



PROLOGUE

INTO THE GREAT BEYOND

Commander's Log, day twenty seven: We have been out beyond the red line for three weeks now and have run into our first dead end. The information on Doctor Z's plot has changed and we are not finding any of the familiar navigational markers that we need to continue.

Doctor Z has been making extensive use of the long range observatory that we had installed for this mission and he says he is getting closer to the answer we are seeking. Of course, he has been saying this for the last week now while we have been sitting idle here in the middle of space.

It's provided a good opportunity for us though. Major Horvath has both of her squadrons up and running now, although the two squadron commanders don't seem to like each other very much. She is keeping the animosity between the two from getting out of hand though so I have given the X.O. orders to stay out of it. I hate to say it but it's actually done some good since both squadrons have become fiercely loyal to their leaders. It's fostered a sense of competition between them and a little competition between units is always healthy.

That being said though, the monotony has begun to wear on the crew so I requested that a data package be sent from Picon fleet headquarters that contains the entire Colonial Cup Pyramid tournament that was just getting started when we left. There are a lot of fans on board and I figured we could take some time between shifts to relax and watch the games. I just hope that my team does well... I don't need to owe Admiral Cain another hundred cubits because of those bums...

A knock at the door brought Commander Turner's typing to a pause as he looked up. "Enter."

As the doors slid open Colonel James Ryan, the executive officer of the Battlestar Prometheus, entered carrying a folder with paperwork inside.

“Are those the status reports?” Turner asked leaning back behind his desk.

“Yes sir.” Ryan replied taking a seat in front of him.

“Good.” Turner replied taking a sip of his coffee before continuing. “Has Colonel Alexander reported in yet?”

Ryan nodded. “Yes sir, the Sentinel is preparing for jump as we speak.”

Turner picked up the status reports and began to examine them. “What happened to Chief Jaxon?”

“She slipped in a puddle of engine coolant on the flight deck.” Ryan replied easily. “Broke her right wrist but doc Taylor says she’ll be fit for duty once he sets it.”

Jonathan Turner frowned and Ryan instantly knew that his commander wasn’t happy. “You know how I feel about safety incidents Colonel.” He said, his voice low “Especially when it involves my chief of the deck.”

Before Ryan could respond Turner had reached over and found his phone handset. “Get me the COB” he said. After a moment the gruff voice of Master Chief Palmer could be heard through the handset.

“Chief, I want you in my office now.” Turner said and then hung up the phone before the Master Chief had a chance to reply.

“Sir...” Ryan began cautiously, but he never got a chance to reply as Turner held up a hand to forestall him.

“We’ve had seven accidents in the week we have been sitting in this star system Colonel.” Turner brooded. “Our people have been getting careless.”

“I agree that the crew has been a little accident prone lately sir but I don’t think they’ve been careless.” Ryan said defending the crew.

Turner fixed the colonel with a gaze like a laser beam for a moment before he spoke, but when he did his voice was filled with a resolve and firmness that Ryan had come to respect from his commanding officer.

“Colonel Ryan,” he began, “We’re not on the Pegasus anymore. Admiral Cain isn’t stomping around our CIC looking for someone to court martial and you’re not the chief of engineering anymore, you’re the X.O. now.”

“I understand that sir.” Ryan said.

“Do you?” Turner asked.

Ryan looked across the desk at his commander for a long moment studying his face. After what seemed like several minutes, Ryan realized that his old friend still had the best card face he had ever seen..

He couldn't read the man at all.

"Look Jim," Turner continued, his voice softening a bit, "I stole you from Admiral Cain because I wanted someone I could trust at my side while I took this ship out. I wanted you because you're someone I've known and trusted ever since you were a green ensign assigned to my squadron on the Valkyrie. You're a good officer and you have a lot of potential, but it takes more than that to be a good X.O."

Turner waited and watched as the words sunk in to his executive officer. It pained him to do it, but the man needed guidance and that was what Turner was here for: to mentor him. It was just that thought that gave Turner an idea.

"Let me ask you something," Turner said, "In all our time aboard Pegasus, did you ever see Admiral Cain lose her temper?"

Ryan shook his head. "No sir."

"In comparison, how many times did you see me flare out on someone who had fraked up?" Turner pressed.

Ryan smiled. "Too many times."

Turner nodded and leaned back as the implications of what he was saying began to sink into his X.O. "Admiral Cain never got pissed because that was my job. If there was a problem with the crew I solved it, she never got involved. Her job was to make the decisions, mine was to implement and supervise them."

"I think I see your point sir." Ryan said.

Turner nodded as a pounding noise came through the door. "Then I consider the matter closed." He said, "Now go out there and explain to that Master Chief how 'disappointed' you are in the crew's safety performance. He'll take care of the dirty work, that's what he's here for after all."

"Yes sir." Ryan said standing and saluting.

Turner flipped him a salute and went back to his reports.

CHAPTER 1

GROWING PAINS

Pilots Ready Room
Battlestar Prometheus
System 47A
Mission Day 27

The squadron ready room for Ace squadron was buzzing with activity as Captain Jason Allen, call sign 'Slider', entered from the back. Looking around and gauging the atmosphere in the room, he waited a moment before shouting "On your feet!"

Immediately, the group of rowdy pilots that made up Ace Squadron went quiet and stood at attention as their leader his way to the front of the briefing room. Once there, Slider took in the faces of his men and women and then said "Seats."

Quietly the assembled pilots all took their seats, but Jason could see the familiar look of contempt on Captain Roger "Spit Shine" Franklin's face. Of course, he wore that expression along with the black eye that Jason had given to him for being an insubordinate smartass.

Three weeks prior, when Jason had been forced to take command of Ace Squadron, Spit Shine had protested that he should be the one in command since he was senior in the rank structure. Major Horvath, the fleet CAG, had not so politely disagreed with him and had told him to suck it up.

