

Chapter 4

Kara Thrace loved drinking, card games, cigars, and sex, not necessarily in that order. But she lived to fly. Out here, in deep space, the *Galactica* so far away that she couldn't pick up its radio transmissions without an amp and a highly directional antenna. Here the only support was Helo in Raptor One and Apollo on her wing. Nebula ahead, familiar stars behind, the unknown beyond. *Thank you, Lords. I know I'm being selfish, but thank you for letting me do this.*

"Starbuck, we've got telemetry from *Galactica*." Helo's voice came over the com. "This is the remains of a planetary nebula, but it's old, and is probably hiding two or three stars. Any one of them could be our target. We're probably a light-year or two from any of them. Hang tight, we're going to jump into the nebula in five, four, three, ..."

The usual jump nausea ensued, aided by the fact that *Blackbird* was near the edge of the Raptor's jump bubble. *Damn, one of these days we're going to do that and I'll leave a wing behind. Or a head.* A quick glance to her right showed that Apollo hadn't left any parts behind, either. At least, not visible ones.

A sun appeared, along with increased digital radio chatter. Encrypted. *Wonder who the toasters are trying to keep secrets from? Surely not little ol' me.* Didn't mean they wouldn't be listening for her, though. Only tight-beam connections to Helo from now on. "What've we got, databoys?"

"Starbuck, this is the system. There's a Kobol class planet right where you'd want it to be, and it looks a lot hotter in the infra-red than it should. Probably occupied, though it's not nearly as full as one of the colonies worlds. There *might* be another installation on a moon off the biggest gas giant. We've also got random chatter several places around the system, none near us, thank the Lords."

"Roger that, Helo. So I go scope out the moon, then down to the planet?"

"That looks best, Starbuck. Keep in touch. If you need help, Apollo will be there as quick as he can, and I'll scream for help from the fleet." Flying the only stealth *Viper* in the Fleet, Starbuck would be alone. Having Apollo as backup was nice, but if he went alongside their cover would be blown wide open. So he could only help after she'd been detected. Adama would have sent more, but they couldn't afford to lose any *Vipers*. Apollo was really along only to protect Helo and collect her remains if something went wrong, assuming there was something to collect.

Well, any of these hypothetical Cylons were going to learn that she wasn't

someone to frak with. “Raptor, I’m go. Try to stay in contact with me!” And off she sped. What she said about Cylon was erased from the mission tape.

Back on the *Galactica* the plotting board was empty. *Raptor One* could only make radio contact by jumping back to the fleet, which would be done only after the end of the mission, in case of an emergency, or if it was determined that there was no threat. (Unlikely, that. Who else would be speaking digital out here except Cylons?)

Communications were active within the fleet, however. Unfortunate, that. “Commander, I’m receiving a message from *Colonial One*. President Roslin is on for you.”

Might as well face it now rather than later. “Madame President, I was just going to call you.”

“I’m sure you were, Commander. To what would I have owed this prospective honor?”

Well, looks like the cat’s out of the bag. She didn’t seem to want to berate him publicly for not communicating sooner, so might as well play along with it. “Madam President, at 1015 hours our advance sensor drones detected digitized encrypted transmissions from inside the nebula ahead. The transmissions had traveled several light-years, so whatever it is has been there for a long time. We suspect Cylons. Starbuck has been sent to investigate with the *Blackbird*. *Raptor One* and Apollo are flying backup. They jumped into the nebula ten minutes ago. We’ll be out of comm range until they return.”

“Understood. Do you have any reason to suspect that these are really Cylons?”

Well, no, but what the frak else could they be? “The telemetry we get doesn’t match known Cylon patterns, Madame President. But then again, what we know of current Cylon communications doesn’t match what we knew after the first war, either.”

“Meaning that this might be a separate Cylon civili, uh, settlement?”

“It’s possible, Madam President. We won’t know until Starbuck reports back.”

“Or doesn’t report at all. Tell me Commander. Is there any possibility that these signals might be non-Cylon?”

What the frak was she expecting, aliens? Except for obscure references in the Sacred Scrolls, no one had ever found any indication that non-human

(or Cylon) intelligent life had ever existed.

“Not likely, Madam President. There’s no indication of any alien civilization.”

“I wasn’t thinking of an *alien* civilization, Commander. I was thinking of a *Colonial* civilization. The Thirteenth Colony, to be precise.”

“We’re nowhere near the location of Earth we found on the Map. It will take months, if not years, to get there even at maximum jump.”

“I realize that, Commander. But what if they’re coming out to meet us?”

