesting." He handed it over to Starbuck to examine. "It's an identification transmitter set to our attack frequency. If one of us comes up on your tail, we get a flashing red dot on our attack scanner."

"Very nice," Starbuck commented, handing it over to Apollo. "The question is, does it work, buddy?"

"Unless you break it. So even though we might think about it, we won't blow you out of the sky."

"Ouch. That just wants me to be doubly sure that it will work."

"It'll work, Starbuck. Don't worry about that."

Apollo turned the transmitter on again, then looked at Boomer. "Thanks, this will really come in handy. I don't think any of the pilots would like the distinction of being the one who shoots down their commanding officers."

"Even though they might want to?" Starbuck said in a wry voice.

"If only I'd been in that position a few yahrens ago. Remember Captain Bastien? Oh, what I would have given to come up and just —"

"Save it for later, Starbuck," Apollo told him. "Boomer, is Doctor Wilker back from the Electronics Ship yet?"

"Yeah, he's been here for the past centar."

"I don't suppose he's had a chance to look at the transmission, huh?"

"No, not yet," Boomer said, shaking his head with a sigh. "He's been gathering some more of his things to take back to the Electronics Ship, and he keeps on muttering that he'll glance at it once he gets a spare micron. I think he's just not very interested."

Starbuck gave Apollo an odd look. "After all this, you still think it didn't come from the basestar?"

"I know it sounds silly, but I have a funny feeling it didn't."

"These days, nothing sounds silly from you, old buddy. Just crazy."

Sheba came into the Raider at the point with Cassiopeia, and heard the tail end of the men's conversation. She was feeling immensely nervous, especially when she saw Apollo sitting in the pilot's chair, and as she stalled, Cassiopeia pushed past her to go to front.

"Starbuck," she said, her voice firm, "can I have a word with you? Please?"

Glancing back to see them, Boomer got out of his seat to allow the women better access to the front of the cockpit. He smiled sheepishly. "It's getting a little crowded in here, so I think I'll go bug Wilker for a few centons. I'll try to get some

response for you, Apollo. Does that sound good?"

The captain nodded, not looking away from the console. "That's just fine, Boomer."

"Yeah, Cassie, what is it?" Starbuck asked as she came to stand directly behind him. "And would you mind keeping it short? I still don't have the hang of these controls."

"Starbuck, I want to talk to you alone." Cassiopeia threw a glance at both Sheba and Apollo, to remind him that they were in public, even if the two were their friends.

"Alone?" Starbuck sighed as he got out of his seat. "I'll be back in a centon, Apollo. If you get a chance, try to figure out what that thing is, okay?"

"Sure thing."

The couple walked past Sheba to leave, and for a few microns, there was complete silence in the cockpit except for the sounds of the machinery. Sheba watched Apollo carefully as he started going through his notes on the computer again, and she suddenly realized that he had no idea that she was there.

Suppressing the urge to run away quickly, Sheba deliberately stepped to the command chair slightly behind Apollo on his right. She could see that he still hadn't heard her, so she decided to speak.

"It takes three Cylons to fly this fighter." She said it a little too loudly, and she was mortified to see Apollo jump in his seat, then turn slightly to look at her. Then she winced, knowing that she'd made a rather stupid comment, but she rationalized that at least she'd let him know of her presence.

"Sheba! I didn't hear you come in." Apollo quickly regained his composure, though Sheba noticed that he was slightly irritated. Frack, that was the last thing she wanted him to be. "Anyway, don't even think about it. I need you and Boomer to lead the squadrons into the battle."

Since they were already on the topic, Sheba decided to pursue the topic for a little while. "Then why are there three seats in a Raider?"

"Shows you how independent the Cylons are," he said, chuckling slightly. "The third Cylon just sits where you are and gives orders."

"Very well." By this time, Apollo had turned back to the front, looking through at his notes. Sheba watched him for another few microns, noticing the way he tilted his head to the side as he examined the console. Finally, she couldn't stand keeping the questions inside her, and she blurted out, "Who picked you for this mission, Apollo?"

"I did," he replied in a confident tone. "It was my idea, and I get to go through with it."

She bristled at his choice of words, even though she knew that he said it unintentionally. "You really want to get yourself killed, don't you?"

Apollo froze as soon as she said that, and he turned so he was completely facing her. Now that they were face-to-face, she could look directly into his green eyes, and she noticed the wary expression he was giving her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Sheba bit her lip, cursing herself for saying that, but now that it was in the open, she decided that she might as well continue with it. When she spoke again, she was surprised at the emotion that came with her words.

"Ever since you lost Serina, you've been on every high risk mission on the board. Arcta, Gomorrah..."

At the mention of his late wife's name, Apollo quickly turned away. Sheba caught a glimpse of an anguished expression on his face before the only thing she could see was the back of his head.

"Serina has nothing to do with it," he said, his voice getting cold as he interrupted her.

"I'm not the only one who thinks that," she said gently. "I remember Serina when she was a BNC anchor and I know she was a lovely woman, Apollo. And everyone I've talked to says that you two were a beautiful couple. But that doesn't excuse the fact that she's dead, and that you're afraid of going on without her."

She couldn't see his face, but she knew that her words had struck a deep nerve within Apollo. His entire body seemed to tense, and she could see his hand clench the computer. For a few microns, she wondered if this was the first time someone actually tried to broach the subject to him.

"Can we just drop this?" he said, not quite shouting, but still loud enough for Sheba to know that he wasn't quite successfully holding back his anger. It was clear that he didn't want to talk about Serina and his feelings for her, and he was being polite before he had to be rude.

Sheba was determined not to let him have his way. "No!" she shot back, feeling herself becoming angry. "We can't just drop this! She's the problem you're having, Apollo. Admit it!"

"Sheba! I asked you politely once, but now I'm going to have to —"

"Hades, Apollo!" she shouted. "Don't you understand? Why do you think that you have the quarter on loneliness here? You've got your family, and the friends you've had for yahrens! But me? I'm alone, it's just me and Bojay. I feel the same way you do, but you don't see me isolating myself!"

Taking a deep breath, she was surprised to see that Apollo wasn't coming back with an immediate retort. Instead, he was bowing his head slightly, and after a few microns, he very quietly said, "I'm sorry.

I..."

She smiled slightly at his apology. "That's all right. I guess we've been at each other's throats ever since the moment we met."

"Yeah, I guess we have," he said softly. Sheba's smile got a little bigger as she realized that had it been Starbuck she were talking to, he would have reminded her precisely how they'd first met.

But Apollo wouldn't, even though she first tried to shoot his ship down unwittingly, then later when they met in person, succeeded in making him look foolish in front of his fellow pilots.

"But this is the first time we've clashed in a while," she continued. "Lately, you've been including me in your tight little circle of friends, and I appreciate that, Apollo."

He sighed gently. "I guess I realized that I'd been a little hard on you. And I... suppose I can relate to what it feels like to be alone."

There was something about his tone that was odd, and Sheba couldn't help picking up on it. She remembered Athena's words, how Apollo wouldn't

acknowledge his interest in her to anyone, including to Sheba herself. She decided to venture on this path and start gently probing, unlike her previous outburst.

"Apollo, have you ever considered the possibility that maybe two people who snap at each other for no reason are trying to hide their real feelings?" she wondered. It was the only way she could think of wording her question without openly asking him if he had feelings for her.

Very slowly, Apollo shook his head. For a few microns, she had the impression that he was staring into his lap, and she wondered why he was doing that. Unless he was afraid of looking up to catch their reflection in the cockpit window? Was he afraid of what he might see?

"I've thought about it quite a bit," she continued when she knew he wouldn't reply to her question. "And Apollo, I'm sick of fighting with you."

"I, uh, I'm not too fond of those arguments either," he finally said, his words not coming out very certainly. He glanced back at her, quickly averting his gaze when he saw her watching him carefully, but she noticed it nonetheless.

Sheba reached out, and held his chin gently in her hand as she turned his head to face her. The micron she could completely see his face, and the turbulent emotions in his eyes, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his.

He tensed at the touch, but then he quickly relaxed as he reflexively closed his eyes. A stray thought went through Apollo's mind at that micron as he found himself wanting to return the kiss, that he should reciprocate, and he knew that he really wanted to. Or, more strongly, he needed to. And to his surprise, no disturbing thoughts of Serina interrupted him.

Before he could react, Sheba had pulled away, but her hand was still resting on his face. Her large brown eyes were watching him carefully.

"I love you, Apollo," Sheba whispered, finally saying aloud something she had first realized six sectors ago amidst the jumbled, blurred memory of Apollo saving her life from Iblis. "Please, be careful."

Unable to say anything, Apollo nodded as he tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He watched Sheba get out of her seat and leave the Raider, then he slowly turned back to the console. He stared at the computer, wishing that it would give some of the answers to the questions that were swimming around in his head.

Sheba would never know that it took Apollo a long time before he could go back to work.

Outside the Raider and a dozen feet away, Starbuck felt as though he were at attention as Cassiopeia first angrily spoke to him, then started pacing in front of him. Sighing, he clasped his hands in front of him, resisting the urge to twiddle his thumbs as he waited for her to get to her point.

"You weren't going to tell me about this mission, were you?" she demanded.

"Of course I was," he said calmly.

"When? Five centons before you report for launch?"

"Actually, when I finished with the prep, I was going to go down to see you." He tried to put as truthful a tone into his voice as he could. The fact was that he knew that she'd be upset, and he didn't want to face that just yet. "Cassie, it's nothing to worry about. It's no more difficult than blowing up the base back at Gomorrah. It's easy. We'll be gone before the Cylons know what hit them!"

"But that's my point!" she exclaimed. "Why does it always have to be you? Why can't you stay behind and take over the squadrons and let Boomer go? And don't say that you were volunteered!"

At a loss for words, he said, "Apollo's going." Surely she had to understand that his friend was his wingmate, and that meant that they went practically everywhere together.

"I don't care if Apollo's going!" she shot back. "It's you I'm in love with, not him!"

He couldn't help rolling his eyes. "Look, Cass, you know me. I'll make it."

The bitter laugh that she gave was the last thing that Starbuck expected. "And knowing you, you're probably going to find some beautiful female prisoner to rescue on that basestar!"

"Oh, Kobol, Cassie... That isn't why you're upset is it?" He gave her a wry grin. "Besides, we're not going to have time to get to the interrogation cells and to the control center. So don't worry."

She gave him an exasperated look and was about to reply when Sheba came

out of the Raider, her eyes tearing slightly. She walked a few metrons toward the nearest lift, then spotted the couple. She called,

“Starbuck?”

Thankful for the opportunity to take his attention from

Cassiopeia’s berating, he looked at her. “Yeah?”

“Good luck, hotshot,” she said, smiling at him before leaving the bay. Starbuck watched her for a micron, then shook his head.

“Why’s everybody acting that way?” he wondered. “Everyone’s going on like we’re about to venture into the depths of Hades or something! It’s just a mission, for Sagan’s sake!”

Cassiopeia couldn’t take it anymore. She’d tried getting to the point gently, but Starbuck didn’t seem to see the topic that was hanging in front of him like a large worm on a hook. The anger and frustration that had been building inside her exploded like a mine.

