

STARGATE
ATLANTIS™

EXOGENESIS

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FANDEMONIUM BOOKS



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Visit our website: www.stargatenovels.com

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STARGATE ATLANTIS™

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER Presents

STARGATE ATLANTIS

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ISBN: 1-905586-02-7 ISBN-13: 978-1-905586-02-8

Printed in the United Kingdom by Bookmarque Ltd, Croydon, Surrey

To the cast and crew of Stargate, who have inspired us for ten amazing years.

—SW

To Mom and Dad, who have inspired me for considerably longer.

—EC

Thanks also to:

David Nykl for timely translations and inspiration for Radek, and my 2006 cohort writers' group at the Queensland University of Technology. Along with the exegesis, this novel forms part of my MA thesis. And most importantly, to my children, who contributed so much to this story.

—SW

The Fandemonium team and the other Stargate authors who have been such a great source of info and support. Thanks as well to the Vipers of the 312th Aeronautical Systems Group and the rest of my USAF cohorts, most notably those who've had to travel with me and put up with me disappearing into my laptop at the end of each work day. Lastly, more thanks than can be expressed here are owed to my wonderful family and especially my incredible husband.

—EC

PRELUDE

The shuttle plunged beneath the surface of the ocean. "We're safe now," said Atlas, slumping in relief. "The Wraith will not follow."

Ea knew that Atlas blamed himself for her injuries, but the transport ship had virtually exploded around them. Whatever had ripped through the shuttle's hull, severing her legs and damaging the primary inertial dampener systems, had also triggered the force field that maintained the shuttle's integrity. Descending through the planet's atmosphere while dodging the phalanx of Wraith Darts had been horrendous, but now they were underwater and the buffeting had ceased.

Relaxing her grip on the remains of her chair, Ea studied Atlas. The watery blue light dancing across his face should have been soothing, but it only enhanced his drawn features. The terrible wounds that he had sustained these past weeks had taken their toll—on both of them—for she had healed him so often that dealing with her own injuries was now out of the question. The best she had managed to do was control the worst of the bleeding and pain, and even that was becoming difficult.

Outside the cockpit window, the domed force field holding back the waters over Atlantis came into view. Moments later Ea saw the spires of the city and she stared in shock. Everything was still and dark and lifeless. "It's too late. They've already left!"

"Doesn't matter. There must still be power, otherwise the force field wouldn't be operational." Atlas glanced at her and swallowed hard when his gaze dropped to the mangled stumps of her legs. "I know the coordinates. Once we're inside I can reroute sufficient power to the Stargate and open a stable wormhole to Earth."

"What of the others?" From where she was seated, Ea could not see Atlas's visual display, but the stiffening in his shoulders was

unmistakable.

"Only four made it past the Darts." Atlas's voice caught, and this time he could not look at her.

"So few." Twenty shuttles had escaped the doomed transport. Ea closed her eyes, determined to control the pain that threatened to engulf her. Why had Moros refused to listen to them?

"Soon now, Ea. Soon, my love. Hold on." Atlas's fingers skimmed across the console. "I'm linking the shuttle's force field with that of the city's, so that we can pass through."

And then? When they went through the Stargate to Earth, Moros or one of the others would likely be able to restore her body, but who could restore her soul? And of course the Council would also learn what Atlas had done.

"Our force field won't link with the city's," someone called from another shuttle.

"We're having the same problem," came a second voice edged with panic. "We can't get inside!"

"That's not possible!" Atlas snapped. "The Council must have known that other ships might yet arrive."

"Moros believed that evacuation to Earth was only a temporary solution," a third pilot reminded them. "And that everyone would return to Atlantis as soon as they discovered a way to destroy the Wraith."

Yes. It had always been about how *they* would vanquish those abominations. In its fear, the Council had forbidden the research work of those who, like her and Atlas and Janus, would attempt to undo this horror.

The pilot did not need to say more. The city's force field had been breached many times by Wraith-controlled human pilots flying captured shuttles. Unaware that Atlas's team was still alive, believing they were the sole survivors in a galaxy that now belonged to the Wraith, the Council would have set the force field to repel all comers in order to ensure the city's protection. This was their team's punishment, then, for keeping their work hidden. Banished from the city, with nowhere to flee, their only hope of a

future now rested with their ability to Ascend—something that Ea did not believe was within her.

Her fear of the Council abruptly vanished, and Ea wanted to scream her rage at Moros. But of course Moros had made absolutely certain that she and Atlas would never be given that opportunity. "Curse them. Curse them all for their weakness in not facing the truth!" she cried.

The voices of those inside the other shuttles were laced with desperation and, soon, resignation as they, too, realized that there was no way into the city.

"This cannot be." Atlas hoisted himself from the chair and turned to the control panels, searching for a solution.

"It's over, Atlas," Ea said, clinging to her anger in order to keep her tone free of despair.

"I won't accept that they abandoned us!"

"One hope remains." Even now, while the life ebbed from her body, she could not entirely give up.

Ignoring her, Atlas pulled open the panels and began sorting through the crystals. "I'll find a way to change the frequency. We have days of air—"

Marshaling the last of her strength, Ea called, "Look at me, Atlas."

He hesitated, but then continued examining the crystals. Ea admired his determination. Indeed, it was Atlas's tenacity that had allowed him to create his incredible machines. She had no doubt that, in time, he would find a way to gain entry into the city, but time was something that she no longer had. "Look at me!" she demanded. It was becoming harder to breathe, and her vision was graying. "I do not have days, or even hours, Atlas. I can't live very much longer."

Slowly, the crystals slipped from his fingers, and he turned and crouched before her. "I won't let you die. I'll heal you." Eyes bright with tears, he reached for her hands.

"No!" She jerked away. "You don't have the strength, and I refuse to live if you perish." The torment on his face was too much

to bear. Relenting a little, Ea summoned up a final smile and held a trembling hand to his cheek. "If we choose now, there will be enough energy to calibrate the shuttle's shield to protect us, as well as Atlantis, and we'll both survive. Then we can begin again, just as we planned."

Atlas's face contorted in frustration. "We have no idea when or even if they'll return!"

"Of course they will." She gazed fondly at the city of her birth, the elegant spires where she had played as a child, safe and secure in its everlasting beauty. "Atlantis only sleeps. We shall slumber beside her and keep her company. It doesn't matter when we awaken, because you and I will be together."

Tears glistened in his eyes, but he nodded and gently lifted her in his arms. Whimpering at the brutal force of pain inflicted by his movements, Ea clung to him, imprinting on her memories the warmth and smell of his body. The terrible pain faded when he laid her down and comforted her with the soft touch of his lips and his parting words. "Soon now, my love, we shall dream sweet dreams together. And when we awaken the worlds will be as they once were, wonderful places full of hope and promise, and the Wraith nothing more than a distant memory."

Resolutely clinging to the last shreds of her life, Ea smiled and slipped into sleep.

CHAPTER ONE

The hushed mutterings off to his left failed to capture Dr. Rodney McKay's attention. Unlike the vast majority of the science team currently stationed in Atlantis, Radek Zelenka didn't pester him unless it was for something incredibly good, horrifyingly bad, or astoundingly bizarre.

"*Muj Bože!*"

Like that.

Automatically hitting 'save' on his computer, Rodney stood and walked across the lab to look over Radek's shoulder. "You have something?"

The Czech scientist was currently investigating an underwater avalanche near the mooring apparatus that anchored Atlantis to the seafloor. He pointed to the readings on his screen and replied, "One might say so, yes."

Rodney almost stumbled backward. "Are those legitimate?"

"No, Rodney, I am playing a joke," Radek answered with a look of irritation. "It is April, and I am the fool to consider investigating the calls of a whale. Perhaps we should also have ignored the animal when it pinpointed your position as you floundered on edge of the abyss."

"All right, excuse me for being just *slightly* surprised—and I wasn't *floundering*," Rodney shot back. "As always, I was entirely rational and methodical in my approach to the problem at hand. And where exactly did you pick up a term like 'floundering'?"

"It was how Colonel Sheppard described Jumper Six on the edge of the underwater canyon." Radek rocked his palm in a see-saw motion to illustrate his point.

Of course it was. It certainly had nothing to do with Rodney's precarious mental balance during his excursion into a claustrophobic's purgatory, complete with an intensely frustrating encounter

with Sam Carter. He also preferred not to dwell on the fact that, with so much Ancient technology at their disposal, Sheppard and Zelenka had resorted to whale watching in order to locate his submerged jumper.

Now the same animal, or one of its relatives, had been sighted swimming around Atlantis's south pylon—directly above the site of the avalanche.

"So," Radek sat back and crossed his arms. "I was right. Your whale is trying to tell us something."

"It's not *my* whale."

"Ah ha!" Radek shot from his chair and waved his hand in triumph. "You admit it. My suggestion was not ludicrous. I was correct, and you were wrong."

"I admit no such thing! I simply stated that relying on a whale was—"

"Tantamount to soothsaying." Casually elegant as always, Elizabeth Weir strode in. "Good morning, gentlemen." Exchanging a knowing look with Radek, she added, "I just came by to check on your progress. So the whale really is signaling something?"

"Yes, yes, we've been through all of that, thank you." Rodney blinked away the distraction provided by the mug of steaming coffee in Elizabeth's hands and tapped a command into the computer terminal to bring up a bathymetric chart on the wall-mounted screen. "We've just found—"

A polite cough sounded from behind him.

With an exaggerated sigh, Rodney amended, "*Radek* has found something of interest."

"Four puddle jumpers," Radek added, his gaze fixed to the readout.

"What?" Elizabeth's eyes widened. She quickly set her coffee mug down on the table and, tucking a wave of dark hair behind her ear, stepped closer to examine the screen.

"I'm assuming they were buried by debris accumulated around the edge of the shield when the city surfaced," Rodney continued, unconsciously edging closer to the aroma of freshly brewed

beans.

Indicating a faint but steadily pulsing light just outside the indentation in the seabed where the city had been, Radek said, "And there is something alive in one of the jumpers."

"Probably the whale's favorite snack food," Rodney said dismissively. "I'm much more interested in the possibility of salvaging the jumpers for spare parts."

"After they've been submerged for ten thousand years?" Elizabeth gave him a look of disbelief. "While I'd be the first to admit that you can fix pretty much anything, Rodney, I doubt that we'd be able to dig them out of who knows how much coral growth."

"It's entirely likely that the jumpers remained intact until the city surfaced. Which of course is good news for us, because even a year or two immersed in water wouldn't have damaged the crystals to any measurable degree."

Radek, who had returned to his computer, now swiveled around in his seat and peered at Rodney over the top of his glasses. "Life sign indicator is not for fish."

"Well, then, what exactly is it? Giant hermit crabs? A baby whale playing hide and seek?"

"No. An Ancient. Two, in fact."

"Oh, my God!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

Radek nodded agreeably. "Is what I said."

Pushing the Czech's chair aside, Rodney took one look at the readout, and then turned on Radek. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was attempting to when you questioned if I was playing a joke." Radek met his glare with an annoyingly disingenuous expression.

"Hold on a minute." Elizabeth frowned. "How could anyone, even an Ancient, still be alive down there after so long? Unless they're in—"

"Stasis chambers." Without a thought Rodney reached across the table for Elizabeth's abandoned mug and took a sip.

A bemused smile quirked at the corner of her mouth. "Feel free to help yourself, Rodney."

"No," Radek corrected. Almost choking on the coffee, Rodney nonetheless caught the look of concern that Radek directed at Elizabeth as he elucidated that comment. "Life pods."

Examining the data, Rodney noticed the newly familiar blip in the life sign signatures. Wincing at the memory, he added, "The energy signature is similar to the units we recovered from the Cohall system—but it's very weak. It's not inconceivable that the avalanche damaged the pods, in which case, we need to get down there sooner rather than later."

"It rather begs the question, doesn't it?" Elizabeth's expression had measurably tightened.

"Why these jumpers were unable to get inside city's force field," Radek supplied unnecessarily.

"Thank you for once again stating the patently obvious." Realizing that he was still clutching Elizabeth's coffee, Rodney put the mug down. "We could speculate endlessly, but it's only a few hundred meters deep. We've already proven that the jumpers can handle significantly greater pressures than that, and I can patch in a spare power cell so that extending the shield won't be so draining this time. Better yet, two jumpers parked here and here"—he typed in a command to bring up an enhanced image of the area, and pointed to a broad ledge near the signal's origin—"would amplify the field approximately four to five times. We could take a look at all of the abandoned jumpers and possibly the mooring apparatus with a minimal amount of moving around."

Her attention focused on the screen, Elizabeth nodded distractedly. "Teyla and Ronon are ashore visiting the Athosians, so you'd better take Colonel Sheppard, Dr. Beckett, and a couple of Marines. We don't know what we'll be dealing with down there."

"I'll go fill them in. You can enlist Carson." Waving a hand toward Radek, Rodney added, "Might want to go get your gear."

The Czech's head whipped around so fast that his glasses slipped off his nose. "Pardon me?" He rapidly pushed back his

chair and stood. "What happened to the 'we' in this discussion? I did not volunteer to play submariner again."

"As you so subtly reminded us, this was entirely your own idea. Besides, I thought you vowed to learn to swim after your last adventure." Rodney raised his eyebrows in challenge.

"A promise made in a moment of weakness. I was merely enthusiastic about not having drowned."

"Well, now you can get enthusiastic again, because one of us needs to go, and you'd better believe it's not going to be me." As loath as Rodney was to admit it to himself, the hours he'd spent in that dying jumper under the unending ocean had left their mark. He'd gotten over it, having lived to fight another day and all, and if asked, he'd swear on Schrödinger's grave that he never woke up in the dead of night with the sensation of cold salt water rising over his face. But really, why should he have to go back down there to *prove* that he was over it?

Radek opened his mouth to continue his objection, but after meeting Rodney's gaze seemed to think better of it. "Yes, I see. Go, find soldiers. I will say hello to your whale friend for you."

CHAPTER TWO

Sitting in the pilot's seat of Jumper Three, Dr. Carson Beckett kept a wary eye on the odd-looking animal visible through his windshield. Ten meters to starboard, Jumper One was maintaining a steady pace as they descended beneath Atlantis.

"This was not the way I'd intended to spend my day," he stated, checking their depth. "I want to make that clear to everyone involved. I'm much more comfortable with specimens than I am with giant beasties. And I'm already feeling a mite seasick."

Beside Carson, Radek stopped fussing with the collar of his HAZMAT suit long enough to give him a distinctly unsympathetic look. "You? I did not want to take this trip the first time. Now I am doing it twice."