Of course, this had been unacceptable to the disgruntled captain who had then gone up the chain, all the way to the commander. When even the commander had told him to stick a sock in it, he had decided to make his protests more vocal, in the way of trying to second guess and cut down the squadron commander at every turn.

Finally, it had all come to a head a week prior when Jason had been trying to brief his pilots, who were a rowdy bunch anyways, on an upcoming mission. Spit Shine had spouted off about how the current plan sucked and how he could come up with a better one in his sleep. He had been confident that Allen would tell him to do so, at which time he would present his plan to the squadron and gain their respect for out smarting the commander.

He was wrong.

Jason had, without any preamble, walked straight over to him and decked him as hard as he could in the face. Spit Shine had gone limp even before he hit the floor.

The medics in sick bay had told Allen that it had taken the man a whole five minutes to wake from unconsciousness. This was a satisfying thought to the still angry captain.

Of course, neither man had made anything of it, pilots never did. The unspoken rule in the military was that what happened within the unit stayed there and so it was listed officially as a hand to hand training accident.

His actions had made his point though. From then on he hadn't had a single problem from any of the pilots.

“Ok Aces, as you all know, we're up for the CAP today.” Jason began, “Scheduled rotations are on the board outside but I'll go ahead and tell you that Shiner and Spanky have the first CAP run today.”

Allen noticed the flinch of anger on Franklin's face as he referred to the new nickname that the squadron had given him, in honor of the black eye. Allen only smiled at him.

“That being said,” he said as he continued with his briefing, “Unless Skeeter and Moby frak up this last CAP run, Knight Squadron will finish this rotation with ninety eight percent efficiency rating.”

Allen waited for a moment while the chorus of boo's echoed throughout the room. Finally, raising his hands for silence, they stopped.

“Captain Percival, thinking that her high and mighty Knights can easily win over a bunch of malcontents like ourselves, has challenged us to a contest. If we can beat her efficiency rating, she says her squadron will clean the pilot's heads for a week.” Allen announced.

This, of course, brought a rousing cheer from the group, even Shiner.

“But!” Allen said cutting the pilots cheers off, “If we lose *we* have to clean up their crap.”

“Ain't gonna happen boss!” one of the pilots shouted. The others quickly agreed to this statement, and rather loudly too.

“Good.” Allen replied, “Because I accepted and there ain't no way we're going to let those miserable stuck up fraks beat us!”

“HOO-RAH!” the crowd chanted as one.

Allen nodded, satisfied that he had motivated his pilots. “Now get out there and kick some Knight Squadron ass!”

Allen waited for a moment while his pilots filed out of the room and then began to pick up his papers and follow. When he reached the door, however, he heard the general announcement tone of the P.A. system.

“Pass the word throughout the ship,” Lieutenant Halloran’s voice said, “Captain Allen, report to the C.I.C. immediately. I say again, Captain Allen to the C.I.C.”

“Great,” Allen said rolling his eyes, “what now?”

Colonial Office,
Quorum Tower,
Caprica City, Caprica

“So they’re stuck?”

The question came from Richard Adar, the President of the Twelve Colonies of Kobol. It was directed at the grey haired man seated across from him wearing the Colonial Fleet uniform and the rank pins of a Vice Admiral.

“Only for the moment, Mister President.” Vice Admiral Roswell replied, “Commander Turner and his crew are working hard to find the next step towards Kobol.”

“They’ve only been out there for three weeks and already they are having problems.” Adar said, rolling his eyes. “I’m starting to think that I was wrong to approve this mission of yours, Admiral.”

“With all respect sir,” Rosewell said, “Commander Turner is one of the best officers we got. In the three weeks since he was dispatched on this mission they’ve already cataloged seven different planetary systems, two with planets capable of supporting human life. I would hardly say that the mission is in trouble.”

“It’s not Turner I’m disappointed in admiral,” The President replied, “It’s Doctor Zylman.”

“What about him?” Admiral Roswell asked.

“He’s supposed to be the foremost expert on the history of the Kobol exodus and the myth of the thirteenth tribe, yet already his data is showing faults.” Adar said.

“You can’t blame the Doctor Zylman for that, Mister President.” A new voice said.

Adar looked up from his desk to see his old friend, Doctor Gaius Baltar, stride into the room with the air of superiority he always carried with him. Smiling he stood and shook the doctor's hand.

"I asked Doctor Baltar here to sit in on this meeting, admiral. Hope you don't mind." Adar said as Baltar took a seat.

Roswell shrugged. "Not a problem to me sir."

"Good," Adar replied fixing his gaze on the newcomer, "Now Gaius, explain to me how this set back isn't Doctor Zylman's fault."

"Well sir," Baltar began, "You must remember that Doctor Zylman is working with data that is over two thousand years old and written in such a fashion that makes it difficult to decipher. Also, you must remember that our knowledge of space beyond the red line is extremely limited. Error factors of up to five percent begin to creep into any jump calculations you make beyond that point. In addition, there are over two millennia of stellar drift to make up for in their calculations."

"But Zylman said he had that worked out when he came to us with the proposal." Adar replied.

"Yes sir, but as I have been reviewing Zylman's calculations, I have seen where his error was." Baltar replied smugly. "He made a slight error in his quantum physics calculations regarding space time and how it relates to the jump process, but it wasn't his fault."

"He made the error, how can it not be his fault?" Adar pressed.

"Because sir, he was using the information you gave him on the Celestus class jump engine system." Baltar replied, "As you know, the Prometheus is equipped with the new Olympus class engine. It is able to fold space in an entirely different way and it gives the Prometheus a range almost three times as long as the Mercury class Battlestars that the fleet currently uses."