“You mean Earth founding Colonies? I doubt it. Their technology must be on a similar level to ours. We wouldn’t be out this far from home if we hadn’t been forced out by the Cylons, and we’re much closer to home than we are to Earth.”

“Perhaps, Commander, they would have a higher technology than ours, given that the *didn’t* fight a war with the Cylons.”

Possible, thought Adama. Human technology had been growing exponentially before the first war, and had been showing signs of resuming that advance just before the Cylons attacked. Talk had begun of the human race approaching a “singularity,” where technological advances would have made any man equivalent to a god. Maybe the toasters had felt that it was their last chance. *And maybe they were sent to us by the Lords to cure us of the sin of pride.* But where would the Colonies be if the Cylons hadn’t revolted? Or if Cylons hadn’t been created at all? Could humans from Earth be so far advanced? (And if they hadn’t created Cylons, could they forgive the Colonies for creating a race of intelligent slaves? Or would they side with the Created against the Creators?)

“Commander?”

Adama realized he’d been lost in thought. Time to regroup. “Or, Madam President, perhaps they lost their technology during the settlement of Earth. We lost much when we moved from Kobol, and we had the resources of the Twelve Colonies. If Earth is so advanced, why haven’t they returned to visit us?”

“Maybe they are on their way, Commander.”

Tricky bit of work, this. If there was an installation on the moon ahead, and if it was hostile, and if it had its telescopes pointed in the right direction, the it would see her burn if she had to make any course corrections, stealth or no. So trajectory to take her past the moon and onto the planet ahead had to be set where the moon didn’t shine, behind the planet. Now she just

had to trust that her computer had set the right trajectory, and that gravity still worked. Oh, and that she didn't have to change course to miss some rock.

So far, so good.

"Raptor One, Apollo, this is Starbuck. The nebula doesn't entirely surround this system, I can see stars on the other side of the sun. I'm approaching that hot spot moon around the gas giant now. Let's see what we can see." The Viper was responding beautifully. Once she had proven it was flightworthy, the Chief was allowed all the best supplies for his new toy.

"Let's see what we can see. Drones launched, approaching the surface. Yes, I've got buildings on visual here. Vacuum tight, of course. Doesn't look like Cylon tech. If anything, it looks like something from a century ago. There are a couple of ships on the ground, possibly Viper-class. Looks like landing space for a few more. I'm getting some kind of weird radiation from one of the buildings, never seen it before. I'll send the drone back to you with the pictures, I'm moving on to the habitable planet." No response from Helo. She was too close to this alien base to risk interception of the signal. Odd things didn't look Cylon, but if not tin-cans, then what? Maybe the answers were on the planet.

If Burkemeier could call P7M-3527 Massilia, then I can call this place Elba, thought Major Wendel Rosecroft. Let's see. What do I do here? Oh yeah, I watch people arrive through the Stargate and travel to the '27, and I watch people arrive from '27 and go back to civilization. For in truth, nothing ever happened here. Just sit around and wait, and hope that you didn't see a bright flash which meant that ninety-nine percent of the life in this system had been wiped out in a naquadria accident.

The pilots could fly patrols, searching for a Goa'uld menace that was becoming more hypothetical with each passing month. Well, there could be an Ori attack, but that would most likely come through the Stargate, and the iris was closed except to those who had the proper signal.

So, sit, wait, supervise the maintenance crews for the F-302s in his command, and smile politely as visiting flyboys like Mitchell got to play with the X-toys by flying them around the solar system.

Like now. "Major, I've got an unidentified bogey that just passed over the base, about 300 miles above us. Probably stealthed, I didn't get a very strong return."

"Was it one of the X-307s buzzing us, Sergeant?"

“Most likely, sir.”

“Damn, they’re supposed to alert us when they’re playing. Send a query to P7M-3527 and ask them what’s up. And let’s see if we can give this flyboy a little scare, anyway. Plot a probable intercept and scramble the F-302s.”

“Yes Sir!” The Sergeant gave him a grin. Apparently even enlisted men got bored here. *Stop that. It’s not like you went to Colorado Springs. You’re ROTC. Which is why you’re here and not out there somewhere.* “All fighters. Repeat, all fighters. Possible bogey on vector for P7M-3527. Intercept. Repeat, intercept possible bogey.”

Fighters went up, eager for action. While it was fun to just fly around, it was even more fun to chase things while flying around. Naquadah powered, and F-302 could do a lot of chasing. But only when there was something to chase. The blip, barely seen once, never reappeared. The pilots returned to the never-ending poker game, and Rosecroft filed the incident in yet another report.