"At least it's your research we're following. I had planned a quiet afternoon of sample analyses, just me and my ultraviolet lamp. Enter Dr. Weir, and suddenly I'm being dragooned into a voyage to the bottom of the bloody sea."

Judging by Radek's humorless expression, the reference was lost on the scientist. "You are here because you can pilot the jumper and because the owners of the life signs we seek may be injured." He somehow managed to sound both fatalistic and resolute. "I am here only because Rodney McKay is a tyrant of the first order."

"Relax, Doctors," said Sergeant Stackhouse, sitting behind them. "This is a cake walk."

The battle over who had suffered the graver injustice was destined to end in a stalemate, so Carson surrendered. Ignoring the Marine, he asked Radek, "How has your lab been managing these days, anyway?"

"We survive through metric tons of caffeine and regular offerings of power bars to the self-proclaimed deity of science," Radek answered morosely. "I am thinking we need airline meals as addi-

tional tribute."

Carson winced. "Rodney has been a bit tetchy lately." Visibility was diminishing as they descended, so he followed Jumper One's lead and activated his craft's external lights. If anything, the limitations of the lights only added to the gloom.

"The difference from his usual charm is slight, but noticeable." Radek resumed the adjustment of his suit.

"Can't blame it on the concussion any longer. It's been a couple of weeks now." Carson wasn't a psychiatrist, but as Atlantis's chief medical officer he had a fair idea of the sort of nightmares that no doubt plagued their highly-strung resident astrophysicist. Peering out into the depths, he noted that he had lost sight of the whale—which was not the slightest bit reassuring. Although he could track it on the head-up display in the jumper's windshield, he would have much preferred to keep it within visual range. There was no telling if the animal might decide to come back and give them a nudge. "Rodney was stuck down here alone for a damned long time."

Radek nodded agreeably. "The situation would have made even a Wraith... what was your word? Tetchy?"

"Aye." And that was an odd mental image if he'd ever had one.

"Hmm. Tetchy. Strange word. Useful in this instance."

"Keep a close eye on your positioning, both of you." Rodney's voice erupted from the com unit in Carson's ear, startling him. "If you can get the jumpers within, say, one meter of the positions I indicated relative to each other, the resultant shield bubble should extend far enough to cover one of the city's anchor points."

It was not something that Carson had given a lot of thought to, but of course the city still had to be tethered to the ocean floor in some manner, or they'd have bobbed around like a cork the moment Atlantis had surfaced. And that would have been just lovely given his predisposition to motion sickness.

"Copy," Colonel Sheppard replied from Jumper One. No doubt referring to the whale, he added, "Our escort is now circling overhead."

The American officer's easy drawl should have provided Carson with a measure of confidence, but the Colonel had years of flight training to aid him. Until coming to Atlantis, Carson had never considered that his genetic ability to use Ancient technology would be employed for the purposes of flying—especially when the jumper mostly operated by reading his mind. Precision vehicle maneuvers of any sort certainly hadn't been covered in medical school.

"Just as it did when we pinpointed Rodney's jumper," Radek confirmed.

"Admittedly the life signs in those pods are the priority, but we need to know that whatever triggered the avalanche doesn't pose a risk to the moorings," Rodney continued. "If we ever manage to acquire sufficient ZPMs, I might be able to submerge the city again, and it'd be strategically useful to know whether or not the mechanism for doing so is still intact."

"Rodney," Radek commented with false patience, "our assignment is to examine four jumpers and their contents, and possibly effect a rescue of the ten-thousand-year-old occupants. All this while wearing uncomfortable suits, separated from several tons of very deep, very cold ocean only by energy. It has surely occurred to you that this will be difficult enough without adding to our list of tasks, yes?"

"Of course, yes. I'm fairly certain I face similar situations on a regular basis." Rodney's impatience was unmistakable, even through the radio. "Choir, preaching, all that. You're down there, so the least you could do is take a look."

"I'm sure they'll do right by you, Rodney." Elizabeth's voice held a touch of tolerant amusement. "Let them work."

"Okay, gang." Sheppard cut into the conversation. "End of the line."

Below them and ahead, the lights from the Colonel's jumper revealed a sloping section of the ocean floor strewn with rubble. Carson brought Jumper Three around so that its lights could cover a wider area. "What next, Colonel?" In the distance, he could just make out the oddly rounded shape of the whale's tail. Apparently

satisfied that they had responded, the animal was now heading off into the depths.

"We're losing our St. Bernard, so let's check out the place," Sheppard suggested.

As the jumper's sensors moved slowly across the debris field, Carson learned a great deal more from the head-up display than from the eerie scene outside. According to the HUD, most of the rocks that he was seeing consisted of nothing but calcium carbonate. "That's incredible," he observed. "It looks like a massive coral reef grew around the outside of the city's force field."

"Isn't it kind of cold for a tropical reef?" Sheppard asked. "Not to mention deep?"

The biologist in Carson was intrigued. Uneasiness now forgotten, he replied, "Not all coral polyps prefer tropical waters, Colonel. On Earth, many species thrive in extreme temperature conditions. The wee animals here were most likely attracted to the residual heat given off by the city's force field, and once they began to build, well—" The coral structure now visible before them was well over thirty meters high. "You're looking at ten thousand years of accumulated animal skeletons."

"Unbelievable," said Stackhouse, a trace of awe in his voice. "You mean animals actually built that thing?"

"Tiny animals at that." Carson had been off-world before. Indeed, 'off-world' was an accurate description of Atlantis itself in his view. Even so, this was the most alien environment he'd yet encountered.

He edged Jumper Three closer to the wall, and the lights transformed what had at first appeared to be an indistinct mass of gray-greens into a riot of color typical of a thriving community of marine life. Schools of tiny fish darted by, flashing silver in the glare from the jumper's lights. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of unidentifiable aquatic creatures whirled around like a swarm of butterflies, while a few larger animals stuck their heads out from cracks and crevices just long enough to size up the jumper before making a strategic withdrawal to whatever caves they inhabited. It was all very much

like a National Geographic documentary, except that none of these odd-looking animals—assuming they could all be classified as animals—had ever been seen on Earth.

Gliding along the edge of the precipice, the jumper soon came to a sharp indentation in the reef. A glance down at a particularly large volume of rubble on the seabed confirmed that this section had collapsed. Very likely it had occurred in the none too distant past, for while the polyps of hard corals had not yet had time to attach to the cutaway section, faster-growing sponges and soft corals or perhaps some form of sea-pens were prolific. Also abundant were the clouds of rainbow-striped fish that clustered over the waving tips of... anemones, perhaps?

"Somebody want to give a visual description for those of us trying to follow along at home?"

Before Carson could suggest that Rodney stick his radio somewhere uncomfortable, Sheppard responded. "Relax, Rodney, you were right. A section of the reef must have broken away when the city rose, probably burying the jumpers."

"Yes, gratifying, but hardly a surprise." Was that muted, rhythmic sound actually Rodney's foot tapping? "Obviously, the accumulated debris that slid off the shield included some kind of manufactured material which interfered with the life pod signals. Check. Next. Have you isolated the location of the life signs? According to what I'm seeing from up here, you should be within visual range."

Ahead of them was an overhang. Beneath, a smaller section of coral had collapsed even more recently, leaving behind a scar that gleamed chalk-white under their lights. "Colonel," Carson said.

"I see it."

"What?" Rodney demanded. "What do you see?"

Beside Carson, Radek was pointing to the HUD. "There."

"Aye." While Carson had not expected to find the jumpers parked neatly on the seafloor, dusted with a bit of rubble from the undersea avalanche, neither had he expected to encounter what the HUD was now telling them. The Ancient craft were actually

embedded *inside* the base of the coral wall.

"For the love of God, *what?*?" Rodney barked.

"You were wrong," Radek replied with barely concealed delight.

"Dr. Weir was correct."

The reply was immediate and indignant. "How could I be wrong when I don't even know you're seeing?"

"Calm down, Rodney," Elizabeth admonished. "Colonel, what is it, exactly?"

"I've got a good view of two of the ships from here." Sheppard executed a graceful about-face, bringing Jumper One nose to nose with the section of wall that had most recently broken away. A pair of large, circular protrusions jutted out. "First jumper's facing this way, but the windshield is shattered."

"What the hell are those things crawling around inside?" came a voice that Carson recognized as that of Sergeant Alderman. He'd certainly heard enough of the Marine's Southern twang while treating him for a couple of broken fingers the month before. "The giant bugs with the long feelers?"

"Don't know, but if we can catch a few, this might turn into the best dinner of the whole expedition. Anybody bring a lobster cracker?"

"Uh...well, we've got pliers, sir."

"Good enough for me."

"If you can tear yourselves away from the thought of food for a *moment*, please?" Rodney sounded as though he were about three breaths away from losing what passed for his temper.

"Oh, the irony of that remark," Radek muttered.

"This is a cheap payback, isn't it?" Rodney snapped a reply. "I refuse to accept that I was in error without a detailed explanation."

Carson smiled and shifted Jumper Three into position to examine the second protrusion. From what he could see, the vessel was facing away from him, which made it impossible to get a glimpse inside.

"I do not think the hatch will open easily," Radek reported—a

remark that Carson considered incredibly understated, even for the Czech.

"This is insane. Elizabeth," Rodney whined. "Order them to tell me what's going on down there!"

"Gentlemen, please, for my sake if not for Rodney's, exactly what are you seeing?"

"The jumpers aren't buried under rubble," Sheppard replied. "They're entombed."

"You mean covered?" Rodney corrected.

"What the Colonel means, Rodney," Carson explained, "is that the wreckage forms part of the reef's structure. The recent avalanche did expose the jumpers, but it wasn't the rising of Atlantis that concealed them in the first place. According to the readings on my HUD, the interior of the craft I'm looking at is naught but a scattering of Ancient materials completely cemented together with coral rock."

"Same over here," Sheppard confirmed. "Although we could probably dig past the busted windshield, ten thousand years adds up to a lot of growth. We could maybe hit it with a few small charges of C-4, but a blast strong enough to dislodge that stuff wouldn't do your spare parts any favors."

"All right, that's that. Moving on—life signs, people," Rodney urged. "The jumper you're looking for should be about ten meters to your left."

"Port."

"What?"

"At sea, left is port."

"Oh, is it, Sailor Sheppard?"

"Hey! To an Air Force man those are fighting words."

"John, Rodney—behave." Dr. Weir's voice was gently chiding.

Their sniping faded into the background, and Carson concentrated on edging his jumper down the newly scarred section of the reef wall. His lights suddenly caught another protrusion. This time the distinctive pattern of a jumper hull was visible. "I've found the

third wreck," he announced. "But given its condition, it can't be where our life signs are hiding."

Radek blinked and sat forward, examining the wreckage first through the windshield and then the HUD. "I did not think that possible."

"Man, look at that, will ya?" Stackhouse added from behind.

"The hull's been crushed," Carson informed his radio audience. He backed his jumper out from beneath the overhang so that he could see upwards. "It would seem as though something fell on it...oh." That explained it.

"What?" Rodney's voice rose in pitch. "Now is not the time to go monosyllabic."

"You'd be pretty stunned too if you could see this," Sheppard told him, angling Jumper One up beside Jumper Three to provide better light.

Stackhouse uttered an expletive. "Guess I should've known that a city as big as Atlantis would need awfully big moorings, but damn."

A simple, monstrosly imposing structure towered over them at an alarming angle. Five stories high at least, Carson estimated, and that was only as far as he could see in the gloom. It had to be part of the apparatus that had anchored Atlantis to the seafloor, and the third jumper appeared to have taken the brunt of its fall in the rockslide.

Over the radio, someone whistled the opening notes to the theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

"Sheppard, I know that's you," Rodney accused. "Either start giving me some useful descriptions of what you're seeing or—"

"It's a monolith, Rodney, all right? It's huge and, according to my HUD, has a density that's off the charts. Apparently it beat the hell out of one of the jumpers when it slipped. Radek's right. There's no way anything's alive in there."

"So you've said, but that doesn't change the fact that the life signs are located at the exact position of this supposedly destroyed jumper."

"There's nothing supposed about it, Rodney," Carson put in. "The thing's been flattened to the thickness of a hubcap."

"Perhaps we have an instrumentation problem?" Radek wondered.

"The equipment is functioning perfectly," Rodney insisted. "I still have two readings, clear as a bell but fading, and they're right on top of you."

"Not on top of," Sheppard said suddenly, swinging his craft around. "*Underneath.*"

It took a moment for Carson to grasp what the Colonel meant, but when the lights from Jumper One's motion shifted the angle of the shadows, he spotted the fourth vessel. "The last ship is set slightly back from and below the crushed one, at the very bottom of the reef," he explained, briefly taking pity on Rodney's lack of visual information. "That's got to be where your life signs are originating."

"All right, good, excellent." It was hard to tell what was faster, exasperated McKay-speak or exhilarated McKay-speak. "Let's get that shield set up. Radek, you're confident on the recalibration procedure, right?"

"Yes, mother," Radek replied, twisting to access the controls behind his seat. "Jumpers in, water out."

"It's not that simple. You're already displacing a few tons of water, so you don't want to unbalance the mooring any more than necessary. The last thing we need is that block to shift and trigger another rockslide while you're all out there dealing with the life pods."

"I will leave rocks alone. Modulating the shield to encompass them is not so difficult as you think."

"I'm just saying to be careful, both now and when you get outside the jumper. While still learning everything you can about the mooring, of course."

Radek engaged their shield and turned down the volume on his microphone. "This is punishment I do not deserve," he muttered to Carson. "I am kind to small children and animals. I use my intellect

for good and not evil...how have I earned such treatment?"

Assuming it was a rhetorical query, Carson ignored him and concentrated on Sheppard's steady voice in his ear, guiding their jumpers into position. Their respective shields merged just before he felt the craft settle onto the seafloor.

A loud creaking sound sent a burst of adrenaline through Carson, instantly banishing his momentary sense of relief. He shot a fearful look at Radek.

"It is to be expected," the scientist explained with a shrug. "The shield has encapsulated wreckage and coral. The force of many atmospheres of water has been displaced by air of only one atmosphere."

Somehow that didn't sound terribly reassuring. "Is that supposed to happen?" Carson pointed to the dozens of fish now flopping around the ground inside what he could only think of as a fragile bubble of air beneath a great deal of ocean.

Radek nodded once. "Force field is currently calibrated to repel only seawater."

Carson was not comfortable in the least. The human body was composed mostly of water. Furthermore— "Everything's still wet."

Crossing his arms, Radek politely explained, "I calibrated the shield to repel water of a certain molecular weight. Now that the shield is in place, I have recalibrated to prevent anything entering. If that"—he pointed through the windshield to the looming monolith and glanced at Carson over his glasses—"falls, it cannot pass through the shield."