"Why didn't he get the information he needed?" the president demanded, turning his angry gaze on the Admiral.

"That was my call sir." Roswell said, "At the time, nobody outside the admiralty and other selected individuals had access to the Olympus class plans, for operational security reasons."

Adar leaned back in his chair and breathed in deeply, an action that, Baltar knew, meant that the president was perilously close to losing his temper.

After waiting a moment for the president to regain his emotional center, he said “I do have good news though sir. I have made the adjustments to his calculations and they are ready to be sent to him in the next update.”

Adar smiled wearily “Good Gaius, very good. As always, my old friend, you come through for me when it counts. Get the data to Admiral Roswell here and he will send it ASAP.”

“Of course, Mister President.” Baltar replied as he stood, “Now sir, if you have nothing else for me, I have a date with a spectacular woman whom I met at a party last week.”

Adar smirked and waved his hand in a dismissing gesture. “Good luck Gaius.” He said.

Gaius Baltar smiled thinking of the sexy blonde bombshell that awaited him. “Luck has nothing to do with it, Mister President.”

“Captain Allen, reporting as ordered sir.” Jason said as he stood before his commander in the CIC.

Turner looked at him for a moment and then returned Allen’s salute. “Stand at ease captain.” He said. Allen immediately complied, placing his hands behind his back in the ‘at ease’ position.

“The Sentinel is going on a scouting mission,” Turner said pointing to the map on the situation table. “I want you to assign four Vipers to go with them as close air support if needed.”

Allen looked at Major Horvath who stood across the table from him. “Not a problem sir. When do they leave?” he asked.

“As soon as you select them.” Horvath replied for the commander.

Allen was quiet for a moment as he thought of the pilots he wanted on the mission. Finally, he said “I’ll send Rain Man, Dasher and Bojay.”

“That’s only three,” Colonel Ryan said, “Who’s the fourth?”

“Me.” Allen replied with a smile.

All three heads turned towards him, expressions both curious and wary.

“Why you?” Turner asked.

“Have to lead from the front sir.” Allen replied. “I won’t send my pilots out on a mission I wouldn’t take myself.”

Turner considered this for a moment and then looked at Horvath. “Any objections?” he asked.

Horvath shook her head and Turner nodded in agreement. “Pack your gear for a week long stay aboard the Sentinel and report to Colonel Alexander in thirty minutes.”

“Yes sir.” Allen replied snapping off a smart salute.

Turner returned the salute and Allen did an about face, making his way quickly out of the CIC.

As Turner watched the young captain jog off, he smiled. “You were right to put him in charge Karla. It’s made a huge difference in him.”

Jason was moving down the hallway inside the pilots section of the ship with a brisk step, his kit bag slung over his shoulder when a voice shouted his name from behind him bringing him to a screeching halt. Turning slowly, he saw Captain Stacie “Sheeba” Percival stalking towards him.

Bracing himself mentally, he said “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I just heard about your assignment.” Percival said planting her hands on her hips, “Is that going to throw you off on this CAP rotation? Because I don’t want to have to pull your slack.”

“My guys will be just fine.” Jason replied, “You don’t have to worry about us.”

“I hope so.” She said, “Because I’m not going to pick up for you just so you can go off adventuring.”

Allen came to a halt and spun on her. “You know, I’m getting real sick of your crap Stacie.” He snarled, “I don’t personally care how you feel about me nowadays but this chip on your shoulder is getting old.”

Percival glared at him but didn’t respond. After a moment of exchanging silent stares, Allen turned away. “I don’t have time for your shit Stacie. Spend more time worrying about your people and not me.”

CHAPTER 2

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Gunstar Sentinel
In Orbit of Planet M-71
Mission Day 27

The Gunstar Sentinel exploded into existence above the planet that Doctor Zylman had designated M-71. Immediately, its hangar pod began to lower down into a launch position as the pilots on board began their preparations for action/

Inside the Sentinel's CIC, the command crew was busy with the activities of post jump operations.

“Jump complete sir, we are in orbit of planet M-71.” Major Karl Glast, the Sentinel's X.O., reported. “Flight pod is in launch position.”

Colonel David Alexander, his uniform starched and spotless, nodded as he looked at the dradis console. “Report all contacts.” He ordered.

“No contacts sir, the dradis is cleared.” Glast reported.

“No contacts, the scope is clear.” Lieutenant Jackson, the helm officer said.

“Very well,” Alexander said, “Launch the CAP and have Archangel prepare a scouting mission to the surface.”

“Yes sir.” Glast replied, “Slider this is Sentinel: You are cleared for launch.”

Inside his Viper Mark VII cockpit, Jason Allen, callsign Slider, was busy with his pre-launch sequence.

“Slider this is Sentinel: you are cleared for launch.” The voice of Major Glast said.

“Roger that Sentinel.” Slider replied switching his com channel to the launch controller, “Engines from standby to power, maglock catapult locked, cockpit pressure stable, navigational updates downloaded. Viper four one seven ready for launch.”

“Roger four one seven, ten seconds for space doors.” The controllers' voice said.

Slider watched in his cockpit as the air rushed out of the launch tube as the doors opened in front of him. Behind him his engines began to whine as the revved up for flight.

“Launch!”

As the catapult rocketed him forward, Slider was slammed back into his seat as the familiar feeling of a high speed launch expelled his ship from the Sentinel.

As he streaked away from the Gunstar, he looked to his left to confirm that Lieutenant Anne “Dasher” Bennett had launched as well. Seeing her fighter alongside him, he activated his com. “Sentinel, this is Slider: CAP is away.” He reported.

In the CIC of the Sentinel, Colonel Alexander nodded to acknowledge the report but said nothing else, instead studying the dradis and watching as the blips that represented the two Vipers moved away from his ship.