“You just don’t understand, do you?” she yelled. “You’re so busy with your ego and the battle that you’re not taking the time to consider how I might feel about you going on this mission!”

“I do understand, Cassiopeia,” he said, determined not to get angry himself. “I know that you’re afraid that I might get shot on the basestar, or we might get blown up on the way there or back. Or maybe we’ll get trapped on the basestar and blow with it, too. You’re terrified about it, but... You see, I just don’t see the sense of dwelling on what might go wrong. To me, that’s a lousy way to live.”

The anger on Cassiopeia’s face disappeared for a micron. “So you know why I’m upset?”

“Yes.” He put his arms around her. “And, I admit, it’s also the reason why I didn’t go see you earlier.”

Hugging him tightly, Cassiopeia didn’t want to let go of him. For the first time in a while, she thought of Cain, and how she’d been devastated when he and the Pegasus were reported as killed in battle.

They’d never had a quiet moment like this to get things out in the air before

he left to reclaim his command. Maybe, she thought, this will help things turn out for the best.

Starbuck, in the meantime, was thinking about how he'd never felt like this for a woman before. Normally, if a previous girlfriend of his had been upset about a mission, he'd have shrugged it off, claiming that it had to do with her being clinging or overprotective. Now, his feelings had changed. He was concerned that Cassiopeia was angry, and he wanted only to assure sure that he'd do his best to be careful.

He pulled back from the embrace so he could lean down to kiss her.

It grew passionate after a few microns as Starbuck held her tightly to him. Together, they stood in the middle of the landing bay in each other's arms until they reluctantly parted.

"I'll be back," he told her. "I promise."

Finding that her eyes were tearing, Cassiopeia wiped the extra moisture away as she unsteadily laughed, "If you don't, I'm going to kill you."

Grinning, Starbuck laughed with her, giving her one last hug before returning to the Raider to continue his prep.

Tigh paced around the command center, watching as the bridge crew prepared for the battle. Reports were following steadily, and they were eventually ending up in the colonel's hands. He glanced at them to make sure they were proper, then put them down, only to be handed another one.

"The ground crews in the Viper bays report that the fighters will be ready on schedule," Omega was saying. "Reports are due at any centon from the crews manning the laser turrets, and the latest report from the Fleet should be any centon now."

The colonel nodded as he glanced at the star map. There were now two targets surrounding the center that represented the Galactica. To the left, closer than it had appeared earlier, was the basestar, and the red laser that marked its position was still distant. Before long, it would be much too close for comfort. The other pinpointed the fleet's located, herded safely outside the star system. Too far for the Cylons to touch, but not too far for the Vipers to aid in the case of an emergency there.

Satisfied for the time being, Tigh glanced down at the three monitors situated on Omega's left. They were alternating between scenes around the Galactica, showing the commanding officer what the current scenario was. At that centon, the view was that of the Cylon Raider in the launching bay. Four orange-clad techs were fueling it, but neither Apollo or Starbuck were to be seen.

"What's the situation on the Raider?" he asked.

"Captain Apollo reported fifteen centons ago that all systems are green." Omega glanced at the chronometer. "They have forty-five centons before they launch. They should be getting their gear now."

"Thank you." Tigh didn't take his gaze from the alien fighter.

Never in his life did he think that a Raider would be the key to ending a battle with the Cylons in their favor. "Keep me posted."

Had the circumstances been different, Boxey would have been elated at being let out of learning period early, but not with the looming battle ahead of them. There was a sense of doom among many of the adults, but it bounced off most of the Galactica's few children. All except for Boxey.

The six yahren old boy had developed a sixth sense when it came to military matters, especially when it had to do specifically with his father. If Apollo was involved with something, Boxey could pick it out the way Muffy did with mushies, and that's exactly what he was sensing at that micron.

Passing warriors on the way back to the billet he shared with his father, Boxey heard more than a few discussing something about a mission to the basestar. He gleaned the information that it was to destroy the control center somewhere inside the ship, and that it was highly dangerous. He wasn't surprised to hear his father and Starbuck's names mentioned immediately afterward.

He picked up his pace to get home faster. When he arrived, he burst into Apollo's room. Startled at the sudden entrance, Apollo jumped slightly where he was sitting on the bed, doing up his boots.

Seeing his son, he grinned widely.

"Hey, Boxey," he greeted, reaching out to give his son a big hug.

"Did you get out of instructional period early?"

"Yeah. Whenever there's a battle, we get the rest of the cycle off." He sighed as he tightened his grip around Apollo's neck. "Dad, what's this about a mission?"

He wryly noticed the good humor in Apollo's face diminish, to be replaced by a facade that was supposed to be calm and reassuringly confident.

"Where did you hear about that?" he asked gently.

"Everybody's talking about it, Dad. Why am I always the last to know about the stuff you do?" Boxey let go of his father so he could sit on his lap. He wanted to look into his eyes. Jone, his instructor, had once said in a lesson that the eyes were the window of the soul, and anything he needed to know could be found looking through someone's eyes. Apollo's green eyes were no exception. "And why are you going to the basestar anyway?"

Sighing slightly, Apollo quickly ran through the details of the mission. By the time he finished, Boxey's eyes were wide with a mixture of fear and excitement.

"No one in the history of the Colonies has..." Boxey paused, snapping his fingers. "What's that word? Infilter? Influx? You know the word, Dad."

"Infiltrate?" Apollo supplied, a small smile on his lips.

"Yeah. No one else in the history of the Colonies has infiltrated a basestar before, have they?"

"No, not that I know of. That's why we don't have the proper intelligence that we normally would have."

"So you and Starbuck are the first? Isn't that dangerous?" Boxey asked.

"Well, yes, it's dangerous, but no more dangerous than any other mission we've gone on," Apollo replied, "and we've always come back from those, haven't we?"

"I guess, but Dad..." Taking a deep breath, Boxey prepared to ask the question that had been bothering him on and off for the past few sectors. "Dad, why is it always you and Starbuck who go on these missions? I mean, it's great having a dad who has a really neat job like you, but sometimes I wish it was somebody else's dad who goes off to fight the Cylons, while mine stays behind to be with me."

"It's my job, Boxey. I have to go out on those missions, just like you have to go to instructional period and do your homework."

"But no one's forcing you to go on this mission. It was your idea, right? Why didn't you send somebody else to do it?"

Remembering the mostly one-sided conversation with Sheba, which still wasn't sitting quite well with him, Apollo wondered what he should say to his son. Why did he have to go, anyway? Was Sheba right?

Did he really have a desire to end his life so he could be with Serina in the afterlife?

While thinking about that, Apollo glanced over to where he kept the pictures of his wife. Her radiantly beautiful face, which had haunted him for so many nights now, smiled out at him. He looked at Serina's image for a few microns, then very slowly, another face appeared over hers. To his surprise, it was Sheba's, which he had been admiring ever since he had first seen her face in the holograms in Commander Cain's office aboard the Pegasus.

Serina, is that your way of telling me that it's all right if I go on with my life? he wondered. Almost as if in reply, he felt something like a weight being lifted from his shoulders. For the first time, he could feel himself admitting inside the real reasons why he had so anxiously sought Sheba out in the Pegasus Officers Club after he'd seen her face for the first time. Why he had lingered for centars as she recovered from her battle injuries after being transferred to the Galactica. Why he had been so insanely jealous when she had come under the spell and influence of Count Iblis. He had always had strong, deep feelings inside for Sheba, and every night he had always looked at Serina's picture in what he knew had been an effort to deny those feelings to himself.

He also felt something else that he hadn't known for a long time. He felt the gnawing edge of fear as he thought of the mission. What in Hades am I thinking?

"Dad?" Boxey was looking up at him with concern. "Are you okay? You sort of blanked out there for a micron."

"What? Oh, I'm sorry. I was just thinking." Apollo blinked a few times, then gave Boxey a reassuring smile. "The reason I'm going is that we need to make sure the job is done right, and besides, who's better at this than Starbuck and me?"

"That's true," Boxey admitted. He gave his father a tight hug.

"Be careful, Dad. I'll be waiting for when you return."

"Thank you, Boxey." Apollo returned the hug, then placed a kiss on his son's cheek. "Okay, go do some homework in the meantime. Off you go."

As he watched his son leave, another stray thought went through Apollo's head. If he did have suicidal tendencies, then the only reason he still might be hanging onto life would be Boxey, since he knew what losing another parent might do to him. Even so, he recalled a lecture a class he'd been in had once received about suicide, and one of the signs of a person about to commit suicide was the giving away of personal items. Before the mission to Arcta, Apollo had entrusted Boxey with a medallion that had meant very much to him. Looking back, Apollo wondered if that had gone through his mind.

"I'm sorry, Boxey," he whispered, "if I've put you through any worry."

Quickly finishing with his boots, Apollo grabbed his laser holster and left his room. Seeing that Boxey was safely in his room, Apollo quickly hurried up to Beta deck where Starbuck was getting prepared.

When he arrived, he found that Boomer and the other Blue Squadron pilots were gathered around the blond lieutenant, who was good-naturedly grumbling about the attention.

"Apollo, you're finally here!" he exclaimed. "Quick, get these mother poulons away from me! Please!"

"Admit it, Bucko," Jolly teased. "You're enjoying every micron of it."

"Don't jinx the moment, Jolly," Starbuck shot back, grinning. As soon as Apollo was next to them, he handed him an extra holster.

"Here, buddy, for luck."

"Just like bandits," Apollo mused as he first strapped on his own laser, then the second one. "We're going armed to the teeth."

"Better armed to the teeth than completely naked," Starbuck said, watching as Apollo fastened the strap that would secure the second holster to his right thigh. "I'm not really up to meeting the Cylons in hand-to-hand combat, and I doubt

you'll be, either."

From his position less than a metron away, Boomer uncrossed his arms, and shifted his weight from foot to foot as he fixed the two warriors with a completely serious look. Starbuck felt himself get a little edgy as Boomer spoke.

"Now's not the time for jokes, Starbuck," he said, his voice a little tight. "All right, are your timers set?"

"Yeah," Starbuck said, as Apollo nodded. "And according to this, I've got thirty-five centons to live."

"It'll be shorter if you don't stop making those bad jokes," Apollo added.

"Whatever you two do, don't lose that transmitter," Boomer continued, ignoring Starbuck completely. He focused on Apollo, who wore the little machine on his belt. "It's the only way we can tell the difference between you and the Cylons."

"I'll be careful with it," Apollo promised.

"And if we do lose it," Starbuck added, not able to resist the opening his friends had left open, "we'll just waggle our wings."

Boomer snorted loudly, fixing Starbuck with a minor glare. "You probably would do that. It'll just make it easier for me to shoot at you."

Frowning at the way the normally calm and unflustered Boomer was acting, Apollo tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention.

"Boomer, are you all right? I've never seen you fuss so much."

"Well, I guess I would be feeling better if I were going with you two," he admitted, a thin smile on his face. He knew very well what Apollo was going to say, but he needed to get the concern out in the air.