Yet it had successfully penetrated whatever shield had encapsulated the flattened jumper. Lovely thought.

"Everybody gear up," Sheppard instructed from Jumper One. "Mueller's going to go out first and check the stability of things inside the shielded area."

Presumably Elizabeth had sent Rodney for coffee, because the radio frequency was unnaturally quiet. Carson watched apprehensively as the German engineer emerged from the jumper and clam-

bered around the mass of wrecks, coral, and mooring block.

The groaning of stressed rocks and metal sounded again. Radek cleared his throat and sent a slightly anxious look in Carson's direction, which did absolutely nothing to enhance the doctor's peace of mind. "Tell me a number," Radek said.

Puzzled, Carson replied, "Eight."

"No, no, bigger."

"Forty-three?"

A snicker came from the general area of Stackhouse's seat. Radek sighed. "You have not played Prime, Not Prime before, have you?"

Before the Czech could explain the game, Mueller reappeared. "It is uncertain," he told the team, his accent sounding particularly thick coming from within his HAZMAT hood. "As you see, the hatch on the bottom vessel is partially open. Two long boxes are inside, one atop the other—I assume that these are the life pods. I cannot be sure if the bulkhead of the jumper is intact or if the pods themselves support it."

"Or if it's all this coral and junk." There was a pause while Sheppard must have been weighing the decision. "All right, let's go. But everybody stay on their toes."

With a fatalistic shrug, Radek waited until Carson had secured his hood before opening Jumper Three's rear hatch. Rodney seemed to have run out of things to harangue them about—a temporary situation, most likely. Either that or the coffee break had extended into lunch. Carson hoped that food might restore the man's blood sugar level and, with luck, his patience.

If using a jumper as a submersible and approaching this under-sea location had been surreal, stepping outside was decidedly unnatural. The casualties of Radek's selective shield calibration were either dead or lay with gills and mouths flapping uselessly. Every surface of every outcrop was glistening wet, and Carson could hear dripping from somewhere inside the wreckage. Did that mean the shield was leaking? He couldn't help but glance up and around. Right then, he fully comprehended Rodney's reluctance to

join them.

Like Sheppard and Sergeant Alderman, Stackhouse had his weapon slung over his protective suit, an odd sight in and of itself. As much as Carson disliked guns on principle, he had had occasion to appreciate them in practice. Of course, it raised the question of what exactly might occur if a discharged bullet struck the force field holding the waters at bay.

Careful to avoid the sharp edges of broken coral, Colonel Sheppard approached the still-intact jumper embedded in the lowermost section of the wall. Carson followed only close enough to get a glimpse of the pods.

"How about some commentary, people?" Rodney's voice was garbled around a mouthful of food.

Sheppard gingerly grasped the edge of the hatch and made a disgusted sound. "Everything's covered in coral and stuff. It's gonna be hard to get a handhold on the pods."

"But they're intact?" Dr. Weir asked.

"Seem to be. They don't look exactly like the life pods we ran into in the Cohall system, though. Smaller, for one thing, even with the growth."

"That's undoubtedly because they were designed by and for Ancients." Rodney noisily gulped down whatever he'd been eating before adding, "I suspect these are portable stasis pods, although the signal they're putting out is similar to the Cohall versions, which definitely were not Ancient in design. Probably copied the idea, though. Which leads me to conclude that this original model was intended to perform a similar function."

"Kinda hoping these don't carry the same body-snatching possibilities."

"I wouldn't bank on that, Colonel," Rodney warned. "After our recent encounter, I checked the database and found that SG-1 once discovered an entire ship full of stasis chambers with a computerized system that had the capacity to download and store thousands of minds. Dr. Jackson found himself inhabited by several personalities simultaneously."

Even through his faceplate, Carson could see the expression on the Colonel's face. "Great," Sheppard muttered, stepping out of the wreck. "As if two wasn't already a crowd."

"Be careful," Dr. Weir said, unnecessarily.

Carson hung back with Radek while the military contingent cautiously maneuvered the wrecked jumper's hatch fully open. Mueller rigged up cables to anchor points on the uppermost life pod—stasis pod, whatever Rodney had it in his head to call them now—and attached them to Jumper One.

A gloved hand on Carson's arm brought his attention to Sheppard. "Why don't you two hop back inside Jumper Three?" the Colonel suggested, motioning with his thumb over his shoulder. "I'll use Jumper One to withdraw the uppermost pod. Mueller and the sergeants are staying out here to guide it, but you might as well be protected in case we destabilize anything."

Another cheery thought. On the way back Carson distracted himself by examining the various soft-bodied sponges and corals. He was tempted to take a few samples back to the lab, but had not brought proper containment vessels.

Radek handed him a digital camera with a vaguely apologetic expression. "For sharing images with the lovely Lieutenant Cadman?"

Wily man, that Radek. Laura had SCUBA dived back on Earth and would no doubt be intrigued by images of the underwater world on this planet. It was difficult to find suitable gifts for a lady in this galaxy, after all. Carson smiled his thanks and stepped up to the edge of force field. Before reentering the jumper, he snapped a few shots of the sea life swimming freely just beyond the invisible barrier.

Extracting the first pod seemed to take an inordinately long time, the process punctuated by screeching sounds and the occasional groan from the tangled wreckage as Jumper One slowly eased backwards. At last, the chamber thudded to the seafloor, prompting Radek to release an audible sigh.

"How we doing, guys?" Sheppard asked.

"So far so good, sir," Alderman replied, already moving to detach the cables. "We're gonna need the winch to get this thing inside, though."

"Watch yourselves on those barnacles and such," Carson warned through the com. While the force field protected them from the surrounding water, it wouldn't do to tear their HAZMAT suits. If nothing else, Carson didn't want any of them coming down with an infected cut or, worse, an allergic reaction to an indigenous coral or stinging hydroid.

Stackhouse replied with a reassuring wave, while Sheppard said, "All right, I'll get turned around so we can start loading. Can we get at the other pod?"

Mueller, who had gone back to peer inside the embedded jumper, fielded the question. "So far the hull appears stable. I cannot promise that it remains so when the force field is withdrawn, but the second pod is readily accessible for me to attach cables. Dr. Beckett can perhaps use Jumper Three in the same manner as you did just now?"

And thus the list of duties that were very much *not* in Carson's job description expanded once again. "You know I'm not very good at these things, and this looks like it requires a light touch."

"You'll do fine," Sheppard assured him. "Alderman and Stackhouse will get you aligned and hook up the cables. Then all you have to do is back up."

Convinced that the process would not end well, Carson nevertheless felt obliged to relent. "All right. I suppose I can give it a try." When Radek gestured outside, he added, "Dr. Zelenka's going to examine the mooring block."

"About time," piped up Rodney.

As soon as Radek set out with a pack full of equipment, Carson maneuvered Jumper Three into position to withdraw the second pod while Stackhouse and Alderman winched the first into Jumper One.

"Radek, how about some kind of update?" Apparently it was time for their regular dose of nagging.

From somewhere outside Carson's field of view, Radek gave an uninterested sound, which was assuredly intended to drive Rodney mad. "It is not terribly exciting. A large block."

"Thank you *ever* so much for that. Anything you can put in terms that might be *helpful*?"

"I will take pictures. You will see then."

The frustrated growl on the line was no less amusing for its inevitability. "I knew I should have gone down there myself."

Radek's tone was pointed, and Carson momentarily imagined the usually docile Czech as a wolf, baring his fangs as his unwary research partner walked right into his trap. "Yes, Rodney. You should have."

The second pod slid with surprising ease out onto the seafloor. When Mueller gave him the thumbs up Carson felt a surge of relief—until Sheppard's voice abruptly sliced through the momentary lull in conversation. "*Son of a—*"

A loud cracking sound was followed by cursing from Alderman. Scrambling from his seat, Carson rushed outside and, along with Mueller, ran across to Jumper One. "Is everyone all right?"

"What is it? What happened?" Rodney called.

"John, what's going on?" Dr. Weir demanded.

Inside Jumper One's rear bay, Alderman was struggling with the winch while Sheppard was bent over the first pod—the transparent cover of which was clear of coral. Carson caught a glimpse of a relatively young but extremely pallid male face.

"A piece about a foot long just snapped off the top of the damned thing," the Colonel reported tersely. "Can't tell how much was barnacle growth and how much was crucial, but there's a bank of lights here that's suddenly blinking like Christmas, so I'm guessing we have a problem."

"The life sign is fading—fast," Rodney announced. "The pod's failing. I might be able to do something, but you have to get it up here *right now*. I'll meet you at the quarantine dock."

"Out!" Sheppard ordered Carson, hustling up to the cockpit. "Alderman, Stackhouse, get the winch detached and help Mueller

load the second pod into Jumper Three ASAP. Radek, get your ass back here in case they have to bail out quickly as well. I'll get this to Atlantis."

Carson's first instinct was to go with the Colonel. That stasis pod contained a living person, one he might be able to aid. He was needed to drive Jumper Three, though, and if the second pod had similar problems, he couldn't be in two places at once. "What about the force field, then? Are we still going to be able to work outside?"

"Yes, but everyone stay close to Jumper Three until Colonel Sheppard departs and we are certain of the remaining coverage," Radek cautioned.

Alderman and Stackhouse carried the winch across to Jumper Three with Mueller close behind, arriving the same time as the Czech. Its sister ship lifted, instantly reducing the area of the force field. The massive mooring block creaked ominously, but stayed in place. Despite his earlier reassurances, Radek must have been concerned that the force field might not hold, because he released a long-held breath—only to scuttle sideways when coral debris tumbled down beside him. The resultant string of Czech phrases were undoubtedly colorful curses, which grew in volume when Radek tried to lift his foot. It evidently had become wedged in a crevice.

While Mueller and the Marines went to help Radek, Carson noticed that the upper section of the remaining stasis pod appeared offset from the base. Had their handling damaged it, too? He circled to the other side and discovered a row of frantically blinking lights. "Rodney!"

"I know," Rodney interrupted, breathless from running. "I'm losing the life sign, and the first—"

"Is gone." Sheppard's voice was heavy with defeat. "I've just landed, but the lights are dead."

"Damn it," Elizabeth said quietly. "To come so close..."

Torn, Carson stared at the second pod. If he could get it open, perhaps he could do something here and now. Under the transpar-

ent lid, which had remained surprisingly free of growth, he could make out the delicate features of a woman; his patient, in a manner of speaking. Didn't he have a moral obligation to do everything he could to save her? "She hasn't aged a great deal," he observed. "Perhaps it's just a problem with the pod itself—"

"Carson! Make certain that everyone is well clear of that second pod," Elizabeth warned him. "In fact I think you should leave it and get everyone inside Jumper Three. Now that the pod is failing, we don't exactly know what could happen."

It was the right choice, he had to concede. Atlantis's leader had to act in the best interest of the people in her charge, and she had firsthand knowledge of the danger these pods could pose. But he hesitated, watching the last light blink steadily slower, frustrated at being hobbled by his lack of knowledge. After this life had endured for ten millennia, the least he could do was bear witness to its passing.

Just as the panel of lights went dark, the rear section of the pod flung open, and a blaze of light burst out and engulfed him.

The flash pulled Radek's attention from his still-lodged boot to the far side of the jumper where the pod sat. Horrified to see Carson confronted by something that appeared unpleasantly similar to a Wraith beam, the Czech shouted a warning. He knew even as the cry reverberated in his mask that it had come too late. The light struck the doctor squarely as if it were a physical force, ripped off Carson's HAZMAT hood, and sent him reeling backward.

"What the hell was that?" Stackhouse demanded, while Alderman gave a low curse.

Carson turned to face them. Haloed by the lights of the jumper, his expression was unreadable, but Radek saw the doctor's entire body go suddenly stiff before he raised his fists and screamed in... what? Rage? Grief?

Startled out of their shock, Alderman and Stackhouse sprinted forward. Radek grasped Mueller's proffered arm and ripped his foot free, twisting his ankle in the process.

"What's happening down there?" Rodney demanded. "The life sign from the second pod just vanished."

How to describe this? "The stasis pod—there was a light. Doctor Beckett was hit." Radek hobbled towards the jumper.

"Oh, God." Dr. Weir breathed. "Like the Cohall pods."

"No. This light was not soft. It was blue and..." Not for the first time, Radek cursed the language barrier.

"Okay, Doc, just take it easy." Alderman spoke to Carson, circling behind him while Stackhouse leveled his stunner.

"It was like a physical form," Radek continued. "Something real, not projected."

"Doesn't sound much like our last life pod adventure," remarked Sheppard. "Beckett, you still with us? Alderman, Stackhouse, report. What's he doing?"

"He's pulling something off the lid of the stasis pod," Alderman replied, raising his stunner and pointing it at Carson, while he motioned to Radek to get inside the jumper.

Being underwater inside Jumper Three had not been nice, but Radek had adjusted to the situation. Sort of. Being underwater *outside* the jumper was very definitely not nice and he needed no encouragement to amend that situation, but his ankle was hindering him.

Then a sudden thought struck him. What if the density of the light indicated that the inhabitant of the pod had taken *permanent* control of Carson? If Carson's mind still existed, it could be fading away much as Lieutenant Cadman had described her experience with Rodney. Any physical trauma might hasten that process, in which case—"I...I'm not certain you should use the stunner," he cautioned the Marines. "In this state it could kill Dr. Beckett."

Carson yanked off his gloves when they proved to be an obstacle to his efforts. "Looks like he's messing with a cylinder of some sort," Stackhouse further informed the Colonel.

"First pod doesn't have any cylinders on the side," Sheppard told them. "Any idea what the thing is?"

"No, sir. Just looks like something about the diameter of a drain-

pipe. Hey, Doc?" The sergeant lowered his stunner as he addressed Carson. "How about you put that down, nice and gentle like?"

Apparently unaware or uncaring that he was shredding the skin on his hands, Carson—or more correctly the being that now inhabited Carson—finally succeeded in detaching the object. He moved with uncommon speed, deftly avoiding the blasts from Stackhouse and Alderman's belatedly raised weapons, and, knocking Radek and Mueller aside, lunged into Jumper Three.

Radek felt the realization like the grip of an icy hand. Alderman, Stackhouse and Mueller were right on Carson's heels, but they failed to reach him before the jumper's hatch closed and the drive pods retracted. The three men ran around to the front of the craft, banging on the hull and the windshield with their hands. It was evident that they, too, understood what was about to happen.

Comprehension must have struck rapidly up on Atlantis as well, because Rodney, Colonel Sheppard, and Dr. Weir all began shouting at nearly the same moment.