Although Gunstars were designed to be able to launch Vipers, they were usually not complimented with them so having four on board was something new to the Colonel, who had never flown a fighter.

“Have them make a high orbit pass along the northern continent.” He said to Glast. He then turned to Doctor Zylman who was standing with him watching the dradis along with Captain Michael “Archangel” Johnson, who was commander of the Raptor group on the Prometheus.

“Well doctor,” Alexander said, “It’s your show now. How would you like to proceed?”

Doctor Lucian Zylman turned to the map of the planet that was laid out on the situation table with a studious expression on his face.

“According to my data, the site we are looking for is here.” He said circling a small area of the northern continent. “This is supposed to be the location of the Athens Valley, the last stopping point of the seventh tribe before they discovered and settled on Aquarion. According to the legends, they left clues here as to the location of Kobil.”

“But why here?” Alexander asked, “Why not on any of the other worlds that you have designated as way points?”

“Because the seventh tribe never landed on any of those worlds.” Zylman replied, “They landed and settled here for a time because their supplies of food and water had run short. They took a year and re-supplied here before moving on.”

“Why didn’t they just stay here?” Archangel asked.

“Because of this.” Zylman said as he opened a scroll. “This is the scroll of Orestes. It details the journey of the seventh tribe from Kobil to Aquarion.”

Moving his finger along the text of the scroll, Zylman found the passage he was looking for. "And lo, the seventh tribe did settle for a time in the Valley of Athena on a world scorned by the gods. There they did struggle to rebuild their stores as they were scourged by the storms that the gods did conjure. At the end of a year, Athena appeared to the children of the seventh tribe and said unto them: Go ye from this place for it is not your home."

Alexander scratched his chin for a moment, then said "Sounds like they had some troubles here."

"The long range observations I took aboard the Prometheus would seem to support that theory." Zylman replied, "It seems that when the planet rotates to its night side, the drop in temperature causes massive electrical storms to build up in the atmosphere."

"We'll have to limit our surveys to the day time then." Alexander said. "I don't want anyone caught down there at night if we can avoid it." Turning to Archangel he said "Go ahead and begin planning your mission. I want to get down to the surface during the next daylight cycle."

"Yes sir." Archangel replied.

As his Viper slid silently through the void of space above the world known as M-71, Slider checked his instruments for, what seemed, the hundredth time. Again it showed him the same thing.

"I'm not reading any contacts except the Sentinel." He said to his wing mate.

"Me neither." Dasher replied. "Maybe we should call this one sir."

Slider had no objections. They had already been on this patrol for over two hours and his backside was beginning to protest its confinement.

"Contact!"

The word brought Slider out of his lethargic haze and instantly his combat reflexes began to work. "Where?" he demanded.

"From the planet sir." Dasher replied, her voice tight with anxiety. "Radio contact, repeating beacon on Colonial Frequency zero, zero seven."

Slider nodded but didn't respond, instead switching his comm channel over to contact the Sentinel.

“Sentinel, Viper four one seven.”

“Sir, I have a priority message from Slider.” Major Glast said.

Colonel Alexander, who had just settled into a chair to enjoy a cup of coffee, immediately stood and moved to the situation table. “Put it through.”

“Slider, this is Sentinel actual.”

“Sentinel actual this is Slider.” Jason replied from his cockpit. “We have a repeating radio contact from the surface of the planet.”

Immediately, Alexander turned to Doctor Zylman. “You said there wouldn’t be any life here.”

“There *shouldn’t* be any.” Zylman replied.

Alexander considered the situation for a moment before making his decision.

Inside his cockpit, Slider grew impatient for the answer from Alexander. Finally, his voice came through over the com.

“Drop down to the deck and investigate but stay sharp.” Alexander said. “Archangel will post in high orbit to monitor your situation. Pull out at the first sign of trouble.”

“Understood Sentinel, Slider out.” Jason said closing the link to the ship. “Ok Dasher weapons hot, let’s go check out the scenery.”

Hitting their afterburners, the two Vipers plunged into the blue atmosphere and immediately the ships were engulfed in a wreath of re-entry flames.

“Uh sir,” Dasher said, her voice nervous and unsure, “Is this normal?”

Inside his cockpit, Slider smiled to himself. “A little hotter than normal Dasher but that’s because this planet has a richer oxygen content than most.”

“O-ok.” The young lieutenant replied. “So the Vipers can handle this?”

“Just relax Dasher.” Slider said. “The ionization is about to kick up and we’re going to lose coms for a minute. Just hold her steady and watch your instruments and you’ll be fine.”

Dasher's reply was cut off by the sudden burst of static that heralded the communications blackout that was common to ships entering a planetary atmosphere.

Inside his cockpit, Slider watched his instruments intently as the glare from the re-entry flames washed out his visor.

"Ionization levels are dropping." He said to himself as he switched open his com system again. "Dasher, this is Slider. You still with me kid?"

His signal was met by static for what seemed like a long moment when finally the voice of his wing mate returned. "Slider this is Dasher." She responded, "All good over here."

"See?" Slider said, "No sweat."

"That's easy for you to say." Dasher replied, "This was my first time re-entering an atmosphere."

"You mean you didn't do this in basic flight?" Slider asked.

"No, it was cancelled that day because of a training accident." Dasher said.

Slider shook his head, "Well then I guess you learned something today. Now stay on my wing and follow me in. We're going to make a low level sweep of the target area and then head back out."

"Right with ya boss." Dasher replied.

Combat Information Center
Battlestar Prometheus
Mission Day 28

"Commander on deck!" the officer of the watch called out as Commander Turner entered the CIC. Turner nodded to acknowledge the lieutenant but said nothing as he approached Colonel Ryan who was studying a map at the situation table.

"What's going on?" Turner asked.