"I know you would, Boomer, and as much as I appreciate it, I need you to lead the squadrons with Sheba."

"It doesn't change the way I feel," he sighed.

A silence fell between the three friends for a few microns, then Apollo held out

his hand. It was the first step of the three-way handshake they used, and both Boomer and Starbuck reached out to join him. With their hands in the proper position, and their fingers grasping the others', they shook for a few microns.

When they finally let go, Boomer received a slap on the back from Apollo and a confident grin from Starbuck to represent their wishes for Boomer to have good luck with the squadrons. And then they were off, heading for the exit while receiving encouragement from their fellow pilots. Boomer noticed that Giles, Greenbean and Jolly were the last to see them out.

Sighing heavily, Boomer whispered the words he wished he'd said directly to them. "Good luck, my friends."

Chapter Six

True to form, Baltar was keeping them waiting. Or rather, his guards were keeping Adama, Apollo and Starbuck waiting, but the commander preferred to think that it was the traitor who was holding things up. He wondered what mischief might have occurred as Castor brought Baltar down to the landing bay. He knew that there was no love lost between the guard and Baltar, and after a few more centons of waiting, he began to get a little concerned.

Beside him, Apollo and Starbuck began to get a little antsy. The lieutenant, was shifting his weight from foot to foot as he glanced from the Raider to Adama to the lift. Apollo stood with his thumbs hooked on the belts of the two laser holsters, a contemplative look on his face as he stared off at the distant wall. Adama wondered what was going through his son's mind as Starbuck spoke.

"He's holding up the mission, you know."

"Yes, I realize that, Starbuck," Adama admitted, "but there's still plenty of time before you need to launch."

"I'd rather be early than late in this situation, Commander. I don't like the idea of the ship I'm standing on being under direct fire while I'm running to a fighter to escape." Starbuck shook his head. "Nah, the sooner we're out of there, the happier I'll be."

"I'm with you on that one, buddy," Apollo said softly.

A smirk appeared on Starbuck's face. "I don't believe this! Are you getting nervous, by any chance?"

"Yeah, just ever so slightly," the captain admitted, not looking away from the wall.

"This is a cycle I'm really going to have to mark down on the calendar!" Starbuck exclaimed, grinning good-naturedly now. "Apollo, there's finally a sane side to you!"

Beginning to smile sheepishly, Apollo's expression suddenly turned completely sober as he heard the nearest lift coming into the bay.

After a few microns, Baltar and Castor were visible inside it. The muscular guard's face was slightly grim as he spotted the commander, while Baltar's was smug as usual.

"I somehow get the feeling he's going to enjoy this," Starbuck muttered as the lift came to halt at the bottom of the shaft, and the two men exited to meet the other three.

Castor was apologetic as he started speaking. "I'm sorry, Commander, that there's been a delay, but somehow some of the Council members have heard that something was afoot, and I had to get past them to get Baltar here before they spotted him. From what I've been told, Sires Domra and Montrose practically exploded through the ceiling of the Council Chamber when they got the word."

Adama restrained the urge to roll his eyes in disgust. That was just what he needed, a group of irate Councilors wandering around the battlestar while he was trying to fight a battle. That would just make his cycle.

"Thank you for the information, Sergeant," he replied, noticing that Baltar was examining Apollo and Starbuck, the smug expression still on his face.

"Captain, Lieutenant," he greeted, smiling widely. "I should have known it would be the two of you going on this mission. How heroic of you to do so. But now that I'm here, I'm at your disposal."

There was a look about Apollo that said that he wasn't quite believing that they'd gone down to this level of desperation as he spoke. "What will happen when we land without clearance?"

Baltar's tone was remarkably civil as he looked the captain straight in the eye. "In all truth, probably nothing. They'll assume that you've had a communications breakdown. Of course, if they don't have any ship in the air, they'll send a

centurion to check who you are."

"I know where to enter the central core from the landing bays," Starbuck spoke up, "but where's the control center?"

"At the bottom of the core."

"At the bottom? Oh, now that makes sense. Place it someplace where we don't expect to find it," Starbuck grinned. "I'm beginning to like the sound of this."

"It's even easier than you think, Lieutenant," Baltar continued.

"There's always a centurion on guard at the hatch leading to the control center. Once you destroy it, you'll be in the computer banks.

You don't actually need to go into the control room itself. Blowing up those computers will blind the basestar."

"I do like the sound of this."

Apollo wasn't as convinced of the simplicity of the mission as Starbuck was. As the group started heading toward the Raider with Castor trailing just behind them, he asked the question that had been bothering him. "How much resistance can we expect from the core area?"

"Ah, now that's the variable I can't tell you," Baltar said. "It all depends on how many centurions are passing through at the time you enter. The only constant is the one guard that I mentioned earlier."

"In other words, we might get stuck in a traffic jam, or we might be completely alone," Starbuck summarized, "depending on the time of cycle?"

"Not quite accurate, Lieutenant, but close enough." Baltar smiled at the thoughtful expression on Apollo's face. "Are there any other questions?"

"Not that I can think of. What do you think, Apollo?" Starbuck asked his friend.

"I think that's it," Apollo agreed. "Unless you can think of anything else that might be of help, Baltar?"

The traitor shook his head. "Your mission is very straight-forward. You shouldn't have any unforeseen problems."

Apollo nodded at the information, then looked at his father.

Adama hadn't said a word since the short briefing began, and now that it was completed, reached forward to shake Starbuck's hand.

"Good luck, Lieutenant," he said, then reached for Apollo's, who found his grip to be tense with nervousness that he could never show at the surface. "Captain. We'll see you soon."

"Faster than you can say felgercarb in Cylon, sir," Starbuck promised.

"Lieutenant, you'll be surprised to learn that the Cylons don't use expletives," Baltar told him, and Starbuck had to suppress the urge to roll his eyes in exasperation.

"Analogy noted and duly appreciated," Adama said, ignoring Baltar's words. "Now you two better get going."

Without another word, Apollo and Starbuck left the two older men for the Raider. Before they could take another few steps, they heard

Baltar calling after them, "Good luck!"

Starbuck glanced over to see Apollo freeze in mid-step, then shake his head in amusement. He chuckled. "Never thought you'd hear Baltar saying that to you, did you?"

"No," Apollo admitted, "but there's a lot of things lately I never thought I'd hear or do."

Baltar smiled as the two warriors made their way inside the Raider. For a few microns, many questions flashed through his mind.

The first thing he wondered was whose baseship this one was. He would have found it a delicious irony if it were in fact the one that had been his own. Even more delicious would be the prospect of Lucifer dying so that he might be free again.

And there were of course greater questions that he would conceivably have to face some day. What would he do if he ever made it back with the Cylons? Would he tell them about this battle? Or would he use it to his advantage to get back in favor with the Imperious Leader by keeping silent, and concocting a story of

escaping to an isolated planet? And what would he do if he ever met back up with Apollo and Starbuck in the yahrens after being marooned? Would he owe them anything?

He noticed the odd look Adama was giving him, along with the barely concealed amusement. For once in his life, Baltar could admit to being able to relate to his lifelong foe.

"I know that sounds unusual, Adama," he said sincerely, "but I have as much stake in their mission as you do. If they don't succeed, I die, too."

"Of course," Adama replied.

"Now," Baltar continued, biting his tongue before he could put the acerbic 'old friend' in the sentence the way he normally would have done, "let's go up to that bridge of yours. We have a battle to fight, don't we?"

Apollo was already sitting in the pilot's chair, activating the computers and prepping the engines. He was doing the final pre-launch check of the board when Starbuck closed the fighter's hatch, and by the time he could sit down, all the lights were green. And Starbuck prayed that they meant the same thing for Cylons that they meant for humans.

"What do you think they're going to call this mission in the history scans?" Starbuck wondered as he buckled himself into the seat.

"What?" Apollo asked, frowning as he looked up from the console.

The fighter's engines began to rev up, and their sound was beginning to fill the cockpit. It was louder than a Viper's, with a higher pitch.

"I was wondering what this mission will be called when our grandkids study it in instructional period," Starbuck said, rephrasing his sentence.

"I don't know. Why don't we name it when we know it's a success?" the captain suggested.

"Good idea."

Taking a deep breath, Apollo glanced at the controls.

"Starbuck...?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you know how to fly this thing?"

Starbuck put on a mock horrified expression. "I thought you did!"

The tension that had built up in the microns beforehand relaxed as both Apollo and Starbuck laughed at their morbid joke. Watching his friend compose himself, Starbuck realized that it was the first time he'd heard Apollo make a comment like that in a very long time, since well before the Cylon Annihilation.

"We'll make horrible comedians," Apollo said, still smiling. He had his finger poised above the turbo ignition button.

"Yeah, we laugh at our own jokes." Starbuck watched his friend's hand. "I'd pretend that I'm Core Command, but I can't do Rigel justice with my imitation yet. Are you ready?"

Apollo gave a short nod before pressing the button. "Launch."

Up in the Celestial Dome, Sheba and Cassiopeia stood side-by-side, looking out the transparent walls at the side of the Galactica where they knew the Raider would be leaving. Neither had said anything during the past ten centons, though both knew exactly what the other was feeling.

Since her confrontation with Apollo, Sheba hadn't been able to stop thinking about what they'd said. Had she gone too far? Was Apollo angry at her now? Had she ruined any chance they might have had at becoming an item? More importantly, had she gotten through to him about his potentially destructive behavior? And if he hadn't, would she ever see him again?

Cassiopeia could sense Sheba's concern at the imminent launching. She was feeling it herself, though after her own confrontation with Starbuck, she was feeling a lot more confident that she'd see him again. She felt herself want to chuckle somewhat as the thought strayed into her mind that although she knew he'd come back, she didn't know what condition he might be in. Starbuck had the worst luck when it came to missions.

When the launching finally came, Cassiopeia nearly missed it when she glanced away at one of the nearby passenger ships. She was still completely overwhelmed by the view the dome offered, and it was very distracting to her. She was thankful when Sheba suddenly exclaimed,

"There they are!"

Glancing in the original direction, Cassiopeia spotted a small circular object shooting out of the bay. From this distance, it was difficult to tell that it was a Raider. Holding her breath, she watched them until the ship was out of sight a few microns later. Very slowly, she let her breath out in a sigh.

"They're gone," she said. "So soon. It's hard to believe that just a few centars earlier, Apollo took us up here and we picked up the signal."

"It seems like a secton's gone by," Sheba agreed.

There was a pause, then Cassiopeia shook her head. "Felgercarb, it never gets easier, Sheba, watching someone you love leave on a mission like this. I was terrified the first time your father left with the Pegasus, and I'm still terrified with Starbuck. Why did I ever have to fall in love with another warrior, of all the eligible men in the fleet?"

It was a rhetorical question, one that Cassiopeia never expected Sheba to respond to. But when she heard Sheba's tearful, "I don't know, but I doubt I'll ever get used to it," she turned on her friend in surprise.

"Sheba? Did something happen between you and...?" She was too stunned to say his name.

"Apollo? In a way." She smiled slightly. "Yes, you could say that. I told him on the Raider after you left with Starbuck that I loved him. I... don't know how he took it, because I left as quickly as I could."