"Carson! Snap out of it, damn you." Rodney's cries overpowered the others. "As soon as you take off, the shield goes with you!"

It was Carson's voice that responded, and yet at the same time, it wasn't. Higher pitched and strangely free of any Scottish brogue, it resonated with anguish. "You fools! Incompetent, mindless humans. Do you see what you have done?"

Dr. Weir, thankfully, reacted first and became the diplomat. "We meant you no harm. You've been trapped for a long time, and we wanted to help you."

"You meant no *harm*? My beloved Atlas breathes no longer because of your clumsy actions. You have destroyed all our hope for the future!" His final words broke into something like a sob.

When Radek pulled himself to his feet, he came around to look through the windshield, now the only source of light in this submarine world. Carson's features were twisted into a grotesque mask. "Your friend's feeble mind tells me much," he snarled, anguish edged with rage. "My people have vanished from existence, and

our grand city has fallen to your barbaric kind. You have no concept of how to be worthy of this place, and in your limitless arrogance you have brought the Wraith upon us once more. This time Atlantis will fall, and entire galaxies will suffer for your hubris."

Jumper Three slowly began to lift away from the seabed. The Marines and Mueller scrambled for handholds on the vessel's hull, but Radek knew with sick certainty that, with the pods retracted, they would find none.

"Please give us a chance to explain who we are, why we're here," Elizabeth called, desperation creeping into her voice.

"To scavenge!"

"No! To find a way to defeat a parasitic race that stole technology from you and used it to enslave our kind after you left our galaxy."

"Better that they had kept you enslaved than you came here," came the equally despairing cry. "We waited so long for our kind to return, but all that should have been destroyed remains, and now, all is lost."

It was the voice of one who was immersed in the madness of grief. At that moment Radek understood there would be no reasoning with whoever had taken possession of Carson Beckett. The Czech swallowed back the bile that had suddenly risen and, stepping away from the jumper, stared dismally upward to the water's surface hundreds of meters overhead. It might as well have been the moon.

"Don't you understand?" Dr. Weir's voice was impassioned now. "We are the descendants of Moros and the others. We came back for you!"

That declaration, inspired though it was, triggered a response that carried the weight of ten thousand years of existence. "Then we are indeed truly lost, and only one thing remains to be done."

The jumper rose, and the force field around the four of them shrank into nothingness. Freezing water rushed in, knocking Radek off his feet. Dimly he could hear Rodney and Sheppard yelling at him, but the cold swept over him, the pressure compacting his suit

so that it tightened painfully against every inch of his body, seemingly forcing the air from his lungs. Basic physics assured him that he could not actually be crushed to death at this depth, but the surface was beyond reach, a tantalizing, hopeless distance away. It occurred to him in a brief moment of bizarre detachment that even if he had learned to swim, it would have been of no use.

Radek had heard that drowning was not an unpleasant way to die. Perhaps that was true, but there had been no mention of the terror one suffered in the final moments as one's lungs burned and the world went dark.

CHAPTER THREE

“Zelenka, everybody, hang tight!” John wrenched Jumper One into the air and redlined its engines, gunning toward the ocean. “I’m inbound to you. Pull your hoods off, stay together and don’t panic!” There was no reply, and he told himself firmly that their silence meant absolutely nothing. “Rodney, am I gonna make it?”

“You should—they’ve got a little time.” That declaration would have been more convincing had Rodney’s voice not cracked. “Carson, for the love of God, I know you’re in there—”

“You’re wasting your breath.” John liked to think of himself as a relatively laid-back guy, but control was kind of an issue for him, and having his body commandeered and taken on a violent rampage not so long ago had knocked him for a psychological loop. When they got Beckett back, he and Elizabeth would have to share a drink with the good doctor. First, though, they had to *get* him back. “The Doc’s not in the driver’s seat.”

“Right. I know.” Rodney sounded abashed and frustrated all at once. “It’s just...”

“Yeah.” Jumper One hit the surface of the water at an angle chosen for speed, not comfort. The impact sent the stasis pod in the rear bay skidding against the bulkhead, but John’s level of respect for his dead Ancient passenger had taken a nosedive the moment the guy’s companion had hijacked Beckett.

Elizabeth’s voice returned, strained but impressively composed as she addressed the distraught Ancient. “Please, what can we do to help you?”

“Help?” The Ancient gave a hideous laugh. “Does your arrogance never end? You are *nothing* without us, and yet you blunder about the universe as if it were your unassailable right.”

“It has never been our intention to use your city for reckless

purposes,” Elizabeth countered. “We simply want to learn all we can. If Carson’s mind is open to you, you must know that. Yes, we’ve made mistakes, but we truly respect Atlantis and everything it represents. We’ve defended it as if it was our own, and we will continue to do so.”

There was liquid steel in that last statement. The Ancient seemed to recognize the warning, but was not deterred. The reply was delivered with cold conviction. “That is no longer your choice to make.”

That had an ominous ring to it, but John had other things on his mind just then. Jumper One’s HUD located four life signs amid the swirling sediment kicked up from the seafloor. Briefly tuning out the situation with Jumper Three, he performed what could charitably be called a combat landing beside the rest of his team. Two of the men had retained the presence of mind to hang on to the others so that they were clustered together about six feet off the ground—and rising, because the other two hadn’t removed their hoods. Despite the compression, air pockets caught inside their suits were giving them buoyancy, something that John really didn’t want. He smacked his hand down on the shield activation panel. When the force field sprang into place and pushed the water away, all four of them hit the deck.

Opening the hatch, John ran out to assess the team’s welfare. Mueller got to his knees, ripped off his hood and threw up. Blood trickled from the engineer’s ears, but John had been around the block enough to know that busted eardrums were more irritating than debilitating. Alderman and Stackhouse also had bloody ears, but they were already pulling themselves upright, using their first gasps of air to whoop in relieved celebration.

John headed for the prone scientist. “Radek, buddy, you still kicking?”

With a shuddering breath, the scientist dragged off his hood and pushed himself up on one elbow. “I am still alive?” he groaned. “Good. Rodney will pay for this.”

John grinned and offered him a hand up. A vengeful Zelenka was

a healthy Zelenka. “Atlantis, Jumper One has its cargo secured.”

“That was shit hot, sir!” Alderman expressed his gratitude at the top of his lungs, probably because of the wrecked eardrums. “Search and rescue to the extreme.”

“All part of the service,” John called back.

“What happened with the Doc?” Stackhouse demanded, bringing his hands to his jaw and flexing it experimentally. The brief, intense pain of having his eardrums perforated was probably making itself felt now that the first adrenaline rush had passed. “He just—”

Shaking his head, John told them, “That’s not Beckett right now.” He’d forgotten to yell, so the men tapped their ears with a collective wince, but they appeared to get the picture. He quickly checked the pod, which hadn’t moved in the buffeting of water, and saw the face of a woman, still beautiful even in death.

Motioning his charges into the jumper, John began paying attention to the radio traffic again. Elizabeth was still trying to reason with the Ancient, but seemed to be making very little headway. He slung one of Radek’s arms across his shoulders and gestured for Mueller to do the same, debating his options as they walked the scientist into the jumper. He was in a good position to follow Jumper Three, and could most likely intercept it faster than anything Atlantis could scramble. On the other hand, he had four colleagues here who were bleeding and slightly oxygen-deprived.

Once the hatch was secured and Radek dropped gracelessly into a seat, John went forward and brought up the HUD. Jumper Three had breached the surface and looked to be headed for the mainland. Two additional jumpers appeared on the screen as well—where had those come from? “Atlantis, somebody give me a status, please,” he requested, blowing through the preflight checklist at top speed.

“Teyla and Ronon were on their way back and diverted to intercept,” Rodney answered, “and Lorne just took off with a squad of Marines.”

Good. That made his decision a lot easier. “Okay, I have ‘em

on the HUD. We're going to head for home, and there's no point in bothering with quarantine now, so if you could scrounge up a medical team for these guys and point it toward the jumper bay, we'd appreciate it."

"Are they okay? How's Radek?"

Was it his imagination, or did Rodney actually sound worried? John glanced over his shoulder and tried not to smirk. "Answer one: they'll all be fine. Answer two: he's half-deaf and royally pissed off."

"Uh, good. Nice work. I'll just take a moment and update my will for when he gets out of the infirmary."

"You do that." John lifted Jumper One off the ocean floor. Over the radio, the Ancient, whose name Elizabeth had learned was Ea, was complaining about the quality of the body she currently inhabited. *Then maybe you shouldn't have stolen it, sweetheart.* What was it with this galaxy and beings that wanted to play puppets with them?

"Agh!" The repugnance in Ea's voice was unmistakable. "His hands are shredded and there is blood everywhere."

John winced. It didn't take any imagination to guess why. The pod had been encrusted with enough shellfish to feed a platoon.

"Like all humans he is weak, unable even to heal himself," Ea added.

"Then why don't you heal him? You can do that, can't you?" Elizabeth's voice broke in.

"Must I also breathe for him? I have little time for such trivialities."

"And what about the man who needs that body? His name is Carson Beckett. He's a doctor, a healer who has only ever wanted to help people."

"A human," Ea replied contemptuously. "Like all of you, he is no longer of any consequence." Something that was either a bitter laugh or a whimper followed that belittling remark. "Atlas, my love, it is fitting that your machine will put an end to that which was created so many years ago."

John sucked in a sharp breath. Elizabeth must have been getting the same very bad vibes because she said in a low voice, "End to what? Ea, what are you going to do?"

There was silence for a long moment before Elizabeth pleaded, "Ea, this is your city. It holds unimaginable knowledge—"

"And *you* have brought it to ruin by exposing it to the Wraith!" Ea roared.

"We will not let that happen," Elizabeth insisted.

"How can you hope to avoid it? Do you truly believe you can succeed where we could not?" A soft, mocking laugh quickly became a sob. "Better that Atlantis be destroyed than become the portal through which the scourge of this galaxy obliterates all life."

Jumper One breached the surface. John slid his hand over the panel and activated the doors to the jumper bay inside the city. Much as he hated to admit it, Ea's twisted logic wasn't completely off-target. If the Wraith ever found a way of capturing the Atlantis Stargate... He glanced down at the *Daedalus*, still parked on its usual pier, its scheduled departure delayed for maintenance. *Significant maintenance*, he reminded himself grimly. The crew had found out the hard way that small material defects could lead to big problems over time. A number of parts needed to be replaced before the engines would be safe and effective for hyperdrive operation, and until then, the ship—and Atlantis—had something in common with the proverbial fish in a barrel.

"We've gone out of our way to enhance the self-destruct mechanism," Elizabeth continued. "Carson knows that. You must see it in his memories. We defeated the Goa'uld through your technology, but now there is a greater threat. Look inside Carson's mind! Can't you see the Ori?"

Putting a lid on the various alarming possibilities that were swirling around in John's head, he brought the jumper in to land. A small army of medical personnel was waiting in the bay, Rodney hovering uncomfortably behind them. The chief scientist watched the Marines disembark, and paled when he saw the streaks of dried

blood on either side of his colleague's head. "Oh, holy—does he have a head injury? Is it possible to get brain damage from rapid depressurization?"

"Deep breaths, Rodney," John advised, assisting Radek to a waiting gurney. "It's just his eardrums. They'll heal."

"And *he* is right here," Radek grumbled, fixing Rodney with a poisoned glare, though there didn't seem to be any real malice in it.

"You can hear me?"

"Earless creatures in neighboring star systems can hear you."

"Excuse me for demonstrating some concern for a member of my team."

Rodney's distress was genuine, John could tell, but there was more to it than that. The problem with an ego like Rodney McKay's was that it usually led him to assume a disproportionate share of responsibility in both good times and bad. It wasn't his fault that a mission he'd foisted on Radek had gone to hell in a hand basket, but that probably wouldn't stop Rodney from sending himself on a guilt trip.

Radek's acerbic response suggested that maybe the Czech sensed the same thing. "You admit my invaluable skill. Also, I am the only person willing to work with you."

That snapped Rodney back to form in short order. "Oh, now I *know* there's brain damage."

"Please excuse me, but I need to throw up now."

From the expression on Radek's face, he wasn't speaking figuratively. Taking that as a cue, John nudged Rodney. "We'd better get to the control room."

"Colonel," called Mueller. John turned back and went over to where the German was being treated. "Dr. Beckett...after the Ancient took him over, he—ah, she pulled something off the stasis pod and took it in the jumper with her."

"The cylinder-looking thing? The sergeants said something about it." John had dismissed it earlier, but he realized now that it might have been their introduction to the machine Ea had men-

tioned. "Try to remember as many details as you can about it. I think we're going to need them."

He followed Rodney down to the control room, where Elizabeth greeted them with a look of helplessness. "I can't get through to Ea," she said. "I've told her how many people she's threatening, I've promised her everything under the sun, but she's determined that Atlantis has to be destroyed."

"Except she's heading for the mainland, not the city," Rodney pointed out. "She must know of something there that has the capacity to wipe us out."

"Unless it's something she took with her," John said, Mueller's description fresh in his mind. "Like the cylinder."

Rodney was all but bouncing from one foot to the other. "By all means, try not to strain yourself with specifics."

"Mueller and the sergeants saw her take something off the pod. You didn't hear him just tell us about it?"

"I may have had a few other things on my mind at that moment, thank you. Okay, a cylindrical machine." Rodney's fingers tapped a staccato rhythm against his leg. "Did they describe it?"

"Underneath the ten-thousand-year-old oysters, you mean? Mueller said it was long."

"Well, that's astute. Long." His fingers stopped tapping and rolled into a clenched fist.

"Atlantis, Jumper Four." Major Lorne's voice sounded over the com. "We have Jumper Three in sight. She's headed out over the main Athosian camp."

Looking at her senior advisors, Elizabeth asked, "Do we have any idea what Ea might be able to do with this machine?"

"Unfortunately, nobody got all that great a look at it." John brushed sweat out of his eyes and took the opportunity to strip off his HAZMAT suit. The damned things were effective but suffocating. "What I want to know is why she's heading inland if her plan is to destroy Atlantis. And how she thinks she can pull that off with a machine the size of a piece of drainpipe."

"Size isn't everything," Rodney declared. "And don't even

think about cracking a joke—”

“Too easy.” The course of action was unequivocally clear in John’s mind. “So we’re going to have to stop her.”

“How exactly do you propose to do that? I’m sure no one has failed to notice that she’s an Ancient, and she has a jumper.”

“Which is heavily shielded.” Elizabeth clasped her hands in front of her, a gesture that John recognized as the prelude to an unpleasant decision.