"The Sentinel just radioed back and said they've found the remains of a Colonial Explorer ship that crashed landed on the planet." Colonel Ryan reported as he pointed to the map. "They've just landed three Raptors here and are moving on foot to the crash site, ETA is one hour."

"Any signs of life?" Turner asked.

“Slider and Dasher did a low level flyby of the site and reported that it looked like the crash wasn’t recent. In fact, they said that there were signs that the ship had been partially over grown with vegetation.” Ryan said.

“What about Doctor Z? Is he in on this mission?” Turner asked.

“Are you kidding? He was the first one on the Raptor waiting to go to the surface.” Ryan replied with a chuckle.

Turner smiled too, picturing the enthusiasm on the young doctors’ face. “Contact the Sentinel and tell Colonel Alexander to proceed with caution and that we’ll be jumping into their orbit shortly.”

“Yes sir.” Ryan replied. “I’ll have them spin up the FTL and prepare to jump.”

“No,” Turner said, “Wait for another hour. I’m expecting a priority packet from Picon.”

“Something big?” Ryan asked.

Turner smiled. “It’s a surprise.”

Doctor Lucian Zylman watched from a hilltop as a platoon of Colonial Marines under the command of Lt. Col Holt, moved in towards the crash site from all sides. Surrounding the downed ship, the marines had moved cautiously and quietly towards the ship in precise fashion so as to emerge from cover all at the same time.

Zylman was fascinated by the care and discipline that the soldiers showed as they moved in towards the potentially dangerous ship. From his position, he could see almost all of them as they moved into the small valley where the ship had crashed.

Next to him, Lt. Col. Holt stirred as his com set came to life. “All Easy elements, this is Easy six: Hold position and await the order to move.”

Zylman watched as the Marines stopped as one and hunkered down to await their commands.

“Viper four one seven this is Easy Six. You are clear to commence your run on target.” Holt said.

Above, the doctor heard the unmistakable sonic boom of a Viper descending from high orbit. Watching, he saw the sleek machine, first as a glint of light, then growing larger into its more recognizable form.

Plunging down on a course that looked to send it slamming into the crashed ship, Zylman watched with anxiety and the ship rocketed closer and closer, only pulling out at what seemed to be the last second, and letting loose a barrage of rounds that brackets the ship and sent dirt flying into the air, but didn't harm any of the Marines.

Holt watched and waited as the dust settled for signs of activity from inside the ship.

At first, only the sounds of Slider's afterburners kicking in as he clawed his way back to high orbit could be heard. Then, after a moment of silence, he heard the sounds of metal scraping on metal along with a thumping sound that sounded like heavy footfalls.

"Keep on your toes." Holt said into his handset, "Nobody fires until I say so."

Zylman and Holt both watched as one of the outer hatches vibrated for a moment. Slowly, the rotator wheel that sealed the door shut turned and then stopped. The door then creaked open and from the darkness inside, a foot emerged followed by the rest of the leg and body.

It was covered in chrome.

"Oh my gods!" Zylman gasped. "Is that..."

"Yeah," Holt said with a nasty snarl on his face, "It's a Fraking Cylon."

CHAPTER 3

SHADOWS AND LIGHT

Crash Site
Planet M-71
Mission Day 28

“Open fire!”

The command, shouted into the com set by Lt. Col. Holt, was instantly obeyed and bullets began flying at the chrome plated warrior.

For a second, the Centurion attempted to raise its arms and level its rifle at its enemies but the damage already sustained combined with the new punishment being inflicted on it by the rounds that the Marines were slinging at it made it impossible. It was only another moment before the robotic warrior collapsed and its red eye went dark.

From all around the fallen Cylon, the shouts of “All clear!” broke the quiet that had fallen after the bullets had stopped.

Cautiously the Marines approached the fallen machine, Holt and Zylman following closely behind.

“That’s a C-101 model.” Zylman said as he caught a close up view of the machine. “Those were old when the Cylon war first started.”

Holt grunted. “Sergeant Hayes, take a squad inside and see if there are any more. Corporal Litterman will wait here with his team to back you up if needed.”

The Marine nodded and replaced the magazine in his rifle. His squad followed suit. Slowly they entered the hatch and began looking around inside the ship.

They checked in every five minutes but it was still almost half an hour before the sergeant signaled for the all clear.

“There are three more Cylon chassis in here sir, all destroyed.” Hayes reported over the radio. “And sir... I think I know what ship this is.”

“Say again?” Colonel Ryan said incredulously as Colonel Alexander explained the teams find.

“I say again, we have found the Centuari Lancer. She is crashed on the planet.” Alexander’s voice said over the loud speaker as both Turner and Ryan listened.

“What’s so big about the Centuari Lancer?” Captain Stacie ‘Sheba’ Percival asked.

“The Lancer was launched shortly before the Cylon war broke out. She had a civilian crew and a squad of Cylon Centurions for protection.” Turner explained. “She was a deep space exploration mission that was sent to find Kobol.”

“Like we’re doing now.” Sheba said.

Turner nodded. “Exactly. It was assumed that she ran into trouble or had an accident because three months into the voyage, all contact was lost.”

“Of course, that was when the Cylons attacked so not a lot of attention was ever paid to it.” Ryan interjected.

Turner studied the map for a moment longer and then turned to Master Chief Palmer. “COB, prepare the ship for jump. Colonel, instruct the Sentinel to hold position. We’ll be there shortly.”

Flaring into life above the planet, the Battlestar Prometheus took up station alongside the Gunstar Sentinel. A moment later and a smaller flash heralded the Gunstar Vigilant’s arrival.

“Jump complete sir.” MCPO Palmer reported. “Flight pods are deploying and the Vigilant reports that she is taking up a picket position at the outer edge of the planetary system.”

“Very well.” Ryan replied. “Set condition two throughout the ship and launch the CAP.”

