

## Chapter 15

Well, thought O'Neill, here we go again. Our one hundred and thirty-fifth meeting with a previously unknown civilization, give or take fifty. Amazingly, only seventy-six (give or take thirty) of them wanted to kill us on sight. At least the overtly aggressive ones aren't all that dangerous, it's the ones who pretend that they are friendly that you have to watch out for, like the Aschen, or the Tollan.

So which type were these Colonials? They'd killed Bridges, but they also claim to have lost a pilot. They didn't seem to want retribution, they just wanted Starbuck back. Possibly they'd exchange her for Mitchell.

O'Neill, Burkemeier, Wilkes, the three remaining members of SG-1, Burkemeier, and six of Wilkes troops (why had Adama insisted on at least twelve visitors?) flew a Tel'tak up to the *Galactica*. No sense in letting them look at any more modern technology, though by now they'd surely torn apart Mitchell's 307 to see what made it tick.

They had. Galen Tyrol was looking through the dismantled cockpit of the 307, amazed. The entire ship was run by computers - no big central one, but lots of little ones. Computers to run the flight controls, tyllium generator, engines (though he had no idea how they worked), comm system, life support - everything. And all of it was networked. This would have been *prima facie* evidence that the ship was built by Cylons except for the fact that none of the control commands were even close to Colonial standard. Core dumps of memory produced endless strings of zeros and ones which refused to make any sense no matter how the cryptography teams tried. Tyrol was coming to the conclusion that this civilization had no relationship to the heirs of Kobol - which meant that it couldn't be Cylon, either. So where were these people from? Earth? He'd always thought of it as a legend, and had accepted Adama's call to find Earth only as a way to keep the Fleet together after the Cylons' destruction of their homes. But now - was it, in fact, possible? Could Earth exist? If not, who the frak constructed a ship like this, and then put a human (or Cylon) pilot into it?

Gaius Baltar was nervous. Of course, he'd been nervous ever since Karl Agathon gave up his seat on the last ship to escape Caprica, so that he - Gaius Baltar, scientist supreme, could escape to help protect humanity. That, of course, was the ultimate irony, because he had, willfully, let the Cylon who called herself Six roam through the Defense computers, ensuring

a Cylon victory in the attacks on the colonies.

Since then the rag-tag remains of humanity had accepted him as The Scientist, and, indeed, he was the only scientist of any stature to escape the destruction. As The Scientist, though, he'd been called on to construct a Cylon detection device, a way of making it possible to separate the machines from the men on the *Galactica*. He'd been telling Adama that the device still needed more testing, but he had - unwittingly - determined that it worked. At least, the device had shown that the creature calling herself Sharon Valerii was a Cylon. The mental version of Six he carried in his brain had convinced him not to reveal that fact, and he'd been able to destroy all evidence that he'd tested Valerii.

However, this visit by a new colony of humans, or maybe Cylons, was going to increase the pressure on him to get his machine working. Testing the new arrivals wouldn't be much risk, but if he revealed that his machine worked, he would have to start testing the humans in the Fleet itself, and that might reveal the eight Cylons whom the Caprica copy of Valerii had told him were still with the Fleet.

Any one of those Cylons could turn him in to Adama at any time. If he fingered one of them, then they would certainly turn him in.

Also worrisome was the fact that Adama had asked for at least twelve visitors. *That* indicated that the Commander knew more than he should about the Cylons.

"Oh, Gaius - what a tangled web we weave -"

Damn. His own personal vision of loveliness and treachery was back. In the red dress. (Not much dress, actually. *Stop That!*) "What?," he murmured, "Do you actually want me to start testing again? Reveal all the Cylons in the Fleet? Stop all the rumors that Gaeta, or Tyrol, or Agathon is actually a Cylon? Or maybe even confirm them? Is that what you want?"

"What I want is for you to accept God, Gaius, and your role in His Plan."

"Do I have a choice? I suppose I did, once, but that was long ago. Your God may be big on forgiveness, if I start following Him, but the people on the *Galactica* aren't. They'll tear me limb from limb - if I'm lucky."

"You don't need luck, Gaius - you just need to accept your God."

"And if I accept him? Will He fix it so I don't have to test these people?"

"Maybe He wants you to test them."

"Dr. Baltar!" Frak. Adama was looking at him. Once again, Six had gotten him so caught up in his fantasy(?) world that he'd forgotten the outside world. Fortunately The Scientist was allowed to be someone eccentric.