The resulting silence was telling. John knew, as the others surely did, that they had only two options: force Ea to land, or use the firepower of the *Daedalus* to blow the jumper out of the sky. Still pulling the HAZMAT suit off his foot, he nearly lost his balance upon remembering that the *Daedalus* was currently grounded. So much for options. With a last fierce tug, he threw the garment aside. Of course nobody wanted to be the one to point out that any action they took to stop Ea could kill Carson Beckett. This was an Ancient that had taken over the doctor’s mind and body. For all anyone knew, Carson had died at the bottom of the ocean.

“Jumper Three is slowing,” Lorne announced, drawing all eyes to the control room’s main screen.

Rodney leaned down to type a command into the computer, and a topographical map appeared. “Ea’s landed on the edge of that rift valley in the mountains above the Athosian camp.”

“Lorne, get down there,” John ordered.

“Roger that, sir.”

“We are nearly there as well,” Teyla informed them from Jumper Two. “I have Dr. Beckett in sight. He is on the ground, running towards a deep chasm.”

Lorne continued, cautious with his choice of words. “Colonel, now would be a good time to tell us our rules of engagement.”

Elizabeth lifted pained eyes to John, and his chest tightened as he responded. “This is an imminent, severe threat, Major. Do what you have to do.”

A new blip suddenly appeared on the screen. “Too late,” declared Rodney. The negative number beside the blip was steadily grow-

ing. “Something’s drilling into the ground at an incredible rate!”

“Ea, can you hear me?” Elizabeth called. No answer came.

“Major Lorne? Teyla?”

“Coming in now,” replied Lorne.

“We have landed by Jumper Three.” Teyla’s voice sounded strained when she added, “There is no sign of Dr. Beckett.”

For some time a tense quiet reigned over the control room. At last, Teyla’s voice returned, even more apprehensive than before. “I fear he has gone into the chasm.”

John glanced at Elizabeth, seeing memories of the same experience mirrored in her expression. If Ea was dying, she likely saw Carson’s body as expendable, something to be used up and thrown away.

They heard Lorne giving instructions to the Marines to spread out. A few moments later, Teyla reported, “Ea appears to have thrown herself into the ravine along with the machine. However, Dr. Beckett’s body has landed on a ledge not far below us.”

“Is Carson alive?” Elizabeth brought her clasped hands to her mouth as they all waited for Teyla’s reply.

Trying to quell his frustration at not being out there, John steeled himself for the worst.

“It appears so. Dr. Beckett’s body is convulsing.”

So it *had* been like the Cohall pod. John’s relief at knowing the doctor was alive was tempered by the knowledge of what Beckett was going through now. The term ‘agony’ might have been a little melodramatic, but it was more the sensation of dying without actually dying that still freaked him out. Beckett was going to be in serious need of that drink when he got back.

A weak voice with a familiar accent could be heard over the radio. “Oh, God... what have I done?”

“Carson?”

There was no immediate reply, and Teyla spoke up again. “I believe Ea has died.”

“Maybe,” Ronon put in gruffly.

Elizabeth’s knuckles were white as she gripped the edge of the

nearest console. "Can you get to Dr. Beckett?"

"No problem, ma'am," Lorne answered. "Give us a minute to set up a rappelling line."

When the Marines reached the doctor, they reported his condition as stable. He didn't seem to be suffering any broken bones. And while the deep lacerations on his arms had resulted in some blood loss, the pain in his voice was clearly not physical. "I left them," Carson said in a broken voice, devastated. "They were begging me—they needed me!"

"Doc, it's okay," John hurried to tell him. "Zelenka and Stackhouse and the others are all fine. It's not your fault."

The reassurance didn't seem to ease Beckett's burden. "I wanted so badly to stop her, and I don't know why I couldn't—"

"Carson, hey." John lowered his voice. "We know. Believe me, we understand. No harm done."

"No harm done, Colonel?" Through the radio, Beckett's voice fractured. "Oh, God, you have no idea."

Elizabeth caught John's eye before speaking to the rest of the group. "Major, Teyla, Ronon—thank you. Hurry back."

The infirmary appeared to be in the eye of the hurricane when Elizabeth entered. The medical staff had treated Radek, Mueller, Stackhouse, and Alderman with practiced efficiency and given them beds in the main bay. Now they prepared for the arrival of their chief physician.

"What's the word?" she asked Dr. Martinez, inclining her head toward the recovering team members.

"Dr. Zelenka's ankle is bruised but it will be fine. The abrupt change of air pressure in their inner ears—twice—caused their eardrums to rupture. They may experience mild headaches and perhaps some hearing loss for a while, but they should all heal quite well over the next few weeks," the doctor stated. "Nothing permanent so long as they don't plan any more deep sea diving."

"So, no swimming lessons," Radek commented from his bed. "I am truly crushed." He accepted an ice pack from one of the nurses

and applied it to his leg.

"You should've seen Colonel Sheppard come screaming toward us in that jumper, ma'am." Sergeant Alderman was grinning.

Apparently it didn't take long for Marines to convert mortal danger into adrenaline. Elizabeth dreaded telling them that when it came to danger, their day wasn't nearly over. "I'm just glad to see you all in one piece," she replied. "Get some sleep while you can."

"Dr. Weir." Radek motioned her toward him. His face told her that he was under no illusions about their situation. "It is important that you know—Dr. Beckett did not disobey you. When you told us to abandon the pod, he stepped away. The end opened by itself. I have been thinking. I believe there may have been a pre-programmed signal, perhaps when a viable atmosphere and host were detected."

It hardly mattered anymore, but Elizabeth appreciated the knowledge. "Thank you," she said, reaching for his hand and squeezing it. "Rest up. I expect we're going to need your help very soon."

CHAPTER FOUR

There was no question in Teyla's mind that Dr. Beckett was once again in control of his body. She might not have been quite so trusting had she not seen Colonel Sheppard similarly convulse when Thalen had died within him. The stunned, anguished look now etched on the doctor's face made many things clear.

Teyla's own experiences in the brief moments when her mind had been under the control of a Wraith had been...deeply disturbing. Although she had some comprehension of what Dr. Beckett had endured, she at least had not been forced to sit idly by while the mind that had taken temporary possession of her body had caused harm to others.

Ronon was not nearly as confident that Ea had truly gone from Dr. Beckett. Teyla could hardly blame him. The Satedan had not long been released from the infirmary after recovering from the wound inflicted by Phoebus. During the jumper's flight back to Atlantis, Ronon silently sat in the rear bay with his weapon trained on Dr. Beckett. The fact that the doctor's hands were deeply lacerated did not seem to diminish his status as a threat.

The craft settled into the jumper bay. Dr. Weir and Colonel Sheppard strode toward them, a pair of medical personnel following with a gurney. Dr. Beckett began to speak before the hatch was fully open, issuing a variation on the same apology he'd been attempting to convey since they had retrieved him from the ledge. "I'm so sorry. I don't understand—"

"Still not your fault, Doc." The Colonel gave a curt, approving nod to Teyla and Ronon. "Can you tell us anything about what Ea did?"

The medics settled Beckett on the gurney and moved in the direction of the infirmary. Dr. Weir and Colonel Sheppard fell into step beside them, and, with barely a glance exchanged, Teyla and

Ronon chose to follow.

"It was all so tangled," Beckett was saying. "Just a constant stream of images. On one hand, I could comprehend what she felt and what she wanted, but on the other...it almost seemed like a foreign language. I don't know if it was because she was an Ancient, or because the technology she used was beyond my knowledge—or because her trauma was so crippling." His words tripped over each other in his attempt to explain. "The only thing of which I'm absolutely certain is the intended consequence of her actions."

If Teyla still possessed any vestige of her former belief in the Ancestors' unwavering virtue, by now it had been severely tarnished.

The group moved through the doorway into the infirmary, and Dr. Martinez came across to join them. Beckett shook his head, eyes wide and searching. "I just wish—"

Seeing his obvious distress, Dr. Weir laid a gentle hand on his arm. She looked briefly at Sheppard before speaking. "We understand, Carson. Completely. Unfortunately, you're the only resource we have to help us stop whatever Ea has set in motion, so we'll need you to try to be as specific as possible."

"How are those hands feeling?" the other doctor asked, reaching for the field dressing that Teyla had helped apply.

"Not hurting at all, which is something to be grateful for, I suppose," Beckett replied absently, still preoccupied with larger matters. He did look down when the dressing was removed, though, and reacted with surprise—as did Teyla. The deep wounds that Ea had inflicted in her desperate work appeared almost healed.

Rodney came barreling through the door then, datapad in hand. "Got the entire science department working on the fastest database search in recorded history," he reported, pulling up short next to the huddle of people near Dr. Beckett. "Of course, it'd be simpler to get as much information on the machine as we can from Ea's memories. Uh, is it me, or is there more blood on those bandages than the corresponding injuries would suggest?"

"The wounds from the fall have vanished as well." Teyla stepped

around the gurney to view the area of Dr. Beckett's neck that had been badly abraded.

A brush of metal against leather signaled that Ronon once more had drawn his weapon. "How do we know he's not still being controlled?"

Nearly everyone took an immediate step back from the gurney. Strangely, Rodney was the only one to hold his ground. "That's easy enough to confirm. All we have to do is check his EEG."

The infirmary fell into an awkward silence while medical personnel set up the machine. It took only a few moments to ascertain that Dr. Beckett alone inhabited his body, allowing everyone to breathe more easily. Ronon holstered his weapon, his face as inscrutable as ever.

"What can you tell us, Carson?" Dr. Weir asked.

Beckett sighed. "At the end, the most recognizable feeling was one of remorse. More than that, it was a crushing sense of guilt. I think she felt as though surviving all this time only to witness her own death, after having endured the loss of her son and her love—indeed, her entire civilization—it was some form of punishment from those who had Ascended."

"The Ancient equivalent of divine retribution," Sheppard suggested.

"It was the only explanation she could find for why she had been made to suffer so badly." The doctor closed his eyes and shook his head in sympathy. "The terrible pain that poor woman went through drove her actions, I'm certain."

"Not that I'm entirely devoid of compassion," Rodney broke in, "but all of this is markedly less helpful than, say, details about exactly what Ea did. Right now we have a machine intent on God knows what drilling through the planet's crust. I'll need to know everything you can remember if I'm going to find a way to stop it—since it seems a safe assumption that we *will* need to stop it."

"That's never going to happen, Rodney." Beckett shifted to sit more upright. "It's an exogenesis machine."

The word was not familiar to Teyla, but comprehension must

have struck Rodney immediately. "Okay, that's a problem," he said, turning huge eyes toward them. "Ea doesn't mean to destroy *just* the city. She means to destroy the entire planet!"

"Hang on a minute," Colonel Sheppard demanded. "How did we go from blowing up a city to blowing up an entire planet?"

"Can you *please* for one minute tear your focus away from blowing up things? Exogenesis!" The scientist's hands moved fitfully as he no doubt searched for the best way to simplify his explanation.

Nodding, Dr. Beckett explained, "Exogenesis, or panspermia, essentially proposes that life was brought to Earth from elsewhere, which, as we now know, is an entirely feasible theory."

"By the Ancients," said Dr. Weir. "But there's already life on Atlantis."

"Yes, of course," retorted Rodney. "Except, what if you had a machine that imposed a completely different biosphere over one that's preexistent?"

"You get a teenaged Spock?" the Colonel suggested. The odd comment in no way eased Teyla's deepening concern.

Rodney scowled at Sheppard. "No! Well, yes, but over a considerably longer time frame. It makes sense that the Ancients had a machine that could terraform planets. It would certainly explain the preponderance of Earth-type planets in both galaxies. Oddly enough, I've always wondered why so many bear a remarkable resemblance to British Columbia."

"The Gadmeer." Dr. Weir spotted the Colonel's blank look and explained. "Several years ago SG-1 encountered a race that used a terraforming device to burn the surface of a planet, destroying its ecosystem before seeding it with life forms suited to their needs. If that's what Ea has in mind—"

"Then we have time to come up with countermeasures?" Even as Sheppard said it, his expression indicated that he doubted they would be so fortunate.

"Unlikely. For one thing, the Gadmeer weren't nearly as advanced as Ancients," Rodney said. "And while I have no idea

how the Ancients terraformed planets, I think it's safe to assume that it would be considerably more efficient—and by that I mean making absolutely certain that none of the original biosphere remained intact.”

“Carson?” Dr. Weir directed her gaze to the doctor.

“Forgive me if this isn't terribly thorough, but as far as I can tell, the terraforming process normally took around ten thousand years.”

“Ten *thousand*?” Colonel Sheppard stared at him.

“The Ancients were extremely long-lived,” Teyla reminded them all.

“And as near as we can tell, they flew here in Atlantis several million years ago,” Dr. Weir added.

Ronon hooked his fingers into his belt. “So we've got nothing to worry about, right?”

“On the contrary,” Beckett continued, his face creasing in concern. “In order to undertake their terraforming projects, machines powered by several ZPMs were placed in numerous strategic positions across a planet. Each world was allowed, even encouraged, to evolve a unique biota with the sole proviso that all such planets would ultimately sustain human life.”

“Several ZPMs?” From his bed a short distance away, Dr. Zelenka joined the discussion. “Clearly the amount of power needed to accomplish a planet-wide transformation would be massive, but how—”

“That's what Atlas, Ea's husband, had been working on. To get away from relying on ZPMs, he'd experimented with a prototype device that incorporated a design feature used on some planets to control weather. Apparently he, or one of his predecessors, had invented such a device in the past.”

“We've seen climate-controlling technology before,” Dr. Weir said, sliding into a chair between Beckett and Zelenka's beds. “There's an SGC file about a similar machine found on a planet called Madrona. It was stolen by Colonel Maybourne's group and briefly used to manipulate Earth's weather a few years ago.”

“I knew all that El Niño stuff sounded fishy,” Sheppard commented under his breath.

Uncomprehending, Teyla dismissed the comment as yet another reference unique to Earth's culture. She did not, however, dismiss the implications for this world.

“I don't know how complex that version was,” said Beckett, “but Atlas's exogenesis machine could be set to run different programs, depending on the preexisting conditions of the planet in question. He'd hoped to someday use the machine in other galaxies, allowing the Ancients to escape the Wraith and build new worlds quickly, without the ten-millennium delay.”

“And by quickly, you mean how long?”

If it were possible, Carson's face fell even further. “A week. Less under the right circumstances.”

Teyla's profound shock was echoed by words of dismay from the others, while Dr. Beckett continued to speak. “Atlas wanted to test the device on a planet already sanctioned for terraforming, but because Janus had assisted him during its development, the head of the Atlantis Council, Moros, considered it too dangerous. The Council forbade the test, and Atlas secretly defied them.”