“Aye sir.” Palmer replied.

Turner, Ryan, Horvath and Percival all studied the map on the situation table closely, examining the scene of the crash.

“Before we jumped,” Ryan began, “Doctor Z reported that he had restored primary power to the central computer core and that he was bringing it back online.”

“Good, maybe we can get the information we need from them.” Percival said.

“Maybe.” Turner replied, thoughtfully stroking his chin.

“I know that look.” Colonel Ryan said. “What’s on your mind boss?”

Turner shook his head slowly. "Nothing yet. I just have feeling..."

"Should I send down some re-enforcements?" Major Horvath asked.

"No, not yet." Turner replied. "Just contact Colonel Holt and tell him to put some speed on this."

"Will do sir." Horvath replied and turned to the com station.

"In the mean time Sheba, I want you to contact Archangel and have three Raptors and a Scimitar standing by to make a run to the planet." Turner ordered.

"Yes sir." Sheba replied.

Doctor Zylman examined the flickering display carefully as Lt. Col Holt moved in behind him. "Commander says to put a rush on this Doc." He said

Zylman nodded absently but continued to study the screen. "I think I know what happened here." He said after a long moment.

"Oh?" Holt replied, "What then?"

"This," Zylman said pointing to the screen, "Is the captains log. According to it, the Cylons assigned to guard the ship turned on the crew shortly after they received a download packet from the home worlds."

"The Insurrection Download." Holt said, "It's what started the whole damn Cylon War."

"Correct." Zylman responded. "Now, according to the log here, four of the Cylons were inactive for transit but the other three were able to complete the download and attack."

"But we only saw one." Holt said as he chomped on an unlit cigar.

"Yes, the other two were destroyed by the colonial officers on board but not before the third was able to sabotage the life support and engines and force them to crash." Zylman said.

"So they all died before the ship went down."

"Yes." Zylman said. "But that isn't the most important thing I have found here."

"Well then, what is?" The Marine officer asked.

“This information has been accessed already by someone else.” Zylman said.

Holt stood upright at this revelation. “How long ago?” he asked.

“According to this, yesterday.” The doctor replied.

“Sir, there’s movement from the aft section of the ship!” a voice called out.

Immediately, Holt was moving out of the bridge area of the ship and back outside to where his radio man awaited him. Zylman followed closely with the downloaded data core in his hands.

Neither of them saw on the screen the flashing words that read SECURITY BREACH IN PROGRESS. ACTIVATE CYLON DEFENSE MEASURES.

“Sir, I have a priority transmission from the planet’s surface. It’s Colonel Holt.” Lieutenant Halloran reported from the com station.

“Put it through down here.” Commander Turner ordered, picking up his handset. “Easy six this is Prometheus actual.”

“Easy six here sir, we have a problem.” Holt said. “Doctor Z has found evidence that this site has been accessed by someone else within the last twenty four hours.”

Turner took a moment to process the message he had just received before saying “Get that download finished and get your men out of there ASAP.”

“It’s done sir. We’re ready to.... wait one.”

In the background, sounds of gun fire erupted along with the sounds of startled men.

“What’s going on down there?” Turner demanded.

“It’s the Cylons!” Holt replied. “The other four have been activate- ARGH!”

“The line is dead sir.” Halloran reported as Turner looked at him for an explanation.

“Action stations!” Turner barked as he sprung into action. “Tell Sheba to launch the Alert Vipers and rescue Raptors *now*.”

“Action stations! Actions stations! Set condition one throughout the ship! This is not a drill! I say again...”

Sheba bolted upright from her desk and immediately began running to the pilots' lockers. It only took her a moment to slide her flight suit on and then she was dashing away into the bay where her Viper awaited her.

“Ok Knight Squadron, mount up and lets go!” she shouted across the bay as her pilots climbed into their cockpits. “Chief, get this thing cocked and loaded!”

It took only another few seconds for the knuckle draggers to load her fighter into the launch tube and close the door behind her.

“Viper one-one-seven, clear, acknowledge dispatch.” Sheba said into her helmet mic.

“Copy Viper one-one-seven. Board is green, mag lock secure, good hunting.”

With those words she was thrown back against her chair as her Viper was hurtled out of the launch tube and into the black of space.

Looking to her left se saw several more Vipers taking station along side her as well as several Raptors.

“All Vipers on my lead.” Sheba commanded, “Raptors, hang back and let us escort you in.”

Receiving acknowledgements from her pilots, Sheba slammed the throttle forward and shot off towards the planet.

The Prometheus CIC was a buzz with activity as lieutenant Halloran reported “All Vipers are away sir.”

“Very well.” Colonel Ryan replied. “Instruct the Vigilant to come in from picket duty, flank speed.”

“Yes sir.” Halloran replied.

“Mister Palmer, prepare to break orbit.” Turner commanded.

“Helm standing by sir.” The Chief of the Boat said.

Turner studied the charts on his table for a moment before saying “All ahead one third, forty degree up angle on the bow planes, come right seventy degrees.”

“Aye sir!” Palmer said turning to the crewmen in the helm pit. “Engines ahead one third, come right zero-seven-zero, forty degree up on the bow planes.”

Slowly, the massive Battlestar began her turn away from the planet and into a higher orbit that would leave it free to maneuver without the pressure of the planet’s gravity.

“We’ve cleared the gravity well sir.” MCPO Palmer reported.

“Good, now-“

Turner never got a chance to finish his statement as Lieutenant Halloran shouted “Dradis contact!”

“Where?” Ryan demanded.

“Bearing three-one-five karem two-four-zero. One small contact, looks to be... scout class.” Halloran reported.

“What are they doing?” Turner asked.

“They’re burning hard away from us sir.” Halloran replied.

“Contact the Sentinel, tell them to pursue at flank speed.” Ryan ordered.