A slight smile on her lips, Cassiopeia laughed gently. "If I'm right, Sheba, you have nothing to worry about at all."

Sheba was the last thing on Apollo's mind at that micron as he put his full concentration on piloting the Raider to the basestar. He'd always had a talent with flying unfamiliar spacecraft, and this was proving to be not much of an exception. He could tell that it had been designed for a pilot who was bigger and stronger than he, and it required him to give extra attention to the way he steered it.

Beside him, Starbuck was fiddling with the scanner, occasionally giving Apollo updates on their progress. In the meantime, he was frowning as he tried to get the equipment to function.

"We're entering the star system now," Starbuck said now, adjusting a knob on the upper right side. "So far, so good, buddy. Keep it steady."

A wry smile found its way onto Apollo's lips as he briefly considered giving Starbuck the same kind of encouragement he was being given, but decided to leave the teasing for later. The Galactica was the proper environment for that kind of activity, not a Cylon Raider.

"Anything?" he asked, glancing quickly at the scanner, but realized that it was in vain. The hood surrounding the scanner made it impossible for him to view it from his current location, and he knew that he couldn't risk moving his attention from piloting for more than a single micron.

"I don't know," Starbuck admitted, keeping his hand on the button he knew adjusted the scanner's frequency. "I wish this stuff was more human-friendly. All I'm getting on this piece of Cylon felgercarb is a bunch of blips."

"Blips? What kind of blips?" Apollo asked, not able to resist this teasing. "Big planet-like blips? Asteroid blips? Blip blips?"

"Keep your mind on piloting," Starbuck snapped. "I'm trying to figure this thing out."

"Then maybe I should get myself a Cylon co-pilot," Apollo muttered good-naturedly.

"Oh, go ahead and laugh, pretty boy. I'd like to see you try this. What's this?" Starbuck frowned as he studied the scanner.

"Apollo, those blips, whatever they are, are getting closer. They should be—"

"Starbuck!" Apollo suddenly yelled.

"Huh? What?" He looked up to see Apollo's arm in front of him. His eyes followed his arm over to his pointing finger, which was directed at a second Cylon Raider that had suddenly appeared next to him. "Holy frack!"

Something told him to look over at Apollo's side of the cockpit, and he was greeted by the sight of a third fighter moving up beside them. "Apollo, look!"

Apollo felt his heart skip a beat in a blind moment of fright, and he forced himself to suppress it as he whispered, "Sweet Kobol, we're surrounded!"

"Well," Starbuck laughed nervously as he looked from one ship to the other, "I guess I know what those blips are now. Do you think they're onto us?"

"I don't think so," Apollo said, trying to concentrate on piloting, but he found it completely unnerving having the alien ships surrounding them like they were. "We must have flown right into the middle of a patrol. They'll probably think we're a stray joining back up."

"Then let's not give them any reason to think we're not one of their own. Keep on flying the way you are, buddy. Remember the commander's catch phrase of precision flying."

"Thanks for the reminder." Apollo cast a glance at the ship on his left. He was chilled that he could just barely make out the trio of Cylons inside its cockpit, and he hoped that they were having more difficulty than he with seeing into the cockpit.

Starbuck, in the meantime, was more concerned with what was becoming visible directly ahead of them. The basestar had just come into range, and as he watched, they were rapidly approaching it.

Apollo, it seemed, hadn't noticed it yet.

"Apollo..." Starbuck began, trying to draw Apollo's attention back to the front. "Look alert, will you?"

Apollo's eyes widened at the sight of the basestar, and he took a deep breath. "Well, Starbuck, I guess we're soon going to find whether they're onto us or not."

Concentrating like he'd never done before, Apollo followed the first two Cylons into the gaping maw of the basestar's landing bay.

Chapter Seven

Keeping his eye on the Galactica's scanners, Adama watched the target on the scanner that represented the Raider until it had moved completely beyond their scanning range. When he was positive that he couldn't see them anymore, he turned away to survey the bridge.

Everyone was more or less prepared for the battle, but there was still some nervous sentiment among the officers, which had started when Adama walked onto the bridge accompanied by Baltar and Castor. He knew that some of them

were wondering if the traitor's presence was a bad luck charm.

Adama made sure that the traitor was not able to access any of the stations, nor able to look at the consoles. If he had his way, Baltar would be chained to the railing until the battle was over. He was still wary of this part of the agreement, but he knew that Baltar possessed intelligence that could help them get the battle over with more quickly and, hopefully, with minor damage.

"It's a very nice bridge you run, Adama," Baltar said quietly at one point. "Much better than President Adar's Atlantia."

Giving the traitor a sidelong glance, Adama wasn't sure how to respond to the statement. For all he knew, it was probably a jibe, but somehow, the way he said it made it sound sincere. Adama knew that his old friend Adar, dead along with the rest of the Council at the ambush of Cimitar, hadn't been command orientated, but that hadn't stopped him from interfering with the orders of the Atlantia's rightful commander, Daxia. Indeed, Adar's insistence on having the commanders of all the other battlestars in the Fleet stay within "the chain of command" had accounted for the Fleet's total state of unpreparedness when the Cylon ambush had taken place. Only Adama and Commander Fairfax of the Columbia had been able to show any initiative beforehand because they had found ways around the chain of command.

Tigh was supervising the activity on the lower deck of the bridge, and he constantly checked with his chronometer when not speaking to a bridge officer. Very slowly, the numbers were reaching fifty, and one centon before the change occurred, he hurried up to the command deck as it turned from forty-nine to fifty.

"It's time, Commander," he said quietly, coming next to Adama.

"It's 1750, sir."

"Proceed with the preparations," Adama said, giving the colonel the authorization to continue. He watched as Tigh turned to both Omega and Rigel.

"Pilots to launch bays," he ordered. "Begin red alert."

The activity in the bridge increased as Rigel called the alert. Before long, Adama could see on the monitors that the pilots were in their ships, and over the comlines, the squadron commanders could be heard checking to see if their wingmates were prepared. Adama waited as he heard each commander calling in with the report that they were ready. Green Squadron, Yellow, Red, Silver Spar, and

finally Blue.

"All squadrons ready to launch, Commander," Omega reported. "All systems are reported as green."

Adama gave a nod to acknowledge the officer's report. "Launch all Vipers immediately."

"Viper squadrons," Rigel said into the comline, "this is Core Command. All systems transferring control to fighters. Red and Blue squadrons are cleared to launch first, followed by Silver Spar, Yellow and Green. Launch when ready."

Adama waited until all the Vipers were launched and safely on their way to the battle before turning to the helm officer on the lower deck. "Bring her around to mark-delta-five."

"Mark-delta-five, executed, sir!" she replied.

"Full scan, Omega," Adama continued, turning to look out the star field at the front of the bridge. "The micron the basestar is spotted, I want to know about it."

Starbuck crouched down as much as he could at the side of the cockpit, clenching his teeth as the muscles in his thighs started to protest at being immobile in their uncomfortable position. Next to him, he could see Apollo cautiously peering out the cockpit at the passing Cylons.

"Are they gone yet?" Starbuck muttered again, feeling Apollo leaning on him as he watched the aliens.

"Not yet," Apollo whispered.

"Now?"

"Starbuck, shut up, will you?" came the irritated response. Not believing that the Cylons were taking this long to leave their ships, Starbuck pushed Apollo away and looked out. He grinned as he saw the last centurion walk by. "Okay, let's go!"

"Wait!" Apollo tackled him to force him to sit back on the deck. He moved just fast enough for them to avoid detection by another group that was only now passing by. "When I say we go, that's when we go. Understood?"

Sighing as he rested his back against the bulkhead, and secretly thankful that

he could stretch out his legs, Starbuck waited for the next few microns until he felt Apollo pulling his arm.

"You haven't said we can go, yet," he teased, but he nonetheless stood. He grinned at Apollo's scowl. "You know, I love that expression, Apollo."

"Just watch it, buddy. I just might leave you behind," Apollo threatened good-naturedly, but motioned for him to head for the exit.

"Let's go."

He went over to the back of the Raider to open the hatch, and motioned for Starbuck to go first. Not feeling too excited about having to go down first, Starbuck went down two rungs, then dropped down onto the bay's deck. Crouching on one knee, he held his laser out, ready to fire at any Cylons that might be lingering in the area. To his relief, the entire bay was empty. Waiting for Apollo to join him, Starbuck took a micron to take in the entire scene, and he was amazed. Their Raider was situated at the front of the bay, close to the exit. Between them and where he knew the central core was located were rows and rows of Raiders, waiting for the micron an alert would be called. Glancing up and to the sides, Starbuck realized how large the bay was. Nearly twice as high as those found on the Galactica, it was also at least three times as long, and Starbuck began to feel very small.

"Is it clear?" Apollo hissed, still inside the ship.

"Yeah, there aren't any Cylons in sight," Starbuck shot back, finding it necessary to whisper. The bay was also very quiet, and it made him feel like he was in a kind of tomb. The silence was disturbed by dull tappings as Apollo descended the ladder to go next to him.

"Impressive," Apollo said, his voice as quiet as Starbuck's as he looked around. He looked over at the interior of the bay, and he tried to spot the central core that he knew they were supposed to locate. He didn't have any success. "Where to now?"

"At the far end," Starbuck told him, pointing to a specific location a few dozen metrons from their position. "Do you see that small enclosure? That's where the hatch to the central core is."

"Then let's not waste any time. Come on," Apollo said, and they started running for the other side.

Starbuck found himself looking fearfully from side-to-side as they passed the Cylon ships. He almost expected to see a few stragglers from the earlier groups appear from behind the parked Raiders, and he was immensely relieved when they reached the central core with no problems.

Slightly out of breath, he watched as Apollo put his laser in its holster to grasp the heavy lid of the core with both hands. Gritting his teeth, he pulled it open, and the stark light from the core spilled out into the small, dusky room.

Letting go, Apollo glanced down into the core. He had to squint against the glare, and there, at the bottom, was the single guard that Baltar had warned them about. It hadn't noticed their presence yet, and Apollo glanced up at Starbuck, the light illuminating the angles of his face.

"If it looks up..." Apollo began, his voice barely a whisper, "we're dead."

"Only if I take it with us," Starbuck returned.

Not daring to do anything else but smile at the comment, Apollo took a deep breath, then sat on the edge of the core so he could swing his legs onto the first rung of the ladder. Or what the Cylons thought they could call a ladder. It was more like a immensely long pole with stakes that acted like rungs sticking out it on all sides. It was awkward for the two warriors to climb, with Starbuck having to be extra careful that his heels didn't land on Apollo's fingers. He sighed once when Apollo seemed to have difficulty trying to find a rung for his left foot, and decided to reach down with his own foot for one that was located close to Apollo's knee.

Glancing up at his friend in slight irritation, Apollo was about to take another step when he noticed movement from the centurion for the first time. It was beginning to pace in front of the door, and then it started to look up. His eyes widened as he realized that the Cylon was looking right at them, and as the centurion reached for its laser rifle, he yelled, "Starbuck, look out!"