“Why, oh why, am I not surprised?” Rodney cast his gaze toward the ceiling.

The doctor rubbed a now-unmarked hand over his face. “Along with Ea and a team of his research associates, Atlas quietly slipped away to a suitable planet, one that had already undergone the initial terraforming process. The Wraith arrived soon after and blocked their access to the Stargate. Many of his team, including his and Ea's son, were killed, and the remainder terribly injured. Those who made it out alive escaped in a transport ship. Only a handful of them survived the Wraith blockade to reach Atlantis, but by then the inhabitants of the city had all left for Earth. Someone—Moros, presumably—had configured the city's force field to keep out all ships. The only option remaining to the last of Atlas's team was to use the stasis pods.”

“Okay, so that explains how they got to be where we found

them." Nervous energy radiated from Rodney as he paced the room. "What we need to know is what configuration Ea used on the machine when she set it to destroy *this* planet."

The earlier loss of blood had made Beckett pale, but now he looked positively ill. "All of the above," he answered quietly.

Rodney spun in mid-step, nearly losing his balance. "What you do mean, *all of the above*?"

"I'm not absolutely certain—it could just be that Ea's emotions were the focal point of her attention—but I get the impression that she'd never grasped the subtleties of the machine, so she set it to run in consecutive, open-ended programs. It will burrow into the planet's crust and set up a chemical reaction designed to release huge quantities of aerosols and water into the atmosphere. That program was designed for planets that didn't have water or air. Since this world already has both, the effect will be a deluge on the mainland the likes of which would terrify Noah himself."

Teyla inhaled sharply.

"Okay, that could be worse," Rodney said thoughtfully. "We thought this was a water world when we first arrived, anyway."

"And what of the Athosian settlement?" Teyla demanded. So much had been invested in this planet, both materially and emotionally, by her people since their arrival many months ago. To see another home destroyed—

"We'll evacuate them, obviously. It's not like it would be the first time." The scientist's hand flicked back and forth in a dismissive gesture. "The real concern is what else Ea programmed."

"Nanites," Beckett said simply.

The room stilled. Rodney and Zelenka traded glances filled with as much dread as Teyla had ever witnessed from them. She could hardly blame them. The chaos that had occurred the last time the miniature machines had been let loose upon the city was something Teyla did not wish to see repeated.

"These are not at all like the virus we encountered last year," Beckett added quickly. "For terraforming purposes they normally disassemble complex compounds into their elemental parts and

rebuild a suitable environment for human habitation."

"And if a stable environment already exists?"

"Like I said, that's what normally occurs. In this case, from what I can understand, I'm fairly certain the beasties will just keep going indefinitely."

The color fled from Rodney's face. "Gray goo."

Sheppard's jaw flexed. "I'm guessing I really don't want to know what that means."

"A microscopic version of a replicator plague, except that they won't restrict themselves to inorganic matter. Instead, the entire planet, and by that I mean every single living thing on it right down to the smallest virus, will be turned into an amorphous mass of... gray goo."

The Colonel stared at him for several tense seconds before replying slowly, "Okay, so we have to stop it."

Beckett dropped his head to his chest, and his shoulders slumped in a way that was deeply alarming. Teyla had never seen such a look of irrevocable defeat in the doctor. "We can't. Ea was certain of that." Hopelessness choked his voice. "We'll have to abandon Atlantis."

This grim pronouncement brought Dr. Weir to her feet. "There must be some way to stop that machine," she insisted. "We killed the nanovirus with an EM pulse. Why wouldn't that work this time?"

"Because it's Ancient-designed technology, much like all the equipment that was unaffected by our EM pulse in that situation." Rodney had been scribbling furiously on his datapad. Now he stopped and looked up. "If the entire terraforming process is designed to be completed in a week or less, production of nanites could have been initiated the moment that thing was switched on. We have to seal off Atlantis with a force field *immediately*. Even as we speak, we're running the risk of a nanite hitching a ride on an upper wind and making its way over here. If that happens—if even one of those damned things gets inside the city—we're dead."

"That's part of the reason the Atlantean Council forbade the

experiment,” Beckett said. “I get the sense that they’d had a number of negative experiences with nanites in the past, because the bloody things are so difficult to control and contain. If a single nanite managed to get off-world via the Stargate, the entire galaxy could be consumed. But I think we’ve got a bit of time yet before that becomes a critical factor. A day or two, perhaps.”

“Excuse me?” Rodney was adamant. “Based on your many minutes of expertise with this technology, you’re willing to take that risk?”

A strange expression crossed Dr. Beckett’s face, as if he were attempting to harness an elusive memory, but it rapidly faded, and the trepidation that had been mounting in Teyla’s mind now blossomed into stark fear. “We *must* bring my people to Atlantis before the shield is raised,” she said, the words an open plea.

She couldn’t be sure that the scientists had even heard her. “If we can selectively calibrate the jumpers’ shields, we can do the same for the city’s,” Dr. Zelenka suggested. “Keep unwanted particles from getting through.”

Rodney was already shaking his head. “Won’t work. The nanites will ultimately consist of so many diverse components that even allowing in air could be dangerous. From this point on we must consider the planet’s atmosphere as hostile as the vacuum of space. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can come inside.” He whirled toward Dr. Weir, a barely perceptible tremor running through his arm and down to the datapad. “You have to let me activate the shield immediately and begin plans for evacuation ASAP. We can’t maintain the shield at full strength indefinitely.”

Dr. Weir studied him, looking as surprised by his vehemence as Teyla felt. On the occasion of their first meeting, Teyla had found Rodney McKay to be overly excitable and prone to pessimism, but, in time, both her view and his behavior had shifted somewhat. They had yet to encounter a technological obstacle that he could not overcome, and in spite of appearances he never hesitated to do whatever was necessary to salvage the best possible outcome from a crisis. This state of instantaneous near-panic seemed an overreac-

tion, even for him.

“Time out,” Sheppard said, folding his arms. “Let’s assume for the moment that we can bring the Athosians to Atlantis before starting the evacuation.” Hope flowed through Teyla, and she sent the Colonel a glance of tentative gratitude, choosing not to see Rodney’s resigned headshake. “What’s the status of the *Daedalus*?”

Dr. Weir pressed her lips together before replying. “According to Hermiod, it will take upwards of two weeks working with, in his words, Atlantis’s ‘limited’ facilities to get the hyperdrive back online.”

“They’re lucky that Atlantis even has the necessary equipment,” Rodney retorted. “Catastrophic material failure can be ugly even in an air-breathing engine, and in-flight fires are entirely too exciting for my taste. There’s no way the *Daedalus* could have limped back to Earth or even effected repairs in space given the amount of damage that was done. I’m surprised they managed to land without incident.”

“Hermiod confirmed that the problem doesn’t lie with the Asgard technology but with the components manufactured on Earth,” Dr. Weir told them. “Apparently our manufacturing processes aren’t quite as flawless as one might hope, and the engine design is unforgiving of even the slightest imperfections.”

From his bed, Dr. Zelenka muttered something uncomplimentary-sounding about Russian-made titanium parts.

“The temperature cycling of prolonged hyperdrive use caused metal fatigue,” Rodney explained curtly. “Over time, hairline cracks propagated in some rather critical locations. Apparently it’s time to start considering more frequent inspections on some of our hyperdrive components. One might also point out that it would have been prudent to put said components in more accessible locations, since our techs aren’t quite as small and flexible as the Asgard, but that’s hardly pertinent now. In any case, the main engines will be completely offline until we can machine the replacement parts and get them installed.”

Dr. Weir nodded. “When I bring Colonel Caldwell up to speed,

I'll see if that time can be cut down."

"Yes, do that." Rodney started toward the door. "I recommend a period of days rather than a week." Motioning absently for Sheppard to follow, he added, "I need to take a look at the first pod you recovered. Hopefully that will tell us something more about what specifically we're dealing with."

"Wait, Rodney," Dr. Weir cautioned. "Atlas might be dead, but we can't afford to spring any other booby traps that might be left in that pod. I'll have it taken to a quarantined area. Meanwhile, I'd like you to get me an update on exactly what Ea's machine is doing."

The group disbanded. Teyla called after Dr. Weir, stopping her in the corridor before she could rush off to initiate contingency planning. "What of my people?" Teyla asked again, her voice becoming more insistent.

The city's leader looked at her with such empathy that Teyla's blood chilled. "I'm sorry, Teyla, but as it stands there's very little we can do without risking Atlantis. Bringing anyone back from the mainland would pose too great a threat of infection."

Dr. Weir's expression implored her to understand. Teyla did, but understanding did nothing to relieve the growing ache that had settled in her chest.

"That wasn't what I was hoping to hear, Colonel Caldwell." Elizabeth sat back in her office chair and rubbed a hand across her forehead in a vain attempt to alleviate the throbbing.

"I'm not too fond of the idea myself," replied the commander of the *Daedalus*. "Unfortunately our resources are limited by our remote location. Even with three shifts working around the clock there's simply no way to accelerate the repairs by more than a couple of days. Do you have any idea what sort of time frame we're looking at?"

"Carson can't be sure, but a week, perhaps less, for complete terraforming. I imagine that environmental conditions will have deteriorated rapidly long before then, and we can only guess

exactly what the impact will be."

Caldwell gazed through her office window at the silent 'gate for a moment before speaking again. "Our options range from lousy to awful," he said. "*Daedalus* won't be hyperdrive-capable anytime soon, and not at all if we can't access the engineering workshops and labs on Atlantis. The idea of abandoning my ship is fairly repugnant, and when Hermiod learned that something resembling a miniature replicator plague was about to be unleashed—the word 'displeased' doesn't even come close to covering it. I don't like anything about what I'm going to say here, but I agree with Dr. McKay's recommendation that we begin immediate evacuation to the Alpha site."

And there it was, as unavoidable as death and taxes. Elizabeth's fingers tightened around the arm of her chair. "I was holding out hope that it wouldn't come to that."

"Hope's a useful thing," Caldwell remarked. "But right now we'd be better served to deal with our reality." Eyes narrowing pensively, he glanced outside to where Rodney was seated at a workstation, tracking the machine while Sheppard, Teyla and Ronon stood watching. "What exactly is this exogenesis device doing right now?"

Elizabeth stood and led Caldwell out of her office. She was about to put the question to Rodney when one of the duty techs tapped his earpiece, turned, and signaled her. "Dr. Weir, we just received a report from Dr. Anané at the Athosian camp."

Rodney's head snapped around. "What? What's he doing out there?"

The news surprised and concerned Elizabeth. Kwesi Anané and a handful of his fellow engineers had been on the mainland, helping the Athosians implement an irrigation system that he'd developed in his home country. She glanced at Teyla and Ronon. "The hydrology team didn't come back with you this morning?"

Ronon shrugged. "Most of them, yeah. But Anané said he had some tasks left."

That complicated matters further. Signaling to the tech to patch

them through, Elizabeth lifted a hand to her earpiece. "Dr. Anané, what's your status?"

"There is a peculiar cloud buildup occurring inland from the Athosian village," the Ghanaian engineer reported. "I have seen a similar formation only once before on this planet, and that was prior to the storm last year."

No further description was necessary. *That* storm occupied a singular place in the short history of the Atlantis expedition. "I can rig up a camera to show you," he continued, "but it will take a few minutes."

"Please do so, Kwesi. Thank you." Torn, Elizabeth met the gaze of her military advisor, who looked equally apprehensive. She'd already been reconsidering her decision regarding the Athosians. It seemed that, too often, Teyla's people had borne the brunt of problems brought about by the Earth team's actions. Despite Rodney's resolve, she'd contemplated rescinding the quarantine, and now with Kwesi still on the mainland—

"Getting back to my earlier question," Caldwell said, interrupting her thoughts. "Can you pinpoint exactly where this machine is now and how long we've got before we run into trouble?"

Rodney's fingers skipped across the keyboard in front of him to bring up a map of the mainland. "Carson's description of the exogenesis device suggests that, with no ZPM to provide power, the machine instead derives energy from the heat in the asthenosphere—the hot mantle beneath the planet's crust," he said. "Makes sense. It's a virtually limitless source of power and could easily sustain a planet-wide operation."

Caldwell arched an eyebrow. "What if we attempt to blow up the machine?"

"And here we go again with the standard military solution to every problem." Rodney's bearing clearly demonstrated his impatience with the *Daedalus*'s commander. "Need I remind you that this thing was built to direct a complete molecular restructuring of an entire world while powering itself from the radioactive decay that melts rocks? Somehow I don't think nuking it will help."

"You haven't answered my second question, Doctor." Caldwell replied levelly. "How long?"

"Where am I supposed to glean that information? I don't exactly have a wide range of experience with planets being terraformed." After a moment under Caldwell's impassive gaze, Rodney conceded, "Carson's one-week estimate may not have been completely off the mark. Although we've noticed some chemical and geophysical anomalies that could explain the formation of the storm, we haven't detected any change in the molecular structure of the surrounding rock, so it doesn't appear to have begun manufacturing nanites as yet."

Teyla's head snapped around, and her eyes bored into Elizabeth's. "Then by all means we should evacuate the Athosians," Elizabeth said firmly. "I think it's a risk worth taking." She anticipated an argument from Caldwell, but the Colonel nodded, while Teyla took a deep breath and bowed her head in gratitude.

"Dr. Weir," came Kwesi's voice over the radio, nearly shouting to overcome the increasing noise of the wind. "I'm sending the images now."

Rodney opened the file on his screen, and his jaw slackened. "Oh, boy."

Looking over his shoulder, Elizabeth was confronted with another terrible reality. The time stamp on the pictures showed that they had been taken thirty seconds apart, displaying the growing speed of the storm. Any rescue jumpers they sent might be able to land, but there would be little chance of evacuating the entire Athosian settlement before it struck.

"This is incredible," Kwesi shouted. "The winds are already approaching gale force. The Athosians are attempting to prepare—"

The signal abruptly cut off, leaving an agonizing silence in its wake. "Kwesi will know what to do," Rodney asserted. "Back in Ghana he designed the water distribution system for an entire group of villages and implemented it practically from scratch as part of his dissertation. He'll get them through it."

"Dr. Weir, I must be there."

Elizabeth shifted her gaze from Rodney to Teyla, whose expression had tightened. "I'll ask for volunteers to assist in evacuations, but as it stands, I'm not certain that any of you will even be able to land." Her eyes moved to John, knowing they all shared her thought. "We need to find a way to stop that machine. Soon."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Well, Rodney, what have we got?" Elizabeth's nose wrinkled in distaste as soon as she stepped into the room.