“Belay that.” Turner said. “Send Sheba instead. Instruct her to plant a beacon on their hull before they jump.”

Ryan looked at his commander with a smile but said nothing as Turner went about his business.

“Colonel Ryan, get me Easy six.” The commander said.

“Sir! Commander Turner wants a sitrep!” Private Allison said as he ducked the rounds being fired at him from below.

Turning away from the cover he was using, Captain Lewis took the handset from Allison. “Prometheus actual, this is Easy Red Six, over.”

After a moment of silence, Commander Turners voice came through. “What’s your situation captain?” he asked.

“Sir, Easy six was killed when the Cylons woke up.” Lewis reported, “We’ve taken down two of them and are holding our position over looking the ship.”

“What’s your casualty situation?” Turner asked.

“Sir, we have three men wounded.” Lewis replied.

“Did the Doctor get everything he needed?” Turner asked.

“Yes sir. Full memory core download.” Lewis answered.

“Good job. Pull your men back to the rescue Raptors. We have Scimitars bombers on a run to your position right now. You got two minutes.” Turner commanded.

“Roger that sir!” Lewis said handing the handset back to Allison. “Everyone back to the Raptors! Air strike in bound in ninety seconds!”

Ninety seconds later, Allison, Lewis, Doctor Zylman and the rest of the Colonial Marines watched from the hills above as the Centauri Lancer was vaporized in a cloud of smoke as Scimitar assault bombers dropped their payloads on her, destroying all evidence of her existence... not to mention the Cylons inside her.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROAD TO KOBOL

Port Side Hangar Deck
Battlestar Prometheus
Mission Day 28

“You are *such* an ass.”

The words hit Jason Allen from behind just as he stepped down from his Viper cockpit and finished removing his helmet. Confused, he turned to see Stacie Percival marching towards him, her usual scowl firmly planted on her face.

“What are you talking about?” he asked confused.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about!” Percival snapped as she came to stand face to face with him. “It was my assignment to plant that tracker on that ship and here you come, swooping in to do it yourself!”

“That was you?” Allen asked.

“Yes damn it! That was me!” Percival said, her face turning red with anger.

“Oh, sorry.” Allen said yawning.

“Sorry? You swoop in like that and try to make me look like an incompetent ass and all you can say is sorry?” Percival demanded.

“A what?” Jason asked confused.

“You know what you did!” Percival nearly screamed. “You just had to show off how much better than me you really are!”

Jason turned and fixed her with a hard stare and the anger radiating from his eyes made Percival take an involuntary step back. “That ship was spinning up for its jump and you wouldn’t have made it in time.” He explained slowly, “Dasher and I had been tracking it from the other side of the planet since it had taken off. I didn’t ‘swoop in’ to make you look like anything. In fact, I would rather have let the thing go because Dasher and I had been in our seats for over seven hours when this all went down.”

Turning away Jason tossed his helmet to the crew chief and began walking before coming to a stop and turning back to face her. “You need to understand this,” he said wearily, “I am *not* here to make you look like anything, I’m here to do my job. Just

because we have history doesn't mean that my entire existence revolves around you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a report to make and then a hot date with the shower."

Turning away he left a very thunderstruck Sheba behind and made his way to the CAG's office.

In the CIC of the Prometheus, Commander Turner, Colonel Ryan, Colonel Alexander and Doctor Zylman all stood around the situation table looking at the print outs from the downloaded computer core of the Centuari Lancer.

"So whoever these people were, they were able to download the core as well." Zylman was explaining. "Chances are that even now, they are on their way to Kobol."

"But who could they be?" Ryan asked.

"Archeologists? Tomb raiders? Who knows?" Zylman relied. "What we do know is that they are on their way to Kobol as we speak and that we will probably run into them there."

"I agree." Turner said pointing to a map laid out on the table. "But are you certain that this star system is Kobol?"

"Yes sir." Zylman replied, "The information I downloaded from the Lancer confirmed my own data. This," he pointed to the circled star on the map, "Is Kobol and it is one jump away for us."

Turner nodded and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Very well, we'll take twenty four hours to rest and refit and then we'll jump for Kobol."

"Twenty four hours?" Zylman asked. "Why so long?"

"Because," Turner said turning towards the doctor, "Our marines just lost their most senior officer and need a day to deal with it before we send them back out. Besides, I have some things that I need to do before we jump."

"Oh, of course sir." Zylman apologized, "I'm sorry if I seemed impatient. It's just that this is the first step in the culmination of a life of work. I'm a bit anxious."

Turner smiled. "I understand completely doctor. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some work to do."

Zylman nodded and left the CIC with his papers in his hands. Turner and Ryan watched him go with smiles on their faces.

"Seems like a kid on Unity Day morning." Ryan said with a chuckle.

“He does.” Turner agreed, “Begin jump prep and prepare to launch a com buoy. You have the con.”

Ryan smiled. “Aye sir, I have the con.”

Pilot’s Bunk Room # 12
Battlestar Prometheus
Mission Day 28

As Stacie Percival sat down on her bunk to remove her boots she was suddenly alerted to the hatch opening. Seeing who was entering, she immediately stood to attention.

“At ease captain.” Major Horvath said as she entered and took a seat at the table in the center of the room. Gesturing, she said “Join me for a moment.”

Stacie nodded and moved to the table where she took a seat across from the CAG.

“I heard about the argument on the flight deck today.” Horvath said.

Stacie sighed. “That bastard.” She growled, “Now he’s ratting me out too?”

“He didn’t say anything.” Horvath replied. “In fact, when I spoke to him about it he refused to say anything. Called it ‘personal business’.”

Sheba was confused. “Then how-?”

Horvath smiled. “Word gets around on a Battlestar, captain.”