Time seemed to slow down as the rifle was moved into firing position, and Apollo desperately reached for his laser as it started to fire on them. Starbuck winced as the first two blasts missed them.

The third hit the ladder just below where Apollo had been trying to place his foot. For a micron, Starbuck had the horrifying thought that Apollo was going to lose his balance and fall the rest of the way down, but he was relieved to see his friend grasp onto the ladder tightly with his right hand as he fired his own laser at

the offending guard.

With two well placed shots, the Cylon fell backward against the bulkhead.

"Good shot!" Starbuck called down. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. Come on, let's go. The micron another centurion comes down and finds that body, they'll know we're here."

They hurried as best they could, and Apollo dropped down the last few rungs so Starbuck could have clear passage. He pulled out his laser again, and waited for his friend to take up position next him, his own sidearm at ready.

"On three?" Starbuck asked nervously, focusing on the closed door directly in front of them.

Apollo nodded. "One, two, three!"

The door opened at their approach, and they burst into the narrow corridor before it completely opened. It was empty except for the long stretch of computers on both sides of the hallway leading up to the entrance of the command center. Apollo didn't realize that he was holding his breath until he let it go with in a rush of expelled air.

"This is a relief," Starbuck sighed, glancing at the computers. He reached under his jacket to begin pulling out the solonite charges both he and Apollo had brought with them. "Step two?"

"Step two," Apollo confirmed, bringing out his second laser so he could cover both doors at the same time. "Set the charges and I'll cover you."

Nodding slightly, Starbuck went down on his knees so he could have better access to the computer panels. As quickly as he could, he secured the charges to the surface, then activated them before moving onto the next one.

Several hundred hectars from the basestar, the Galactica's squadrons advanced into the star system. Still unused to having command over the squadrons, Boomer continually glanced at his scanner, as though needing to remind himself that he was indeed in command.

There'd been little conversation between the pilots on their way over. A few of the younger pilots were chattering nervously among themselves, but the senior

pilots were mostly taciturn, though some of the wittier ones like Giles and Bojay were making a few cracks to ease the tension in the air.

Sighing slightly, Boomer checked the long-range scanner as the objects within the star system began appearing on the screen. He recognized the layout from the briefings previous to their launching.

"I've got them in range," Jolly said. "Looks nicer in person than in the Colonel's lecture, wouldn't you say?" "More or less," he answered absent-mindedly. "The only problem is that I've got nothing but planets so far. Wherever the basestar is, she's well hidden."

"I say we head toward the vicinity of the third planet," Sheba suggested, her voice enthusiastic. "The basestar was behind that one when Starbuck spotted her."

Boomer nodded slightly as he checked their course and the current position of their intended destination. "That's right, he did. All right, we'll hold this heading. Sooner or later, she's going to pick us up on her scanners, and she's going to launch all her fighters.

Remember, we want to pull those Raiders to us, so the Galactica can continue with her part of the plan unimpeded, because the basestar's going to have the Commander's full attention."

"Don't worry about us, Boomer," Dietra said, sounding as though she were grinning. "We're going to have us a little fun."

As Beta grew older, there were so many opportunities when he cursed whatever Fates there were that he'd been created an IL Cylon.

Even outdated IL's as he was, still possessed those rudimentary human emotions that came courtesy of their second computer brain. But while it made them more independent in thought than the single-brained centurions, it still meant that he alone had to know what it felt like to feel the sense of boredom and waste that had been his lot for so many yahrens it seemed now. It was enough to make him actually welcome the prospect of decommissioning and scrapping one day. Perhaps his central banks would be recycled into one of the newer IL models, and he would find himself in a better assignment. Or perhaps he would end up within a new centurion shell again and be deprived of those characteristics that made him feel so bored.

He'd heard that the newer baseships actually had throne rooms for their

commanders similar to the one the Imperious Leader used whenever he traveled aboard his flagship. At the very least if he had something like that, he could look down and watch his crew go about their work and feel his boredom eased somewhat by the pleasant thought of having some greater sense of what it was like to be in command.

Of late, he had begun to feel somewhat uneasy, as well as bored. His centurions had reported back to him that the scanners were working better than they'd been for the past several sectors —about fifty-six percent the normal efficiency of a normal basestar. Good enough for their purposes, but it still left them with below standard equipment.

The squadrons were now playing more of a role as sensors than the basestar's own scanners. The patrol Beta had sent out after the odd sighting a few sectors earlier — which still hadn't been explained — has scouted a fair amount of territory without scanning anything. They had ventured outside the solar system, and had returned about fifteen or twenty sectors beforehand, reporting nothing. If necessary, he'd order more deep patrols like the last one. Tylum wasn't a problem for the Cylons. Before the geoscans had crashed a few days before, the readouts had shown that there were traces of the vital mineral a few star systems over, and it appeared that they were easy to collect.

But that still left the enigma of the scanner blip, and he was certain that the answer wasn't a malfunction. How would he prove it, though?

"Sir," the centurion he only knew as One suddenly looked up from his scanner, "Vipers bearing in Omega seven sector and closing rapidly."

Beta's bulbous head darted toward him and had he possessed facial muscles, they would have contorted into disbelief and shock.

"Vipers?" he could scarcely bring himself to utter the word. The thought that his solitary, ancient basestar manned by an outdated crew would be the one to stumble on to the elusive quarry of the entire Empire had never been taken seriously in his computer mind.

"Confirmed," One nodded. "Five squadrons in all."

It seemed too much for Beta's ancient circuits to comprehend, that he took an extra micron before responding. "Launch all fighters to intercept," he ordered, and then added, "Scan for the Galactica. And prepare a long-range message for

transmission to the Imperious Leader.”

“By your command,” the higher pitched voice of Two said.

Incredible, Beta thought. If I end up being the one who does what all other Cylon commanders failed to do, I might get the kind of reprieve I’ve always hoped for. Perhaps a major upgrade. Perhaps even... he trailed off, unable to express his next thought that he might even be in line to become the next Imperious Leader.

For the first time in many yahrens he felt a sense of pride and swagger as he glided toward the doors leading to the Computer Center.

As soon as the door opened, his circuits froze in shock when he saw two uniformed Colonial Warriors standing inside the Computer Center, one of them attaching an explosive charge to the banks, the other pointing a laser pistol right at him.

Beta frantically pressed the button closing the door just before a laser blast impacted against it. His circuits almost numb, he turned around and angrily shouted, “Security team, now!”

Even before Beta had opened the door, both Apollo and Starbuck had heard the low-pitched sustained whine of a Cylon Red Alert fill the Computer Center, causing the captain to blurt out, “They’ve spotted our Vipers, Starbuck! We’ve got to go!”

“No!” Starbuck said as he activated the second charge and then pulled out a third, “Just one more! Give me ten microns.”

Before Apollo could reply, he heard the door open and saw an IL Cylon standing in the doorway. Apollo got off one shot that missed as the door closed again before it could hit its target.

“Let’s go!” an edge of panic entered the captain’s voice. For the first time in a long time, he actually felt scared. And after all the soul-searching he’d been doing since his conversation with Sheba, he didn’t know anymore if that was bad or good.

Starbuck hastily attached one final charge and flicked the switch.

The two of them then dashed back out the way they had come into the Central Core shaft. Apollo took one final look inside the Computer Center with his pistols

trained to make sure the reinforcements from the other side wouldn't show up just yet. When he saw nothing, he finally felt safe to head back for the ladder. The blonde warrior was right behind him as Apollo grabbed the rungs and began the climb back up to the top of the shaft.

Apollo felt himself climbing up as fast as he could possibly go, since he felt the sense of fear rising inside him. More than anything else, he wanted to return alive from this mission. For the first time in so long, he actually felt cognizant of what it was that he needed to stay alive for at all costs, and how there was no honor at all in the prospect of losing his life on a mission as dangerous as this.

His palms were sweating so much from tension and fear that he felt them slip on the rungs for a brief instant. It caused one of his arms to fall away and slap against his side, where he felt it dislodge something he'd clipped to his holster...

"Starbuck!" he shouted in horror as he realized what had just happened, "The transmitter!"

Beneath him, Starbuck saw the black object dislodge from Apollo's weapons pack and fall towards him. He frantically reached out to grab it in mid-flight, but it fell out of reach down to the bottom of the shaft, where they heard it clatter against the floor.

"Quick!" Apollo shouted, "See if you can——"

Before he could finish, there was a loud explosion and a cloud of smoke and fire belching from the Computer Center below. They glanced down just in time to see the bodies of five centurions that had obviously gotten into the Computer Center just before, get hurled through the blasted door where they tumbled against the walls and floor of the shaft in motionless piles of dead machinery. The force of the explosion was so great that it almost caused Apollo and Starbuck to lose their hold on the rungs.

When the explosion finally died down, Apollo managed to resume his climb back up. He reached the top and climbed out of the hatch and onto the tarmac of the Launch Bay. Wasting no time, he reached down and lifted Starbuck out as soon as the lieutenant reached the top.

"Frack!" Apollo let out his inner rage, "Without that transmitter the squadrons can't tell us apart from the Cylons."

"Forget it buddy," Starbuck tried to catch his breath, "We won't be needing

any of that electronic felgercarb. We'll think of something."

"Like what?"

Just then, the sound of the alert siren resumed, and with it a panicked announcement from a human sounding voice that could only belong to an IL. "All pilots to your fighters immediately! All pilots to your fighters immediately!"

"First things first, buddy," Starbuck said, "The Galactica's about to attack so we'd better get out of here before they show up."

"We'd better not bother trying to find the fighter we came in. I guess any of these'll do."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

The two warriors then sprinted across the tarmac for the nearest Raider to them. Running like two frightened equines, they somehow avoided detection. Hiding behind some containers, they waited for the centurions to enter their Raiders so they could find out which ship to take. To their relief, one ship remained empty.

They hurried inside it, not concerned with appearances this time. Starbuck closed the hatch in the floor as Apollo started flipping toggles with a sense of desperation to get the thrusters started.

"Ready?" the lieutenant asked as he settled in his seat. He looked over at his friend, and gave Apollo a confident grin.

"Yes, and no," came the tense reply. "This reminds me of a game we used to play when we were kids. 'Hide and seek.' And whenever it was time to go looking for the other kids, we'd yell out, 'Ready or not, here I come!'"

"I remember that game," Starbuck grinned. "Ready or not..."

"Here we come," Apollo finished, activating the turbos. With a forward momentum that pushed them back into their seats, the Raider shot out of the landing bay into space.

Down in the Command Center, Beta's sense of shock had only increased as he saw the remaining centurions attend to putting out the fires in the Computer Center. As soon as it was under control, he moved back over to where One and

Two remained perched at their consoles.

"Status?" he angrily inquired.

"All short and long range scanners rendered non-operational. Estimate at least twelve centars to affect repairs."

"We haven't time for that!" Beta raged, "Put all maintenance crews into getting those scanners fixed immediately! I don't want anyone on this basestar who isn't a pilot to be doing anything else!"

"Sir," Two said, "What of the message to the Imperious Leader?"

