

Chapter 5

Cameron Mitchell hadn't had so much fun flying since – well, since before Antarctica. The inertialess Goa'uld drive in the X-307 gave him more speed and maneuverability than the F-302. The Earth-tech stealth (Goa'uld had never been much for hiding) kept him hidden from just about everything.

In particular, the refitted Goa'uld Tel'tak up ahead, just launched off the planet on the way to the Stargate, presumably to pick up new supplies of the base on the planet. Though, truth be known, the planet needed very few supplies. Saturn had started a pretty good ecosystem, which had expanded to fill most of the continent and the ocean in the millennia since he left. Only the Jaffa had died off. But with the Stargate off planet, ships were needed to transport scientific and military equipment, not to mention letters, magazines, books, videos, and (he'd heard) the occasional porn movie.

Buzz them? Childish. *I'm a Lieutenant Colonel in the USAF, dammit.* Come to think of it, he was the ranking officer in the system, with the exception of Wilkes and O'Neill. And she was Army and he was fishing. And really, these poor saps in the transport didn't have enough excitement in their lives, and it was up to him, a bona fide Lieutenant Colonel in the USAF, to provide it.

No, I really shouldn't do that. They'd probably file a report, and O'Neill would have to tell Landry to discipline me, and I'd spend a couple of weeks doing paperwork instead of going on missions. I don't really want that.

Hell, he was bored. And just about to accelerate in front of the Tel'tak when his close proximity alarm went off. Something went by him fast, going the other way. His radio squawked as the Tel'tak informed all and sundry that *something* was heading toward the planet, faster than sh-

“Tel'tak, Mitchell. I'm in an X-307 behind you. I'll try to pursue.”

Easy to say. Velocity difference between him and the UFO must have been at least 50kps. That wasn't a big deal for the X-plane, but it did mean that in the time he'd taken to react the target had vanished from his screen.

Well, there was only one place he was concerned about. “P7M-3527, this is Mitchell. I was taking the X-307 out to the Stargate when my proximity detector went off. Something is heading your way. I'm in pursuit, but I don't have a visual.”

Speed-of-light transmission would have meant that he wouldn't get an answer for a few minutes, but Asgard technology didn't much bother about such rules. “Mitchell, this is Flight. Roger your ID of something heading our way. We've got nothing, yet, but we'll send up patrols. Keep us informed if

you find anything. Flight, out.”

“You got it, Flight. I’m doing a search of the probable trajectory of – of whatever it was.”

I’m not imagining it, right? I saw something. The Tel’tak did, too. But nothing showed up, either by radar or by sight. The Asgard could beam objects over a whole solar system, but they couldn’t find a small –

Wait a minute. What was that? Just a very small flash, which looked for all the world like a rocket. *Rockets? Who the hell flies out where with rockets?* Reaction engines, once the pride and joy of Earth, hadn’t been used by any space-faring civilization in – ever, probably. Too inefficient, too slow.

Now that he knew where to look, it didn’t take much maneuvering to get into visual range. And what have we here?

“Flight, I’ve got a real live rocket in front of me. At least, just fired a rocket engine, probably to make a mid-course correction. It looks like – well, something like an old X-15, but bigger. Room for a crew of one. Several engines, something that looks like weapons. It’s stealthed, I couldn’t pick it up on radar, and wouldn’t have found it without the burn. At present speed it will be in your area in about two hours.”

Flight changed to a higher-pitched voice. “Mitchell, this is Colonel Wilkes. Understood you to say that you’ve sighted a rocket-powered bogey headed our way. Goa’uld, or something else?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it, Colonel. I don’t think it’s Goa’uld. Must be new kids on the block.”

“Understood. Well, it would be worthwhile to have a talk with them, at least. Try making contact. We’ll send up some help.”

“Sure thing, ma’am.”

That’s easy for you to say, Cam-my-boy. How do you contact someone in a flying firework? Radio was out. The bogey’s makers had obviously never known Goa’uld or Ancient technology, and it sure wasn’t built on Earth, so it was unlikely that their comm systems would mesh. Sit yourself right in front of it? Those missiles underneath the ship looked as deadly as any pre-Goa’uld AirtoAirMissileName. He could avoid them easily at a distance, but not at close range. How about coming up on the tail? He remembered one of the stories he read when he merely dreamed of flying in space: *A reaction drive is a weapon, with destructive capability in direct proportion to its efficiency as a drive.* It wouldn’t do if the pilot turned on the engines when he was sitting right behind.

OK, come along side, roll down the window, and wave – or something

to that effect. He touched the controls. The X-plane effortlessly glided up to within a few hundred meters of the rocket. No reaction. Well, the pilot, assuming it was manned, was probably dozing. At this speed, it must have been in flight for hours. All right, time to play deer in the headlights.

A bright light off to her left awakened Starbuck with a start. What the frak? She looked to the source of the light. A ship! About the size of the Blackbird, but it didn't look Colonial, nor Cylon. *Neat! I get to meet aliens. The first we've ever met!* Stories had been written about alien races for millennia, but no one on the colonies had ever met one, and most assumed that they didn't exist. And Kara Thrace was going to be able to prove them wrong.

Better tell Helo and Apollo what's going on. My cover's blown, somehow, so they might as well come in, too. "Raptor One, Blackbird. You're never going to believe what I found! I've got a real, live alien ship off my port side. It doesn't look like anything we've ever built. I don't see any thrusters, I don't know how it flies. I'm waving to it now. She turned on her cabin lights so that she could be seen and raised a hand.

The alien ship responded by turning off the spotlight. It drew within a few wingspans, and the cabin light turned on. The pilot took off his helmet, revealing the face of a male human.

Or not. No humans were out here. "Raptor One, the ship's pilot is a Cylon! I'm making a break for it. Go back and tell Adama this system is under Cylon control!"

What to do? The planet was close enough, if she could only get away from the toaster. She gunned the ship's engines.

Was it something I said? thought Mitchell. The bogey's tail had lit up, catching him by surprise. The thing must be making a good ten gees. It was headed toward the planet. No problem, it's a rocket, I've got a miracle machine. He followed effortlessly.

All other things being equal, Mitchell would have had no trouble intercepting. But Kara Thrace believed that she was running for her life, and the planet ahead gave her an opportunity she wouldn't have had in free space. She entered the ionosphere, still running at maximum acceleration. The Blackbird's skin heated immediately. Fortunately the carbon-composite skin wouldn't burn off too quickly, but she'd better do something, quick, or her atoms would never even make it down to the surface. Up ahead was a storm system. Apparently this place didn't have weather control. She glided her craft over the top of the storm, then did something she would have never

tried had she not once entered a much bigger storm system. She killed the Blackbird's engines, rotated the craft 180 degrees, and fired at twice maximum safe thrust. This couldn't go on too long, of course, there would be problems.

As she was losing consciousness, Starbuck's last thought was *Adama came for me before, he'll come for me now.*