

## Chapter 6

*I don't think I'd ever be that nuts*, was all Mitchell could think. He hadn't expected anything like that, nor did he expect the acceleration that the ship had poured on. No point in following it down into the storm. If the ship somehow remained intact, he'd never be able to see it. And flying even a 300-series through that storm was out of the question, anyway. Best to give it up and organize a search for the remains, if any.

"Flight, this is Mitchell. I've lost it. Some of the best and craziest damn piloting I've ever seen. If the pilot survived, he's someplace in that storm that's about thirty degrees west of the base. I'll stay up here to see if he comes back out, but I don't think that's going to happen. Stand by for my video dump, it should help you organize a ground search when the storm passes by."

"Understood, Mitchell." Wilkes didn't sound too mad at him. Possibly because he wasn't under her command. "Keep watch, we're sending up a couple of F-302s to help out. Flight out."

When the Blackbird slowed to a safe velocity, it followed its preprogrammed commands and settled into a level flight. That is, it tried to be level, but even at this height in the stratosphere the wind gusts made the ship shake about. The rattling awakened Starbuck, who spent a full minute checking to make sure that the pain over her entire body came just from bruising, not from anything breaking. *Damn, I've got to stop doing this. Adama will think I'm just hungry for attention. And Tigh – well, who gives a frak about anything Tigh thinks?*

What to do? The tin-cans were probably waiting for her above, so escape that way was impossible. She was just going to have to wait for her signal to reach the Raptor, the Raptor jump back to the Fleet, and Adama to organize a rescue. Unless Tigh led a mutiny to stop him. This time, though, she had Adama, Lee, and President Roslyn on her side. Those three against Tigh and a planet full of Cylons – now that should be a battle.

In any case, rescue wouldn't be for a few days. At least if she landed on this planet she could breathe. Maybe there would even be something other than her standard rations. The planet had oxygen, it must have life. *Do the Cylons that look like us need to eat? Sharon did, but maybe she didn't have to. If she did, though, there's food down there. Maybe something other than emergency Colonial Fleet supplies.*

Given that she'd be here for awhile, her duty was to find out everything about the enemy that she could. The biggest infrared hotspot on the planet

wasn't more than an hour away even at subsonic speeds. She dropped the Blackbird's nose and went down.

Wind, rain, lightning and hail buffeted the ship. *Lords of Kobol, I can really use your help right about now. Get me through this, please?* Somehow she made it through.

Clearing the storm, she saw that she was over a large forest, with a river running through it. The sun was hidden behind the approaching storm, so the landscape in front of her was relatively dark. Ahead a hundred or so clicks were lights. Cylon HQ, no doubt. Better set down somewhere near here.

Since the Blackbird, true to its Viper origin, was designed to land in the confined space of the *Galactica's* landing bay, it could, like Earth's *Harrier*, practically stand on its tail. Starbuck found a small clearing near the river and set her ship down. The forest floor had enough fallen tree limbs to construct makeshift camouflage. That would have to do. Though the storm was breaking up behind her, the sun was nearly set. The ship shouldn't be visible at night, especially after it cooled down to air temperature and couldn't be seen by infrared. Best to get as far away from it as possible, though. She headed down the river.

Some thirty minutes later she heard what sounded like human voices. Cylons. Probably searching for her already. She hid in the woods, approaching cautiously. Lucky that Colonial military training included how to sneak up on enemies, even for pilots.

Looking out from behind the trees, she saw two human-like figures standing in the water. Doing something she couldn't make out. They didn't look like they were looking for her, though. Starbuck drew her gun and approached the pair from behind. Their attention drawn to whatever they were doing, and her footsteps drowned out by the sounds of the river, they never saw her.

That man-figure on the right was holding a long, thin rod. He was drew it back behind his body. Starbuck was within a few feet of him as he finished his backswing.

"Hey! Turn around and put up your hands!" The backswing completed, the rod came forward. Something slipped inside Starbuck's open mouth and stuck in her lip. The pain was fierce. She stumbled forward, tripping over the figure with the rod.