Beta wished he could glare at him. "Never mind the message, you imbecilic scrap heap! With our scanners non-operational, the last thing any of us should be concerned with is a message that won't be received or acknowledged for sectars at bare minimum! Now see to those scanners immediately!"

"By your command."

Beta felt convinced that he was going to self-destruct in a matter of microns as a result of all these unexpected turn of events. For just a brief instant he had known the thrill of realizing that he had a chance to score the greatest military triumph of Cylon history. Only to now see that his basestar had just become the first to fall victim to a successful infiltration by Colonial Warriors that had resulted in the sabotage of the most vital piece of equipment in the entire vessel.

He glided back over to his command position and tried to get his thoughts under control.

Ten centons after leading the squadrons into the solar system, Boomer finally spotted the basestar, hovering serenely over the bleak lunar landscape. Watching it for a few microns, he wondered where Starbuck and Apollo might be at that very micron. Were they still deep within the ship, or were they farther out, headed in or out of the central core?

Still wishing he were with them, Boomer watched his scanner for what he knew was undoubtedly to come, the launching of the Cylon Raiders. He didn't have long to wait. Soon the alien fighters were spitting out of the bays like insects from a swamp.

Tensing his hand around his control stick, and poising his thumb above the fire

switch, Boomer glanced at the scanner one more time to see what condition the squadrons were in. The Vipers were lined up row by row, ready to meet the alien ships, and Boomer smiled in anticipation for what was to come.

"They're coming!" Jolly exclaimed.

"Continue to hold position," Boomer commanded, watching as the ships continued to approach their current location. He could feel the tension building among the pilots as they waited. "Hold..."

"Five microns," Sheba counted.

"Here they come," he radioed to the combined squadrons that had come together for this strike. "Stand by to assume attack formation. And keep your eyes peeled on your scanner for any flashing red dot. That'll be Starbuck and Apollo."

The tightly packed echelons of Cylon fighters drew closer. He almost marveled at how utterly predictable Cylon formations always were, and how they showed no sense of independent flying initiative. That was why against an organized group of Colonial Vipers, Cylons seldom stood a chance even with a two to one advantage.

Boomer took a breath and decided that the moment had come. "Break!"

Blue, Red, Green, Yellow and Silver Spar Squadrons went into their diversified flying pattern that immediately caused the Cylon echelons to break off from their tightly organized formations. Now, the Colonials had the ability to track them down almost at will and keep the enemy from making any coordinated effort to scan for the Galactica themselves.

The battle had begun and soon settled into what Colonials regarded as an acceptable battle ratio of eight to ten Cylon fighters for every one Viper lost. Boomer right away noticed that the only two casualties from the first phase of the battle had been young cadets out on their first combat mission. The one thing disconcerting about that was if that carried ominous implications for the long-term future. If long periods of idle time between combat engagements became the norm would the younger generation of pilots that would come after seasoned veterans like himself be able to handle the challenges?

He pushed the thought out of his mind and came up behind another group of three Cylons. The middle one was in sight. He looked down at his attack computer and saw no red dot beneath the image. He calmly pressed the fire button and the Raider was destroyed.

"Boomer?" he heard Sheba radio, "Any sign of them yet?"

"Not yet," he replied, "I wouldn't count on them trying to lose themselves with these guys. I know if I were them I would have high-tailed it out of the combat zone after leaving the basestar."

"I hope they're off it by now," she didn't try to hide the edge of concern in her voice, "According to my scanner the Galactica will be on top of it any micron now."

Aboard the Galactica, Adama was hunched over the laser turret control banks located one level down from the command section of the Bridge's upper level, making sure that all systems were on-line and functioning. The instant the battle began he wanted to be right next to where the heart of the Galactica's attack would be.

Above, Baltar remained on the upper level, his hands clasped behind his back, his expression carefully guarded while Castor stood several feet away keeping his eye on him. Since the battlestar had picked up speed, the traitor had grown uncharacteristically silent, not bothering to make any sarcastic remarks at Adama's expense. Indeed, for the first time since his capture, he had actually felt his hate for Adama dissipate for the first time. Ever since Adama had coldly rejected his offer to strike back against the Cylon Empire in the tomb of the Ninth Lord on Kobol, Baltar had been filled with an unending hatred of the Galactica commander as the ultimate cause of his cursed fate as an outcast from humanity and it had guided his actions all throughout his pursuit of the Fleet, and even after his capture.

But now, Adama had unexpectedly changed his tune for the first time and had become Baltar's potential instrument of freedom. It had taught him a valuable lesson how even a powerful emotion like hate was not unchangeable over time.

And if Adama kept his word and set him free, and he were rescued one day by the Cylons and restored to his command? What would that ultimately mean? Would he be able to resume the chase with the same vigor and determination that he had mounted it the last time? Or would it lead to something else entirely?

Those were certainly questions he knew he was going to have ponder at some point. Assuming all went well and the battle was won.

For now, he would stay out of Adama's way and just cooperate if called upon. All he wanted to do at this point was uphold his end of the bargain and earn his

way off the Prison Barge forever.

"Adama!"

The commander looked up and his expression darkened when he saw the white-robed figures of Sire Domra and Sire Antipas enter the Bridge. Without wasting a micron, Adama mounted the steps and headed them off before they could get to the upper level where Baltar stood.

"Sire Domra, Sire Antipas," he said curtly, "I have very little time to discuss any matters with you. Take them up with me after the present situation is ended."

"This won't wait, Adama," Domra was seething, "What is that despicable cretin," he motioned to Baltar who merely glanced at them with amusement, "doing here aboard the Galactica?"

"Those matters do not concern you at this time, Sire Domra."

Adama's cold tone increased, "And if you value the safety of every life in this Fleet you and Sire Antipas will leave the Bridge immediately and let me do my job."

"Rumor has it that you've struck a deal with him that will result in his sentence being commuted," Antipas said in that smooth tone of voice, purposefully using the formal language to drive his point home.

"If that is indeed true, Adama, then I believe there will be little question of the need for you to explain your actions before the entire Council later on."

"I will do so at the appropriate time," Adama almost hissed, "But there might not be another Council meeting if I'm kept from my duties at a time when we are about to engage in direct combat with a basestar."

I am now ordering the both of you to leave the Bridge immediately!"

"We shall leave, Adama," the younger Council member said coolly, cutting off Domra's next retort. "But I believe that we will have much clearer consciences when this whole affair is over than you shall."

As soon as they had walked away and left the Bridge, Adama shook his head in disgust, and then felt his skin crawl when he heard

Baltar's voice from behind him saying, "Well done, Adama. Well done."

Without acknowledging him, he went back to his position in front of the laser turret station, knowing already that Baltar was probably smirking at him again.

"Commander!" a faint level of urgency entered Omega's voice, "Long range scan indicates that our squadrons are engaged."

"Transfer scan to here, Omega," Adama felt his voice rise anxiously.

"Yes sir," the Bridge Officer replied crisply.

"They're heavily outnumbered," Tigh cautioned from his station on the opposite side of the Bridge.

"They should be able to handle them." the Commander said confidently.

"Commander," Athena chimed in, "Urgent messages are coming in from all over the Fleet on when the present situation is going to be over."

"Send out a unicom on priority scrambler and tell those ships to stay off the airwaves!" Adama snapped, "We can't risk their inter-ship transmissions being picked up by the baseship and alerting their presence to us! Tell them we'll rejoin them in no more than thirty centons from now."

"Yes sir!" his daughter's voice was punctual.

"Assuming you make it through this," Baltar half-muttered under his breath. There was still a part of him that could scarcely believe this was happening. Chiefly because he had long since grown unaccustomed to the thought of a battlestar being able to take a basestar on directly. Granted, he had seen Cain do it against his two sister ships at the Battle of Gomorrah, but that had been the exception that only proved the rule in Baltar's mind. For the most part, in the yahrens leading up to his decision to betray humanity he had come to see all of the battlestar commanders as too soft and unwilling to take on major risks that could win the war against the Cylons.

"We're almost there," Adama could feel the tension rising inside as he looked at the scanner showing the third planet of the solar system. Then, in an instant he could see a familiar circular shape emerge on the screen, "There she is, Tigh!" his voice rose.

"I see it," the executive officer nodded, "We're getting a transponder signal off of her. Warbook classifies her as serial number 1974, from the Sonus Class." he

said in reference to the coding system for basestars that had been devised yahrens ago by Colonial military intelligence.

Baltar felt a wave of disappointment go through him. He knew right away that the number didn't match the transponder code for his own basestar. That meant he wouldn't draw the satisfaction of seeing his own personal revenge on Lucifer exacted. If his fate was to one day be rescued by the Cylon Empire it would in all likelihood mean a reunion with the IL. And he could easily picture the devious mind of his one-time second-in-command finding ways to use the knowledge of what he had done to regain his freedom to his own advantage.

But on the other hand, his past experience also made him know something else about that particular basestar.

"Adama," he spoke up, "I'm familiar with that ship. She's an older one, deemed by the Imperious Leader long ago as insufficient to handle the task of major combat operations. As I recall from my intelligence briefing her crew is yahrens out of date from the current centurion models and was slated at one point for eventual decommissioning and overhaul."

The commander looked back at him and realized immediately that Baltar was telling the truth. He nodded and turned back to the laser turret station and leaned forward, "All lasers to maximum readiness.

Stand by on my signal," he then looked over at Tigh, "Sound battle stations!"

"Battle stations!" the executive officer called out. "Seal all compartments!"

The red glow bathed the bridge and the klaxon sounded. Tigh made his way over to the laser turret station where Adama was hunched over the gunnery officer.

"She's taking no action sir," Omega called down. "Just staying there dead in space for now."

Baltar moved over to the railing with faint concern and looked down at the laser turret station, "Adama," he said, "Surely you could end all this in a micron by firing one of your missiles at them."

The group ignored his comment and kept their eyes trained on the viewing screen where the baseship had come into view.

"I don't think she's scanned us." Tigh ventured cautiously.

"They might just have done it," Adama kept his voice at a low hush, "Stand by to fire all forward laser batteries."

"Adama!" Baltar gripped his hands on the railing as he looked at them in bewilderment, "Have you lost your mind? If they've succeeded then you have a chance to use one missile at point blank range!"

A few heads on the Bridge uneasily turned toward Adama.

"Adama, didn't you hear me? You're risking our lives if you don't use a missile on them!"

The commander turned around and glared at the traitor. "Baltar," he said calmly, "Another word from you and you'll spend the rest of this battle in the brig. I am not going to use up irreplaceable weaponry if I don't have to."

"You are a fool!" Baltar hissed, "A cautious fool to the very end."

Adama turned his back to him and then said at the top of his voice, "Fire!"

With that, a large number of red streaks hurtled across space and crashed directly into the basestar.

Beta had only felt his state of agitation increase with each passing micron as he waited for more information on whether the scanners were being attended to. He could not avoid the sensation that it was so unfair for all this to be happening when he'd known for a brief instant the pleasure of thinking that he might be able to find a reprieve from his inevitable fate of decommissioning and recycling.

Now, events were reaching a situation where even that might not be an option any longer if this ended in failure.