“Yes, Commander?” Remain calm.

“We should go to the shuttle deck. The ship carrying General O’Neill and his party will be arriving soon. In the absence of President Roslin, you, as Vice President, are the highest-ranking civilian in the system. You should be there.”

“Oh, of course, Commander. Coming right along.” He followed Adama and Tigh off the CIC and down to the shuttle deck.

Carter piloted the Tel’tak to a graceful landing in the *Galactica*’s hanger deck. Armed guards, presumably ceremonial, marched in. O’Neill waited until they were in place, then opened the hatch. The soldiers forming his “escort” went down first, forming two lines for the Tau’ri VIPs to pass through.

Three men were waiting at the bottom of the ramp. One in a fancy uniform, another in what looked like a working uniform, and the third looking complete disheveled. He correctly identified fancy-dress as the leader. “Commander Adama, I presume.”

“Correct. General O’Neill?” Jack nodded, and Adama continued, “This is Colonel Tigh, my XO,” introducing the other uniformed figure, “and this,” pointing toward the remaining man, “is Colonial Vice President, Dr. Gaius Baltar.”

Interesting, thought Daniel Jackson, standing O’Neill. He introduced his second-in-command before the civilian government leader. Does that mean that the military runs the government, and Baltar is just a figurehead? Or is something more complicated going on. Maybe I can get Baltar alone and question him later.

O’Neill performed the introductions of the Tau’ri. “Dr. Burkemeier, Governor of Massilia.” It was easier to say than P7M-3527. “Colonel Mary Wilkes, head of planetary security. Colonel Samantha Carter, Dr. Daniel Jackson, and Teal’c. I’m sure Dr. Carter would like to talk to Dr. Baltar about - oh, Scientific Stuff.” Daniel took the hint and drew Baltar to one side, talking very fast.

“And where is Lieutenant Thrace, General?” asked Adama.

“We felt it best that she should remain on Massilia for the time being, Commander. I’m sure you understand. Oh, and I don’t believe that I see Colonel Mitchell anywhere about, either.”

“Yes, we too felt it best that he not be present for this initial meeting. Shall we get out of here? I’m sure you’d like a tour of the *Galactica*, and then we can get down to business.”

“Oh, yes. Guided tours of ships are something I greatly enjoy,” said O’Neill. Adama gave him a strange look. Oops. Apparently he’s got a good sarcasm detector. But Carter and Jackson were practically salivating at the chance to look over the Colonial mother ship.

As they walked to the CIC, Adama considered what he had seen of these, Massilians, for want of a better word. Twelve different humans. *Good*, he thought, *these aren’t Cylons*. Probably.

Hidden in his safe was a small slip of paper Adama had found in his office following the escape of the Fleet from Ragnar Station. All it said was “there are twelve models.” He’d immediately believed it, though he didn’t know who, or what, had given him the message, nor what their motives were. He went through the list of known Cylon models: Valerii, Leoben Conoy, Aaron Doral, the “doctor” Starbuck knew as Simon, and the one the Caprica copy of Valerii called Six. None of the twelve Massilians, thirteen counting Mitchell, matched any of the Cylons he knew, so they weren’t Cylons. Not all of them, anyway. Tyrol’s report on the technology in the captured fighter only reinforced that view. If the Cylons had that kind of engine technology, for example, the *Galactica* would have been caught and blown out of space months ago. Further supporting his belief was that Mitchell’s monitored conversations with Valerii showed that Mitchell knew nothing about the Fleet or Colonial civilization.

The one Massilian, Teal’c, was different, though. Not just the gold symbol apparently branded to his forehead. His bearing screamed *Warrior!* As they paraded to the CIC, Adama noticed heads turned toward them as they passed. Everyone he saw stared at Teal’c, at least until the big man made eye contact. At that point gazes were hastily averted.

Tigh, with a series of deft moves that impressed even Adama, had managed to put himself alongside the Commander and maneuver several of the *Galactica* guards between them and the Massilians. He murmured “What the frak are you doing? Showing these Cylons the CIC? Why don’t you just hand them the frakking keys?”

Adama whispered back, “These aren’t Cylons, Saul.”

“How the frak do you know that?”

“I know. Accept it.”

Startled, Tigh stopped dead in his tracks, making some of the troops behind him stumble. He looked shocked.

Adama sidled up to O’Neill and said, “Over here, General, is the recre-

ation area. We've got pyramid courts, weights, and a running track. And up ahead ... ”