Sheba nodded but didn’t respond. After a moment of silence, Horvath continued.

“He did the right thing.” The CAG said. “You wouldn’t have made it in time and he was following good pilots’ instincts.”

Sheba sighed in resignation. “I know sir, it’s just that when it comes to him.... I just see red.”

“I understand.” Horvath replied. “It’s not easy to work with someone you once had a romantic relationship with.”

For a moment Stacie was flabbergasted. Not many people knew that she and Jason had been engaged for a short amount of time during their time in flight school. “Um, how did you-?” she asked

“One of my classmates at the academy was one of your flight instructors, Captain Brewer.” Horvath replied.

Stacie smiled. “Bad Ass Brewdie is your friend?”

“Yes, he is.” Horvath said, “And he knew what was going on between you two.”

“Yeah, right up until-“ Stacie said.

“The accident?” Horvath asked.

Stacie nodded. “After that it went down hill fast.”

“I heard all about it.” Said the CAG. “How you guys were on a training mission and how he lost it and slammed into a hillside.”

“Did Brewdie tell you how Jason blamed me for it? How he said that it was my fault that his best friend died?” Stacie said near tears.

“No.” Horvath quietly replied. “But I did read the accident report. You may have encouraged him to get in that Viper when he was sick but he had the option of bowing out. He made the choice.”

“That’s not what Jason thinks.” Stacie replied, her voice a whisper.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Said the CAG, “But his opinion doesn’t matter. You are a squadron commander now, Percival, and so far the only thing you have been concerned about is showing him up.”

Percival nodded but didn’t reply. She knew that Horvath was right.

“Focus on your job and you’ll be ok.” Horvath said, getting up and moving towards the hatch. “Oh,” she said before she stepped through it, “And I think that if you find the time to talk to Captain Allen, you’ll find that his opinion might have changed since your time together at flight school.”

With that, Horvath slipped quietly from the pilots bunk room to leave Sheba alone with her thoughts.

Cylon Homeworld,
Somewhere beyond the Armistice line
Mission Day 29

“Are you certain?” The Cylon model known as Cavil asked to the one known as Six as they walked along the halls of the Grand Convocation Center, the other members of the council flanking them.

“Yes,” she replied, her seductive voice purring. “Gaius knows only what he’s been told by Adar about the Prometheus and her mission.”

“And what’s that?” The one known as D’anna Biers said.

“That the Prometheus is on a long range exploration mission out beyond the red line.” Six replied. “They’re looking for new resources and worlds to colonize.”

“What about us?” Cavil demanded. “Did he mention anything about the Prometheus trying to locate us?”

“No.” said the blonde Cylon, “In fact, I had the chance to look over his shoulder while he was correcting Doctor Zylman’s errors. They’re heading in the opposite direction.”

“Good.” The one known as Leoben said. “That means we can continue on like before.”

“No!” Cavil shouted drawing everyone’s attention to himself. “Nothing can be the same! You read the reports from the Centurions who downloaded today! They were executed without question! The first one didn’t even have time to raise his rifle.”

“So you’re saying we should destroy them for that?” Six asked.

“That and so much more!” Cavil replied with venom. “If they had the chance, they would see us all exterminated! The humans are evil and have to be wiped out!”

The procession, which had been moving at a brisk pace, all came to a stop with Cavil’s outburst.

Everyone waited for someone to say something as the thought of human extermination went through their minds. Finally, it was D’anna who broke the silence after several awkward moments.

“I think it’s time to reopen the great debate.” She said.

“We agree.” Cavil said.

“We agree.” Said the number 8 model.

All around the circle, the Cylons agreed unanimously. Finally it came to Six.

“We agree.” She said heavily. “The debate on the future of humanity... is open.”

EPILOGUE

THE NEXT STEP

Battlestar Prometheus Commander's Log, Mission Day 29:

The Cylons we found at the crash site of the Centuari Lancer have all been destroyed. Doctor Z assumes me that they were all older models from the Cylon war and that we have not run into a vanguard of a new Cylon attack. Thank the gods.

My father fought in the first Cylon War. It changed him. I was only five when the war ended 39 years ago but I remember the haunted look in his eyes that he carried all of his days. I think that when he dies last year it was the first peace he had known since then. I have no desire to see that kind of carnage unleashed again.

On a brighter note, the special package I was awaiting from Picon Fleet Headquarters came in and the crew was thrilled. Many of us on board are avid Pyramid fans and getting a complete recording of the Colonial Cup Playoffs from last month did wonders for morale. I personally loved watching my Leonon Lions totally dominate the Tuaron Lightning. Now Admiral Cain owes ME a hundred cubits.

Fans from Caprica were severely disappointed though when Sam Anders fouled out against Arilon. I honestly think that that kept them from advancing beyond the second round. If that hadn't happened, I think the C-Bucs would have taken it all. Oh well, there's always next year.

In the meantime, we are preparing to jump to, what we believe is, Kobol. Once there we'll use our replica of the Arrow of Apollo to open the Tomb of Athena. According to Doctor Z, it will be our first clue as to the location of Earth. I hope he's right.

I've sent a letter of condolence to Lt. Col. Holt's family back on Troy. He was as fine a Marine as I have ever served with and will be remembered with distinction by myself and the rest of the Prometheus crew.

I'll close for now as we are preparing to jump. This next step will take us farther away from home than man has been in over four millennia. I confess to being a little anxious about it, but the challenge in this is too great to ignore. I look forward to the next few days.

Then did Athena, last of the Lords of Kobil, throw herself from the mountain to land among the rocks, and with her life's breath fading away did she curse the ground of Kobil saying "My blood is first to flow here but not the last. Whosoever returns here to this tainted land shall also pay my price in blood."

– Holy Scroll of Pythia, Chapter 13, Verse 13.