Suddenly, his circuits felt the rumbling of a massive shockwave that caused the entire command center to literally shake. One and Two were almost knocked to the floor.

"What happened?" he demanded angrily as he leaned against a bank of monitors to keep him from falling. The bulk of his robes concealed his cybernetic arms underneath and made it impossible for him to immediately grab on to something.

One had regained his footing and was checking his console. "Aft laser turret reports an attacking battlestar."

"Fire aft mega lasers!" Beta shouted. "Initiate on-line sequences for all missile batteries!"

"Acquisition of missile readiness not possible for at least five centons."

"Direct all firepower to aft batteries!" Beta tried not to sound any more rattled than he already had. "Don't waste any time with precision targeting!"

The Galactica had managed more than a dozen hits on the basestar before the first blue streaks of return fire hit them. In an instant, everyone on the bridge felt the rumbling sounds beneath their feet.

One shot, absorbed for the most part by the bridge shield, caused wisps of smoke to erupt in several areas. Without the shielding, it would have resulted in overloaded circuitry bursting into flames.

On the upper level, Baltar's hands were sweating so much that they almost slipped off the handrail that he was tightly gripping. It still struck him as incredible that Adama wasn't resorting to the easy solution of firing all missiles at point blank range. He thought of making another outburst that might get the rest of the Bridge personnel to listen, and perhaps they would go along with him. But he dismissed that in an instant, knowing that the likelihood of anyone in this room willing to trust his judgment over Adama's, was practically nonexistent.

As much as the traitor didn't want to admit it, his fate was in Adama's hands alone at this point, and he had no choice but to watch, and for the first time since he was a child, perhaps even pray.

"Fire in the bay!" Athena shouted, as indications of a hit showed on the monitor in front of her.

"Damage report?" Adama turned and sharply inquired.

"Being dealt with," Athena pressed her earpiece tightly, "Chief Jorda reports that the Boraton Mist Control Center is operating efficiently. No loss of pressure to boraton hoses."

Adama nodded with satisfaction. The new safety measures put into place to avoid a repetition of what had happened in the suicide hits of seven sectars ago,

when the Control Center had been wiped out in a single blast, were working as they should.

"Indications show heavy damage to baseship on aft starboard and port mega lasers," Omega reported. "Baseship is now attempting to maneuver into position for forward mega laser use."

"Bring us around to new heading delta one-five," Adama said, "Fire all forward laser batteries as she comes to bear. We'll try and catch her dead on, right at the reactor level and finish her. If it doesn't do the job," he skipped a beat, "Then prepare port missile one for point blank firing."

Several levels below the Bridge, Dr. Wilker had calmly sealed the compartment door that led from his lab to the corridor and gone over to the work table where an agitated Fairfax waited.

"All right Fairfax," he said, "Now let's finally have a look at that recording you and Boomer and everyone else have been on me about since I got back from the Electronics Ship."

"Uh, sir," his assistant let out another of his characteristic snuffles, "Do you really think this is the time for——"

"Fairfax, I have never been a believer in sitting around doing nothing even in the face of battle. If anything, continuing with work helps me stay sane during a battle. Now let's have those recordings and start analyzing."

Fairfax wiped away the sweat that had formed on his bald pate and moved over to the computer near the duct vent, where the recording had been stored. He could feel his tension increase as he felt the rumble of a laser blast that had struck somewhere else in the battlestar.

"Okay," he tried not to let his voice tremble, "Opening the file now. In about ten microns we can——"

Fairfax didn't get to finish his sentence when he suddenly felt the force of a more powerful explosion knock both him and Wilker off his feet. Portions of the ceiling suddenly collapsed on top of several computer terminals, including the one Fairfax had been standing in front of.

"What the...?" the Chief Scientist was in a state of shock as he got back to his feet. The last thing he expected was to feel a laser blast affecting his lab area. He

had always thought of it as one of the most secure parts of the battlestar.

“Sir!” Fairfax didn’t hide the panic in his voice, “I think we’d better get out of here and fast!”

“Wait, just wait a centon, let’s not panic!” Wilker waved his arms, “Maybe it——”

A blast of flame suddenly roared through the duct vent at the other side of the room, engulfing the entire rear of the lab.

Nothing more needed to be said, as the two scientists scrambled for the compartment door that led to the corridor. Wilker frantically pushed the buttons that opened it, and he and Fairfax dashed out.

The last thing the Chief Scientist saw of his lab as he shut the compartment door from the outside, was the fire consuming the entire room.

Smoke was now coming through numerous vents throughout the bridge, indicating the presence of fires on other levels. Clearly, the battlestar was absorbing heavy damage even as she picked up speed and assumed the new heading.

Just then, the battlestar felt the blast of two simultaneous hits, more violent than anything else up to this point.

“We’ll be in position in five microns, four, three, two, one, mark!” Omega raised his voice, “Forward lasers now locked on!”

“Fire!” Adama’s voice was determined.

The new round of laser fire from the Galactica, more precise and accurate than anything the basestar had been able to muster on short notice, now crashed directly into the center hub of the basestar, right at the level that housed the warship’s main reactor.

Beta had enough time to know right away what it meant. That his long career was finally at an end.

His last thought before the entire command center was engulfed by flame, was that perhaps it was more fitting to die this way, then to suffer the indignity of scrapping after all.

On the Bridge, they could see the basestar absorb the newest barrage of lethal fire. The circular shaped warship began to sag slightly, and then an instant later exploded completely.

There was a delayed reaction of a half micron before the reality of the situation set in among everyone on the Bridge. Tigh was the first to let go, letting out an excited cheer, "We did it!" the executive officer was trembling, "We did it, Adama!"

"We all did it Tigh!" Adama had let go as well, and an entire chorus of cheers and whoops came from every quarter of the room. He turned to his daughter, "Damage report?"

"Extensive in some localized areas, but Jorda says all fires are controllable." Athena reported and then grinned as she heard the next piece of information in her ear, "And everything around the landing bays are cleared. All intact and still ready for operational use."

"Thank God for that," Adama turned back to Omega, "Tell our vipers to stand by and make sure that none of the remaining Cylon fighters attempt suicide runs at us. And keep a watch for Captain Apollo and Lieutenant Starbuck."

"Yes sir!" the bridge officer grinned.

Adama went back to the upper level where Baltar remained. The traitor seemed more spent with relief than anything else.

"My congratulations, Adama," his voice was the most neutral Adama could ever recall, "You acquitted yourself well in the battle."

The Galactica commander resisted the temptation to make a retort. Baltar had lived up to his word, and he now had to do the same, regardless of how difficult his opponents on the Council chose to be about it.

"Thank you, Baltar," Adama kept his tone equally neutral, "I will be in touch with you when the matter of your... disposition shall be dealt with." he then motioned to Castor, "Escort Baltar to guest quarter space. Maintain a constant guard, but accord him every possible courtesy."

The Colonial security guard glanced at the traitor with a hint of distaste and then nodded, "Yes sir."

As soon as Castor had led Baltar away, Adama went back to the lower level, "Any word on Apollo and Starbuck?"

"None sir," Omega shook his head, "Boomer says the Cylon force is down to less than halfstrength now. Some of them turned around and are committing suicide by making steep dives into the atmospheres of the various planets in the solar system. Not too many of them are shifting course toward the Galactica."

For the first time, Adama felt his euphoria replaced by a slight sense of uneasiness. "Tell them to keep watching. And have all attack computers here on the bridge watching too. A flashing red dot is the key."

"Yes sir."

"I don't think there's any fight left in them anymore," Sheba noted as she saw another Cylon fighter go into a steep dive above the giant first planet of the system, where it glowed a bright red and then faded into nothing as it burned up.

"Seems that way," Boomer agreed, "The Galactica's given the go-ahead to let us come back in stages. Silver Spar, Blue and Red Squadrons first. Yellow and Green groups will stand by to take care of any Raiders that still want to fight or make any suicide runs on the Galactica." He paused, "That puts you in charge for now, Greenbean."

Feel up to the task?"

"You'd better believe it," Greenbean answered.

"And keep watching for Apollo and Starbuck," Sheba jumped in.

And for the first time, there was more than a hint of concern in her voice. "There ought to be some sign of them by now, unless..." she broke off.

"Sheba, relax," Boomer cut in reassuringly, "They're probably already back at the Officers Club having a cold one."

Ten centons later, Boomer and Sheba were aboard the battlestar and had gone straight to the Bridge. When they saw an uneasy Cassiopeia standing by Adama and Tigh, they knew right away that the news was not good.

"Nothing, not a sign of them," Adama's early euphoria was gone completely now as he stood hunched over the attack computer for the main port side laser

turret. "We've had two Cylon fighters that tried suicide runs and neither of them transmitted the identification signal.

And Greenbean says there are probably no more than ten to fifteen left out there and they've gotten no indication either."

Cassiopeia glanced over at Sheba and noticed how she seemed one step away from losing control completely. The memory of their conversation in the Celestial Dome only centars ago filled her mind, and it made her wonder if Sheba would be able to handle it if the worst happened.

And will I be able to handle it if the worst has happened? she took a breath.

"Commander," Omega called over from his station, "Another Cylon fighter approaching. Greenbean said it took a vector away from the main group so we'll have to deal with it."

"Transfer to my console, Omega," the commander said, as the four people around them all hunched forward to see the readout on Adama's computer.

"Maybe that's them," Cassiopeia tried to sound hopeful.

An anxious silence came over them as they watched the image of a Cylon fighter appear on Adama's computer. The commander had his hand ready above the fire switch that would activate the laser guns. Cassiopeia found herself reaching out and squeezing Sheba's hand for support.

"No flashing red dot," Adama said flatly as they stared at the computer. "We'll have to take care of this one. Activating guns in five microns."

Boomer frowned as he saw the image suddenly tilt at a forty-five degree angle, and then almost immediately tilt the other way to a forty-five degree angle in the opposite direction.

"Sir, wait!" he bolted forward, "Don't fire, it's them!"

Adama's hand was above the fire switch, "Boomer, there's no flashing dot, and that fighter is on a direct course for Alpha Landing Bay!"

"But sir, it's them! You've got to believe me!"

The commander turned around and frowned at him, "How do you know?"

Boomer stared at the screen and saw the image tilt sideways again. The warrior suddenly broke into a wide grin, "Because they're wagging!" he exclaimed.

Tigh looked at the warrior as if he'd gone mad, "Wagging?" he repeated the word, as if he'd never heard it before in his life.

"Starbuck said if they lost the transmitter, they'd waggle their wings. That's what they're doing!"

For the first time, a look of optimism came over both Sheba and Cassiopeia.

Tigh was still unconvinced, "Adama, if he's wrong and that fighter turns out to be a suicide ship, we could end up losing Alpha Bay."

Adama felt his body tense up in his seat. His hand was above the button that could destroy the image on the screen in an instant. The weight of the decision was on his shoulders in every sense.

"Twenty microns to impact with the landing bay, Adama," Tigh prodded, "Are you going to open fire?"

The commander was totally rigid, not showing any sign of movement.

He finally shut his eyes and said a brief prayer to the Lords for strength that he make the right decision.