"Besides the overpowering stench of decaying sea life?" Rodney's eyes were watering, and he was certain that the tingling in his fingertips was due to an allergic reaction provoked by the weird orange gunk he'd had to fight through in order to set up an interface between his computer and that of the stasis unit. He stood and stared down at the marine-encrusted pod, now thankfully empty of its resident. "Judging by the Ancient design, this is obviously a portable stasis unit similar to the module we discovered with your"—he glanced at Elizabeth—"older self."

"Except it didn't operate quite the same way," Carson put in.

"Yes, Carson, I'm getting to that, and shouldn't you still be in a hospital bed or something? Or poking around the insides of our Ancient friend?" He gestured toward the glass window, behind which Atlas lay awaiting an autopsy.

Carson didn't reply, but instead stared at the pod as if he could divine something from it. The two armed guards at the door—only one door this time, a lesson they'd learned well from Phoebus and Thalen—moved aside to let Sheppard and Ronon enter the already cramped room.

"I've asked Carson to wait until we're absolutely certain that Atlas is in fact dead," Elizabeth said. When the doctor still didn't comment, she added, "SG-1 revived an Ancient in Antarctica after being frozen for what they estimated was several million years. Atlas may yet be able to provide us with some information."

Rodney felt a stab of panic. No matter how many nightmare scenarios his hyper-cautious mind could conjure up, there was always one more that *hadn't* occurred to him.

Apparently reading his expression, Elizabeth reassured him.

"We're keeping the body under twenty-four-hour guard."

"Oh, in that case, there's obviously nothing to worry about. Never mind the fact that this is an *Ancient* who had the brains to design planet-shaping devices. I'm sure a couple of Marines will be able to handle him just fine."

"Quit knocking my guys," Sheppard told him. "And remind me why you called us all here."

"According to the data log that I've been able to retrieve, it wasn't the removal from the jumper that damaged the pod. The avalanche ruptured the hull and flooded the compartment. In order to maintain the memory module, power was diverted from the stasis pod's life support, resulting in the occupant's death—well, presumable death." He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the body. "The memory module was the piece that snapped off during retrieval."

The lifeless panel now sat on the lab bench nearby, smooth and unblemished on one side, and encrusted with growth on the other. A year ago it would have been inconceivable to Rodney that the entire consciousness of an *Ancient* could be contained in the complex matrix. A year ago, however, he hadn't yet had the experience of being stored in a similar matrix inside a *Wraith Dart*. "Once power to it was severed, Atlas was effectively brain-dead."

Sheppard glanced away, looking uneasy. Rodney decided to head off the Colonel's train of thought immediately. "It wasn't anything our teams did. The module wasn't attached all that securely. It looks like it was intended to be removed and plugged in to a separate power unit, much like a USB port. Abysmal design, really. Something so critical should have been much more robust. Anyway, it's likely that Ea's pod was damaged in the same way. It was just...luck, I suppose, that the memory module remained connected to the main power supply long enough for her memory to be transferred to Carson."

Walking to the pod and glancing inside, Elizabeth said, "Radek speculated that, once the unit detected a viable atmosphere and nearby host, it acted in a manner similar to the *Cohall pods*."

Not a bad theory, Rodney admitted to himself, especially from someone whose head no doubt hurt like hell.

"That's nice," Sheppard responded, apparently channeling his earlier remorse into impatience. "How does it help us stop the exogenesis machine?"

"It doesn't. But like the *Cohall pods* it acted as the equivalent of a biological black box. Just before the power completely died in this stasis chamber"—Rodney typed a command into the computer—"I managed to extract some basic information from the matrix. Unfortunately nothing of Atlas's memory, which is what I was hoping for. It actually contains flight data information from the transport they took to escape back to Atlantis. The module must have been connected to the transport ship's main log at some point and later to the log of the jumper. I've written a basic decryption program, but so far all I've managed to decode is the raw data on various ship systems. Atlas and Ea were the only two passengers on their jumper. I may be able to get access to recordings of their conversations, but refining the decryption program that much could take more time than we've got."

"Perhaps something in the logs will jog Carson's memory," Elizabeth suggested.

Carson seemed to shrink back a little from the sudden scrutiny of the group. "I don't know," he said hesitantly. "I'm trying to remember more, but it's terribly confusing."

"I've got the program set up to work backward through the logs." The code scrolled rapidly across Rodney's screen. "The jumper's course suggests that they approached Atlantis and failed to gain entry through the city shield."

"We knew that much already," Sheppard pointed out.

"Yes. Give me a few minutes, would you please?" Rodney snapped back. "The heading of the jumpers and the time en route should give us a good idea of where the main transport ship was destroyed...there." The computer helpfully plotted the coordinates. "Anything, Carson?"

The doctor stared at the map on the screen, but shook his head.

“Okay, moving on. Back on the main transport now. Damage reports from the battle...boring. Casualty list by hour, both boring and unnecessarily depressing. Unless any of these names look familiar?” Rodney took Carson’s lack of response as a negative and turned fully back to the computer. “All right, now we’re getting somewhere. The navigational data from the transport suggests that its flight originated from a planet in this system. There’s a name—at least, I think that’s the planet’s name. Pol—”

“Polrusso!” All eyes went to Carson, suddenly pale and distant-looking. When Ronon’s hand flew to his weapon, Rodney wondered for a moment if maybe the Satedan hadn’t been wrong about Ea loitering around after all.

“Carson?” Elizabeth prompted. “Are you all right?”

“The planet, Polrusso,” replied the doctor slowly, with increasing assurance. “When she woke, part of Ea’s shock came from the realization that Atlas hadn’t had time to activate the exogenesis machine that they left behind there.”

The possibilities contained in that statement instantly sent Rodney’s mental processes into overdrive. For the first time in the current crisis, he felt a surge of hope. “Perfect,” he breathed. “That’s it. That’s our best shot.”

“What?” Ronon spoke up, still keeping a wary eye on Carson.

“If there’s a second machine on that planet, one that hasn’t been used, we could learn an immense amount from it. Best-case scenario: if we can recover that machine and bring it here, I might be able to configure it to counteract the one Ea programmed.”

“Is that really possible?” Elizabeth demanded.

“It should be mostly a matter of determining the order of chemical and biological processes. If one machine has the power to implement such massive change, the other will as well.” *Assuming the machine is still there and intact after ten thousand years.* Rodney kept that thought to himself, though he knew the rest of the group must have shared it. A slim chance was better than none, and slim chances seemed to be all that this galaxy ever offered.

“Do we know if this Polrusso has a Stargate?” Sheppard asked.

“Doc?”

In response, Carson held out his hand for Rodney’s datapad. Noting the glazed look in the physician’s eyes, Rodney balked. There was a lot of critical information on that pad, and if Carson wasn’t entirely himself...

“Give it to me,” Carson ordered with unusual intensity. “For God’s sake, man, I have seven symbols bouncing around in my brain, and if I forget one of them because you refuse me a writing implement—”

Never mind. Rodney thrust the datapad at him, and Carson wrote down the address. Ronon examined it, but after a moment he shook his head.

“All right, this is a start.” Elizabeth appeared to have regained some of her confidence. “I’ll brief Caldwell and get an update on *Daedalus*’s status. Colonel, get your team ready to go to Polrusso. Finding Atlas’s machine may be a long shot, but it’s all we have. Meanwhile, we’ll activate the city shield...and begin preparing for a possible evacuation.”

Sheppard gave a brisk nod. “Fifteen minutes,” he told Rodney and Ronon. “We need to nip this planetary version of ‘Extreme Makeover’ in the bud.”

Rising from her desk chair, Elizabeth rolled her shoulders in a vain attempt to loosen tense muscles. Colonel Caldwell had listened to her explanation of the current situation with little comment and had left quickly to check in with his ship. He clearly didn’t like relying on such shaky odds, but he understood that they had no real choice in the matter.

She stepped out of her office and crossed the walkway into the control room, finding Rodney and Carson in the middle of a heated conversation. Both were outfitted for the mission, which caught her off-guard. “Is this a good idea so soon, Carson?” she interrupted them.

“I think I’m uniquely qualified to self-diagnose,” Carson replied with a half-smile. When it failed to sway her, he continued in a

more solemn vein. "Ea's memories aren't fading the way I might have expected. Perhaps it's because she was an Ancient that they're so clear, but in any case, I think I may yet have some knowledge that could be important once we get to Polrusso." He glanced at Rodney, who had turned back to the computer.

A sudden thought struck Elizabeth. "Are you sure we can trust whatever information Ea left behind?"

"Just before she died, Ea made a conscious choice to heal me," Carson said. "I don't think she was a bad person, simply traumatized beyond her limits. I think she had reservations about what she'd done, or at least a part of her did. It's hard to say exactly what she most regretted, her actions on Atlantis or Polrusso...or perhaps it was something else entirely. I can't tell, and I...I really need to know." He started to say more, but paused, uncertain.

Aware that he hadn't answered her question, Elizabeth studied Carson's determined stance with concern. The doctor loathed going through the Stargate, and she felt certain his desire to do so now was driven by a misplaced sense of responsibility for Ea's actions. From the way he was talking, it also seemed that Ea's possession had impacted him somewhat differently than Phoebus's possession had her. While she'd known what Phoebus had planned and had been helpless to stop it, she hadn't had access to the pilot's memories. Recalling another SGC file, Elizabeth wondered if the effect on Carson might be more similar to Colonel Carter's encounter with the Tok'ra, Jolinar.

Before she could respond, however, Rodney's newfound exuberance figuratively trampled her. "Things are looking up," he announced, tapping his fingers against the computer screen. "The Ancient database indicates that ten thousand years ago, Polrusso was in the early stages of a sanctioned terraforming, with all the associated equipment that implies. Presumably the process is now complete. Even if we can't locate Atlas's experimental exogenesis machine right away, a collection of three or four ZPMs with even a small percentage of power opens up our options considerably."

"How's that?" John entered the control room, Ronon not far

behind. Like Rodney and Carson, they were mission-ready.

"Well, for one thing, it would buy us more shield time, which would be best used to search whatever records exist on Polrusso for the experimental machine or at least a blueprint of the thing."

"More time might help Atlantis, but not Teyla's people," Ronon pointed out.

"Right, so obviously it's not our first choice, but can everyone please cut me a little slack here? Considering what we have to work with, the idea that any additional ZPM power might be available is something we all ought to be turning cartwheels over."

Celebration was clearly not on Carson's mind, for he was frowning, seemingly lost in thought. "Were you going to say something else earlier, Carson?" Elizabeth pressed.

Troubled, the doctor shook his head. "I can't grasp the details, but something about the terraforming of Polrusso bothered Ea. I think it may have been associated with her feelings of guilt."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "After ten millennia, I hardly think we need to worry about whatever neighbors the Ancients may have ticked off."

"That's pretty much what we said before the super-Wraith took out Gall and Abrams," John reminded him quietly.

Rodney's haughty expression faltered.

"So we go prepared," Ronon said in his usual forthright fashion.

As prepared as possible, Elizabeth corrected mentally. There wasn't time for a proper survey of the planet or its possible inhabitants. As always, they'd simply have to do the best they could. "Good luck," she told the team. "Stay safe."

CHAPTER SIX

“This is what ten thousand years of terraforming buys you, huh?” Sheppard stepped out of the jumper. “A dark and stormy planet.”

“It’s not dark,” said Ronon, squinting against the bright sunlight. He took a few steps away from the jumper and looked around.

“And I doubt there’s been a storm here, ever.” McKay was smearing some sort of creamy white gunk across his neck and ears.

“Hey, I’m the guy who has to submit the reports,” retorted the Colonel. “Assuming I even get the chance to write this up, at least let me make it a little less boring than ‘We came, and we saw nothing but sand and sky.’”

For the first time since they’d boarded the jumper back on Atlantis, Dr. Beckett spoke up from the rear. “I’m told that SG-1’s reports are noted for their brevity.” He accepted the tube of gunk from McKay and began rubbing it across his face.

“I don’t get it,” Sheppard admitted, eyeing the barren landscape. “This doesn’t look like the kind of place you’d build by design.”

“Terraforming must have failed,” Ronon ventured. An aerial reconnaissance pass could have told them more, but McKay had wanted to land the moment they’d exited the Stargate, babbling something about ‘it’ being right here.

“Brilliant deduction, Watson,” muttered the scientist, nose now buried in his handheld scanner.

Ronon wondered what kind of insult ‘Watson’ was supposed to be. If McKay had planned to continue his derogatory remarks, he was interrupted by a pointed query from Sheppard. “Rodney? We’re on something of a time limit here.”

“What did you expect? A ZPM to just pop up from the ground and say, ‘Take me to your leader?’ I’m still determining its exact

location.”

Sheppard used the jumper’s remote to close the hatch and activate the cloak. The ship vanished from view but left an obvious indentation in the soft sand. “If a ZPM is still giving off power readings, why did the terraforming fail?”

“Could have been any number of factors.” McKay took a few steps toward the nearest dune. “As much as we make them out to be Holy Grails, ZPMs are simply power sources, nothing more. Whatever method the Ancients used to carry out their landscaping projects, it undoubtedly involved some form of computer, which itself may have malfunctioned or even been tampered with by Atlas and Ea in preparation for experimenting with their exogenesis machine.”

Three gazes slid toward Beckett, who looked doubtful. “I don’t know,” he confessed. “It might explain Ea’s deep reservations. But I can’t be sure.”

McKay ran his scanner across the face of the dune. “There’s definitely some sort of Ancient structure beneath this.” When he started up the sandy slope, Sheppard moved to take the lead. By unspoken agreement, Ronon waited until Beckett followed the others and then brought up the rear.

“The ZPM is about five kilometers away.” McKay managed to operate his equipment while negotiating the shifting sands, no small feat for a man who often got distracted enough to walk into tables.

“In which direction?” pressed the Colonel.

Sucking in a lungful of air and squinting against the sun, McKay declared, “Straight down.”

“Say *what*?” Sheppard turned to stare at the scientist.

“Just...hang on.” His breathing became more labored as they continued to climb.

“Maybe it didn’t fail,” Ronon suggested. “Maybe it was never switched on.”

“It was.” Beckett paused to pull his cap down, shading his eyes from the worst of the glare.

Ronon glanced ahead, wary. He knew the doctor was fully himself again, but the way the man's focus drifted each time he remembered something from Ea was just...not right.

"If you'd like some evidence to go along with that sixth sense," McKay panted, "look no further." He waved his scanner back in the direction they had come from. "Underneath that dune sea is a reservoir with enough water to fill"—he reached the top of the sand ridge and his eyes widened—"that."

