

Chapter 11

Cameron Mitchell found himself out in the middle of nowhere, waiting for something – anything – to happen. Plenty of time, he thought, to put the X-307 through its paces, a pleasure he'd been denied when the Colonial Fighter swept by him.

Let's see. How did the briefing go? Oh, yes. Boys and girls, someone from somewhere dropped off a fighter pilot and her ship. We don't know who, we don't know why, and we don't know when, or if, they're coming back. However, when they do, they'll be loaded for bear, and probably more than willing to shoot first and ask questions later.

Daniel Jackson had briefed the squadron – fifteen pilots in system plus Mitchell and Teal'c – on what he had learned from the Colonial pilot. “They apparently think that we're machines – Starbuck called me a Cylon – and they're at war with these machines. Think about it – those of you who interacted with the replicator Sam Carter – she appeared identical to Colonel Carter. Now, she didn't have Sam's personality, but she wasn't really trying to hide herself. These Cylons apparently do try to pose as humans. Think about that. If a replicator looks like Colonel Carter, and acts like Colonel Carter, how can we tell them apart? That's apparently what these people are dealing with. So they may very well start firing on us as soon as they come back into the system.”

Jack O'Neill took it from there. “On the other hand, you are most emphatically ordered *not* to fire first. These people haven't done anything to harm us, and we're not at war with them. We don't *want* to be at war with them. We've already got too many enemies in the galaxy simply because we started shooting before we understood the situation. Besides, Carter says that the naquadah rocket technology that these people have dwarfs anything that we've developed. We *need* to be friends with these people, people. They've got something we want – and we've got something that they probably want, how to make a fighter go FTL.”

“So no shooting first. I know that puts you at a decided disadvantage. But nothing good can happen if we shoot first. Do that, and they'll think we're all Cylons, and that will be the end of it.”

Mary Wilkes had taken up the deployment of the fighters. “As you know, we're woefully undermanned for any large scale combat. Our system resources are twelve F-302s, five operational X-307s, and two refitted Tel'taks. The Tel'taks are unarmed, so they'll serve as communication and rescue ships, if anything should happen. The eight F-302s at the Stargate,” she nodded

to the camera which was transmitting the briefing to those on the moon, will guard the moon and the gate. This is important *the Stargate must be held at all costs!* It's our only way home, and the quickest way to get help. The rest of the F-302s will remain near this planet to set up a guard here. Your mission is to keep anything from firing on the base here, and to keep anyone from landing at the test facility. These people use naquadah, it's likely that they'll be able to detect our mining and experimental operations over there."

"That leaves the X-307s. We need intelligence. We've got no idea where the mother ship is, if it's in-system, or when it's coming back, if it's not. We assume that they'll start looking for the pilot, but you know what you do when you assume something. So the 307s, since they're the fastest, longest ranged craft that we have, will fly patrols throughout the system. Mitchell and Teal'c, you'll each fly one of them. Bridges, Kleinman, Reynolds, you'll fly the others. We'll do twenty-four hour shifts, I know that's hard, but you can sleep in your seats and it's faster than coming back here to change pilots. We'll do twenty-four hour shifts on and off until further notice. Questions?"

Mitchell had held up his hand. "Reinforcements?"

"None likely soon. We can ship 302s and 307s through the Gate, and we've requested them from SGC, but there's a lot of Ori activity right now and they're all being used. *Daedalus* is coming back from Atlantis and won't be here for another week. *Prometheus* is being tweaked by our engineers working with the Asgard, so it won't be available for at least two weeks. We've put out calls for any spare Al'kesh or Ha'tak, but they'll take a long time to get here – we put this base far out for that very reason. So basically we're on our own, and we're likely to be out-gunned."

Jackson chimed in. "However, if we can open communications with these people, we might not have to fight – it's still possible that we can be friends."

Sure, thought Mitchell, dragging himself back to the present. All we have to do is convince them that we're not a race of intelligent, bloodthirsty robots who look exactly like humans. Piece of cake.

And so he searched the infinite nowhere for an infinitesimal something that might never arrive. Oh well, it wasn't as though he had to maintain constant vigilance. His radar system was controlled by the computer, which would alert him to anything unusual. Unfortunately, it considered any passing asteroid a possible hit, so he had to check things out frequently. But between alerts he could read, watch TV off the base's net, or just doze.

Back on the planet, Carter and her team of engineers and technicians

didn't have that luxury. They had completely gutted the Colonial fighter. The radio (analog FM, rather than the digital design that the SGC had adapted) was taken apart, and analyzed to determine which frequencies Starbuck's Fleet were most likely to use for communications. "At least this gives us a chance to talk to them before the shooting starts," Carter had remarked.

The engines were remarkable. As Sam had deduced, they were basically an extremely efficient naquadah reactor which heated up the fuel. "It's got a very high specific impulse, and the engines can be gimbaled in just about any direction. These things are very maneuverable. It's going to be a problem fighting them, even with the 307s. Over long distances, of course, we win, because they'll run out of fuel. But for short dog fights, they should be able to hold their own against us. And the missiles have the same types of control surfaces." She looked up from the bay and gave Jackson, who was standing on the catwalk above, a worried look.

Daniel had a guest. He had obtained Starbuck's parole, and taken her to see what they'd done to her ship. Maybe, he thought, her reaction would tell them if they were about to blow themselves up by dissecting the wrong bit of machinery at the wrong time.

Or not. Starbuck had looked startled when she saw the Blackbird, but had remained silent, her lips tightly pressed together.

If they're going to rescue me, thought Starbuck, it's going to be soon. The time-line was clear in her mind. Hours for her distress call to reach Helo and Apollo. A day for them to make the limited range jumps the Raptor required to return to the *Galactica*. Hours to prepare the mission and set up a rendezvous with the Fleet, another hour to setup for the jump here, and then the single jump to this system. From then on it depended on exactly where the *Galactica* entered the system, and when she was detected by the Cylons. Which meant, thought Starbuck, that *Galactica* should show up any time now.

Wilson Bridges was a test-pilot. Which meant he liked to fly planes fast and far. Having an X-307 out on patrol would have seemed to be ideal – he had all of space to play in, and his only duty was to cover as much of it as he could in the time he was there.

The problem was that all of space – at least all he had visited over the last twelve hours – looked the same. Empty. He couldn't leave the system, so the stars didn't even change position. After awhile turning corkscrews, backflips,

and death-spirals with the 307 ceased to thrill him, not least because the inertia damping field made it impossible to feel the acceleration.

So he was soundly asleep when all hell broke loose.