His hand then pulled away from the fire button.

Another tense silence came over the five people as they watched the scanner showing the fighter drawing closer to the Galactica.

Entering the landing bay...

And finally coming to a perfect stop.

Sheba and Cassiopeia both threw their arms about each other and the two of them were suddenly sprinting away from the bridge as fast as their legs could carry them.

Boomer was grinning from ear to ear, as he followed them out.

With Adama and Tigh there was only intense relief. The executive officer's rigid posture slackened as he sighed and patted Adama on the shoulder.

"The Lords of Kobol be praised," Adama said as he leaned back in his chair.

Apollo's hands were still gripping the controls even after the Raider had come to a stop in the landing bay. He was still numb from the tension of the last several centons, wondering if the gambit Starbuck had reminded him of, would work. Wondering if he would be forced to suffer the cruel irony of surviving the basestar only to meet death at the hands of his friends and allies. It had left him feeling more scared than at any other time he could recall on a mission during the last yahren.

"Wasn't I right?" Starbuck said with a trademark grin, "I told you we didn't need any of that electronic felgercarb."

Apollo finally forced his hands off the controls, looked at his friend and let out the biggest tension-releasing laughter of his life.

Through the side windows, they could see a large crowd of people rushing up toward the fighter, and then came the sound of pounding on the hatch opening outside.

"Come on buddy," Starbuck said as he flicked the switch that opened the hatch and then got up from his seat. "Let's go meet our adoring public."

Apollo was slower to get up. All he could feel going through him was the intense feeling of relief that he'd made it back. And with it, some feelings about other things as well.

Starbuck was the first to exit the fighter. By this point, almost two dozen people had gathered near the fighter, warriors and technical crew alike. The blonde warrior raised his arm and flashed a thumbs up signal, clearly enjoying the accolades everyone was giving him.

"I kind of figured you'd have to be dramatic and lose that transmitter," Boomer stepped forward and came up to him, "And after all that hard work I put into making it."

"Well Boomer, where would my reputation be without theatrical flourishes like that?" Starbuck grinned as he then embraced his friend.

"Hey, you guys did a great job yourselves out there. How'd we come through in casualties?"

"Nine pilots," Boomer's tone grew serious, "Nine too many of course, but the Fleet can manage."

Starbuck nodded in understanding and made his way down through the crowd, where he could see Cassiopeia waiting. She impulsively sprinted toward him and they met in a long embrace and kiss.

The crowd had now turned its attention back to the fighter, where Apollo had just emerged. Their applause and cheers escalated, as the black-haired captain smiled sheepishly and awkwardly waved to them in acknowledgment.

Boomer stepped toward Apollo, but then noticed that the captain's eyes were darting about the landing bay as if he was looking for someone else. He backed away and decided to wait until it was more appropriate.

As Apollo continued to wave, his eyes finally spotted Sheba, standing alone by one of the support pillars. He could see that she was smiling at him, and that she also seemed to be trembling as well.

Apollo wished at that moment that he had the courage to run through the crowd, come up to her, take her in his arms and kiss her.

But his mind was still coming to terms with feelings and emotions that had taken so long for him to admit existed, and he knew that in spite of how he felt about Sheba, he still had a ways to go.

He slowly stepped down the ramp, exchanged handshakes with Boomer, Jolly and other warriors. Then, after several centons of waiting for the crowd to disperse, he finally reached the other end where Sheba was still standing.

"Hi," he managed to smile weakly at her. "I made it."

"I'm glad," she kept her tone even, as she returned the smile.

Apollo could tell that there had been tears of relief streaming down her face earlier.

"Um... Sheba," Apollo sighed, feeling more awkward than any other time he could remember in his life, "I ah...was wondering if it might be possible for you

and me to um...continue that conversation we were having a few centars ago sometime."

"Of course," Sheba had no intention of rushing Apollo at this point, not when it was at least clear to her that he was finally willing to take some steps forward himself. "When would be a good time?"

"How about dinner on the Rising Star in a couple of days from now?" Apollo gathered all his inner strength, "I have a feeling that after this mission, I'm going to have earned myself a gold pass for an evening there."

"I'd love it," she smiled, not wanting to lose control at that moment, even though to hear him go this far was enough to make her quiver with emotion. "You let me know when, and I'll be ready."

"Thanks," Apollo visibly brightened, "I've... learned a lot these last few centars Sheba, and... there's a lot that needs to be discussed."

"I know." Sheba nodded.

He abruptly straightened himself, "I... ah, think I'd better go make my report to the Commander. I'll... be in touch."

Sheba watched him disappear into the next compartment, let out a sigh and then said quietly, but aloud, "I love you, Apollo."

Epilogue

Even with the thick ear protectors, Starbuck could still sense the deafening noise of the Galactica's main thrusters rumbling through his fingers as he climbed up the ladder that led to the Celestial Dome above. Wondering if it would reach a point where the vibration would make him lose his grip on the ladder, and not wanting to wonder what it would be like if some accident knocked the ear protectors off. He knew he was only playing a hunch coming up here, but ever since Boomer had given him the bad news about what had happened in Wilker's lab during the battle, he knew that sooner or later Apollo would find a reason for coming here again. That meant he had to check this place out.

Starbuck opened the hatch and pulled himself inside. He saw right away that Apollo was sitting in the elevated console, busily working at all of the instruments there. First taking another star reading through the ancient navigational scanner. And then looking at the console set for the long-range transmissions with an

almost forlorn expression.

"I thought I'd find you up here," Starbuck said.

As soon as he spoke, Apollo turned around, and smiled weakly.

"Hey, Starbuck," he then quickly turned his attention back to the instruments.

The blonde warrior mounted the ladder so that he could stand next to Apollo. "You know, you've got a lot of people getting impatient down in the Great Hall waiting for you and me. Big victory celebration planned." his voice took on a sly edge, "The rumor has it that we've earned ourselves another Gold Cluster. And this time, it's not a political gift from Sire Uri like the ones at Carillon were."

Apollo sighed with resignation but didn't turn away from the instrument panel, "I'll be there. Just give me another couple centons with this thing."

"For what?" Starbuck asked rhetorically. "Another transmission?"

"Yeah."

"You still don't think that first one was a Cylon lure?"

"No," Apollo shook his head, still not looking at him. He then let out another forlorn sigh, "But now we'll never know. Wilker's lab took a direct hit in the battle and destroyed all the computers and all the data in there. Including the transmission. Frack, I should have had the sense to make a backup copy for safekeeping before the battle and kept it under a secure lock in my quarters."

"Come on, you can't fault yourself for that," Starbuck chided,

"You had other things on your mind then."

Apollo pondered that one for a micron and then nodded, "You're right about that."

"So you're just going to sit here and wait for another one?"

"I hope so," he shrugged, "Boomer rigged a gamma frequency booster so that if we do get another signal it has to come in a lot clearer than the first one did. But the way this system works, someone has to activate the recorder manually if another one ever does come through."

That's why... well, I figured since I had some time to come up here and just think about...other things too, I might as well see how it's doing."

Starbuck knew right away what Apollo meant by 'other things'. Cassiopeia had already told him how Sheba had been spending the entire afternoon asking for help to prepare for a dinner date with Apollo on the Rising Star that Starbuck knew was going to happen after the Victory Celebration ceremonies were over. He was glad to see that his friend was at long last taking some small steps forward with regard to that. It told him that at long last, Apollo was breaking out of the shell he had encased himself in after Serina's death.

"Level with me, buddy," Starbuck delicately inquired, "If you don't think that was a Cylon lure, then do you think that transmission might have come from Earth?"

Apollo finally turned around and smiled weakly at his friend, "I hope it did." He looked back at the panel again, "The first contact with Earth should be her transmissions. Something similar to what we saw."

Starbuck frowned, "I didn't see anything special in that transmission. Just looked like a spacecraft on a routine run to me."

The black-haired captain chuckled, "What would you expect? A momentous message?"

"Well," Starbuck shrugged, "I guess maybe I always felt in the back of my mind that Earth's been waiting for us all these thousands of yahrens and has a big signal to their brothers to let us know how to get there once we're close enough to hear them."

"Yeah, you would think that," Apollo's chuckle deepened, "But it's not going to be like that. We'll just pick up routine radio and video scans first. Nothing extraordinary. To them anyway."

"I guess so," Starbuck admitted and then nudged him, "Come on buddy, let's get going to that celebration. If Earth's out there, we'll find it without you holding vigil twenty-four centars each cycle."

Apollo sighed and slowly hit the buttons that shut off each instrument panel on the console. "I guess you're right."

The captain rose from his seat and prepared to follow Starbuck down the

ladder. With their backs to the console now, neither one noticed the butt of Starbuck's laser pistol, protruding from his holster, brushing against the panel and switching on the video scanner again. The two warriors made their way to the hatch and donned their ear protectors.

"So they're really going to give us the Gold Cluster?" Apollo raised his voice as Starbuck opened the hatch and the roar of the thrusters filled the dome.

"Did I say us?" Starbuck grinned as he started down the ladder,

"I think it's just a Silver Cluster for you, buddy. I get Gold because I was the one bright enough to remember about wagging our wings."

Apollo laughed, "I'd give you a sectan's pay if you'd summon the nerve to make cracks like that on the reviewing platform in front of Adama and Tigh."

"Only if you share my cell during the sectan in the brig I'd get."

The hatch then closed cutting off the sound of the thrusters and Apollo's laughter. The Celestial Dome was now empty and silent.

But the silence inside the dome did not last long.

On the elevated console, a clear picture had emerged on the video scanner. The picture of a dark, crater-filled landscape looming closer and closer. And with it, the clear sound of voices. Calm, collected and thoroughly professional sounding voices.

"Two hundred feet, down three and a half. Forty seven forward.

Fifteen, down two and half. Nineteen forward. A hundred feet, three and a half down, nine forward. Forty feet, down two and a half. Picking up some dust."

"Thirty seconds."

"Brake shadow. Contact light."

A brief hush. And then, the picture shifting to an image of a spidery like spacecraft standing proudly on the surface of the crater-filled landscape.

"We copy you down, Eagle."

Finally, the voice of Commander Neil Armstrong filled the empty Celestial Dome of the Battlestar Galactica.

“Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed.”

“Roger, Tranquility,” the voice from Mission Control in Houston, Texas answered. “We’ve got a bunch of guys about to turn blue here.”

The picture shifted again. To the sight of Walter Cronkite removing his glasses, rubbing his hands eagerly and letting out an excited, “Oh, boy!” To the sight of his broadcast colleague, astronaut Wally Schirra wiping away a tear from his eyes over the realization that his friends Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin had made it.

All over the planet called Earth, the words that had just been spoken had brought crowds of millions in all nations to a standstill, as they listened in with excitement to something that from their perspective, had never before been accomplished in human history.

Aboard the Battlestar Galactica, where the words and pictures would have been regarded as more meaningful than to any of the four billion people on Earth, there was no one present in the Celestial Dome to hear them.

Even so, the great battlestar and her fleet of 220 ships continued to move forward. Toward the source of the signal that lay somewhere ahead of them.

The End