The Colonel, several steps in from of him, had already let out a long whistle. "Man, it's like standing on Santa Monica Beach and looking out over the Pacific—except that someone pulled the plug."

"Or, more precisely, hasn't opened the tap yet," McKay corrected, wiping the sweat from his face with his sleeve. "Personally, I'd describe it more as standing on the edge of a vastly scaled-up version of Monument Valley."

Ronon had never given much thought to the landscape of any planet except insofar as he could use it to his tactical advantage. This, however, was a first. He didn't have any idea what a Santa Monica beach or a monument valley was, but it looked to him as though a whole chunk of the planet had been carved out, down to a depth of—

"Five kilometers," McKay declared, lifting his scanner in triumph. "Three miles for the metrically challenged, although the distance varies, of course, given the terrain." He pointed to a couple of dark rents in the ground several miles—or kilometers—below.

Although it made no sense to Ronon why two people from the same planet used different forms of measurement, he had quickly adapted his thinking to accommodate the inconsistency.

"That would explain the aquifer," McKay continued. "We're currently standing on the edge of the continental shelf, overlooking what will one day be an ocean."

"What's an aquifer?" Ronon wondered. He wasn't sure what a continental shelf was, either, but one thing at a time.

"Water that's retained underground. Actually, that's a bit over-

simplified, so maybe 'reservoir' would be a more accurate term. In any case, the terraforming process apparently excavated the surface for the necessary elements to create a breathable atmosphere and a substantial ocean, and dumped the leftovers"—McKay turned and pointed back the way they had come—"there."

Ronon pivoted around. From their elevated vantage point, he could now make out a chain of mountains in the distance.

The only one among the group who didn't express any surprise was Beckett. "As far as I can understand," he said, "there should be four or five of these massive subterranean oceans abutting equally large excavations."

"Why keep the water underground?" the Colonel asked.

"They must have planned to release it all at once." McKay pulled off his boot and poured out a stream of sand. "And then, *voilà*, instant hydrology cycle. It'd be staggeringly violent at first, massive storms and floods and the like, and the underground reservoirs would probably collapse as they're emptied. At the risk of repeating myself—which, I admit, seems necessary all too often—the dune sea would be inundated, thus becoming a continental shelf."

"What about the 'gate?" Ronon looked back down at the ring, all but dwarfed by the sheer scale of the dunes.

"It and the Ancient structure are sitting on a plug of solid basalt." McKay poked at the scanner's screen. "It would undoubtedly become an island, while the coastline of the mainland would be somewhere closer to those mountains."

"So we have a ZPM somewhere down there," Sheppard said, staring out over the cliff. "That's good to know, but finding the exogenesis machine is our first priority."

"And for that," McKay said, tapping his foot ineffectually on the apex of the dune, "we need to access this Ancient structure."

Ronon strained to look in all directions. "Don't see any buildings, Ancient or otherwise. Maybe there's another way in through the cliffs?"

"Do I try to do your job for you?" McKay snapped.

"It was just an idea." Ronon would have said more, but the

Colonel caught his eye.

"And a good one, at that." A faint smile crossed Beckett's face. "Try looking over the edge, Rodney."

For a few seconds, no one said anything, until McKay adjusted his scanner and frowned. "Huh."

"Care to elaborate?" Sheppard watched him intently.

McKay visibly brushed off his surprise at having been shown up. "There are several thousand life signs—human life signs—about two hundred meters to the left and fifty meters below us."

Not needing any further invitation, Ronon started down the dune, Sheppard right behind.

"Wait up—can't we fly there?" McKay whined.

"Two hundred meters?" Even Beckett sounded disbelieving.

"Plus the two hundred we've had to walk up this hill, then fifty meters down and back up again. And as you pointed out, time is a factor here."

"Then we'll make it a brisk walk," the Colonel called over his shoulder.

The narrow patch of ground at the bottom of the dune was more solid underfoot. A fine, crystalline substance coated the exposed surface. Taking a sample on his finger, Ronon tasted it and spat. "Salt." He cautiously made his way to the edge of the vertical face.

"Base jumper's paradise," Sheppard said, peering over with him. "Three miles straight down, huh? Sounds about right."

Looking left, Ronon couldn't see much because they were near a headland. To their right, the line of cliffs curved in and then out again until reaching another headland several miles away. "Nothing except rock." Heights didn't bother him, and he knew that as a pilot, Sheppard was equally unaffected, but they both were careful when easing back from the brittle precipice.

"This way." McKay turned left, unwrapping a food bar as he walked. "My advice is to keep well back from the edge. I wouldn't guarantee that the ground away from the basalt plug is entirely stable."

"Okay, everyone." Sheppard moved out ahead of him. "Just for a change, let's try not aggravating the locals."

Around a mouthful of food, McKay said, "I for one would be happy not having the Wraith popping out from behind every tree—ow!" Clutching at his jaw, the scientist shot a laser-edged glare at the offending power bar. "Are there nut shells in these things? That's just flat-out negligent."

"A tree would be nice right now." The Colonel put on a pair of sunglasses. "Maybe even a few decorative bushes here and there. Give us a little cover."

"God, I think I chipped a tooth." Still holding his jaw, McKay exchanged one scanner for another. "Has anyone noticed that the humidity around here is approximately zero? My eyeballs are already drying out."

Ronon didn't need McKay's instruments to tell him. The complete lack of moisture in the air was impossible to ignore. It wasn't all that hot, but the cloudless sky did nothing to soften the sun. Beckett tipped his head back and downed half his canteen, while McKay fumbled in his pack for something called eye drops.

Why anyone would want to drop something in their eyes was a mystery to Ronon, but he'd given up trying to understand the scientist's peculiar physical shortcomings.

"Well, lookee here." Sheppard increased his pace.

The sight that came into view was a total contrast to the desert. Fifty yards, or meters—couldn't they just pick one?—down from the top of the cliff, an entire village had been carved out of the pale stone. Below the dwellings was an escarpment divided into well-cultivated terraces and planted with what looked like grain and vegetable crops, even some fruit trees in the near distance.

"How are those able to grow?" Ronon wondered. Until now, he hadn't seen so much as a lichen.

"These people must be tapping into the water in the reservoirs, most likely via wells and subterranean irrigation systems." McKay had pulled a pair of binoculars from his pack and was examining the village. "The structures are built right into the cliff. They're similar

to those once used by a group of humans on Earth. Somewhere in the American Southwest, I think—”

“The Anasazi,” Sheppard supplied, lowering his own viewing device. “Doesn’t look like anybody’s home right now. Are you sure about those life signs, McKay?”

Checking his handheld unit again, McKay announced, “Except for one in that direction”—he motioned towards the dunes—“they’re mostly all inside.”

That had been bothering Ronon—the utter stillness of the place. It was unnerving, even from a distance. Fingering his weapon, he muttered, “Doesn’t feel right.”

McKay looked at him askance. “You spent seven years constantly looking over your shoulder for Wraith. What *would* feel right to you?”

“No, I hear you, Ronon.” The Colonel’s bearing changed slightly, his grip on his weapon also more secure. “Is it me, or has the wind picked up?”

With instincts born from seven years of running, Ronon turned to look behind them. The monochrome sky was now broken by a darker smudge on the horizon. Didn’t look like weapons were going to be much use this time. “It’s probably not you.”

Glancing back, Sheppard lifted his binoculars again, and his face went slack. “Sandstorm. *Not* good.”

“I, ah, take it we’re heading back to the jumper?” Beckett’s voice wavered, and he looked uncertain, as if another tattered memory was hovering just outside his reach.

The Colonel appeared to be sizing up their position and the speed of the storm. “No time. The sand’ll get to it before we could.” An assessment Ronon agreed with.

“And you’re basing that on something more scientific than your gut instinct, right?” McKay demanded.

“Are you really questioning my qualifications for desert ops?” Not waiting for a response, Sheppard turned back toward the cliff-dwellings. “Whoever lives there must have seen this coming and taken shelter. It’s closer than the jumper, so let’s get down there.”

They hurried along the cliff searching for a place to descend, breaking into a jog when a strong wind gust nearly toppled McKay. Without comment, Ronon took the scientist’s overloaded pack and slung it across his own shoulder, allowing them to move faster. He’d been in a sandstorm before and, based on the size of the rust-colored cloud bearing down on them, this was going to be... uncomfortable.

Ronon knew that he could have made it back to the ‘gate if he’d left the moment they’d spotted the storm. Sheppard would probably have made it, too, but neither McKay nor Beckett was in the same physical shape. These people had taken some getting used to, but they’d accepted him as a part of their team, and he’d stand by them.

Sheppard threw down his pack and hunted inside for rope. “I’ll find us an anchor point.”

Ronon narrowed his eyes against the expected airborne grit and sized up the cloud. It was hundreds of meters high and curled over at the top like a breaking wave. “Guess you were right about the dark and stormy part.”

If they couldn’t find a way down the cliff face, they were better off digging in well back from the edge, because visibility would soon be reduced to nothing.

A hiss drew his attention back to Sheppard, who’d jerked his hand back from the pack. Before Ronon could question, he felt a sting against his cheek.

“Ow! What the hell?” McKay instinctively ducked.

Squinting against the gusts, Ronon took a good look at the approaching storm. What he had at first assumed were darker patches in the cloud in fact had a distinctly reddish hue. “I don’t think that’s just sand.”

“Cover as much of your skin as possible!” Beckett pulled the sleeves of his jacket down over his hands, raising his voice over the wind. “There must be something caustic in the dust.”

Sheppard was still struggling with the rope, while the swirling clouds grew thicker around them. “There’s nothing I can secure the

rope to," he yelled. "I'm gonna try and anchor myself so you guys can climb down."

"Are you brain-dead?" McKay shouted back. "Do you *have* to try to kill yourself every damn day?"

"You got a better idea?"

Ronon pulled the collar of his coat up to shield his face. He didn't need to see his surroundings to know that there was no way out of this. On one side they faced a sheer drop of a hundred meters to the village, and on the other a deadly storm that was already starting to envelop them. Any action, even the Colonel's intended sacrifice, would come too late.

The one emotion Ronon allowed himself was anger. This was an utterly pointless way to die.

After Jumper One had vanished through the 'gate, Elizabeth barely found time to walk across the control room to her office before being called back.

"Dr. Anané has reestablished contact," the tech informed her. "He's managed to set up a video link."

"Patch it through," she said immediately, turning to the screen.

The picture was dimly lit and peppered by static, but Kwesi looked none the worse for wear. So far.

"Dr. Weir," he greeted. "With luck I will be able to keep this link operating."

"Good work. Halling, hello." The tall Athosian stood to the engineer's left, looking intently into the camera. "Kwesi, what can you tell us?"

"The wind has decreased somewhat," Kwesi reported, "and the most developed cloud mass is currently moving away from us, further up into the mountains. Here, let me show you." He moved out of the camera's view, speaking as he went. "I cannot be certain it will continue in that direction, though, as it is close to sunset and we are losing the light."

The image jerked before refocusing on the familiar landscape behind the Athosian camp—except that the mountains were now

crowded by the blackest, fastest moving clouds that Elizabeth had ever seen. Even through the narrow camera lens, the storm looked massive and quite terrifying. "Is the camp secure for the moment?"

"For the moment, yes," Kwesi replied, facing the camera once more. "My concern is the possibility of flash floods. Although the camp is situated well above the river, the cloud mass indicates that the mountains are receiving an extraordinary volume of rain."

"Halling, please gather your people and take them to higher ground," Elizabeth said. "This storm—it isn't natural, and we can't predict its course or its consequences."

Kwesi looked off-camera and nodded. "There is a sheltered position in a narrow gorge above the camp."

The Athosian stepped back into view again, his reserved demeanor clearly masking deep concern. "I see. May I speak to Teyla, Dr. Weir?"

"Teyla is on her way to you, bringing several jumpers to evacuate the Athosian settlement."

"Once again, we are grateful for your assistance." Halling's expression became difficult to read. The news of his leader's return seemed to placate him, but it hadn't diminished the magnitude of the danger. "May I ask why you believe that this is not a natural event?"

In Atlantis's control room, out of the camera's view, Colonel Caldwell gave her a warning glance. Elizabeth hesitated, conflicted. She certainly didn't think it prudent to explain that this storm was only just the beginning. The Athosians' rather pious view of Atlantis as the home of the Ancients might feed tales of angry spirits, first prompted by their encounter with an energy creature shortly after their arrival. At the same time, she felt that, too often in the past, she'd had to override Halling's concerns in favor of her own judgment. He, and his people, deserved more than a brush-off response.

"An Ancient device designed to terraform planets has been inadvertently triggered," she told him, keeping the explanation vague

but truthful. "We're not entirely certain, but we believe that the storms will be far in excess of what we have ever experienced."

Frowning, Halling glanced at Kwesi before asking, "Have you no way of stopping the device?"

"None that we've been able to determine," Elizabeth admitted. "However, Colonel Sheppard has taken a team off-world in the hope of recovering a second machine we believe should counteract the effects of the first."

There was a brief, strained pause, during which the distance between their two cultures seemed as wide as it had ever been. Then, with a bow of his head, Halling said, "Again, thank you for sending aid. I must go tell my people to prepare for the evacuation."

Watching the Athosians leave, Kwesi finally allowed Elizabeth to see his unbridled alarm. "A *terraforming* device?"

Elizabeth made a deliberate effort to maintain her composure, feeling like it was all she could do to manage the situation. With a nod, she asked, "Realistically, how feasible is a short-notice evacuation?"

"The main camp, where I have been working, is relatively safe for the time being. There are people at the mountain camp, however, and many more who are out hunting. They are several hours' walk from either camp. Young Jinto is one of those who are away."

Halling's only son. Elizabeth closed her eyes. As seemed so often to be the case, the nightmare was compounding.

"I worry about how long the jumpers will be able to stay in the air," Kwesi continued, holding his hand above the lens of the camera in a mostly futile attempt to keep it clear of rain. "There may not be time to reach all the Athosians. If a machine is creating this weather, it will only continue to worsen, will it not?"

"Not necessarily," she replied. "We're not entirely certain how the machine was programmed."

Optimism was a required element of diplomacy. Kwesi's expression suggested that it was less useful in his line of work.

The engineer had signed on to the Atlantis expedition fully aware of the unknown and potentially lethal risks involved. This was most assuredly an unknown, and she owed him the truth. "We have no way of predicting what's going to happen," she conceded. "However, I am confident that Colonel Sheppard and his team will recover the second device."

While she spoke, a Marine came into the control room and approached Colonel Caldwell. "Sir, we've hit a snag with the science teams. There are some disagreements about priorities in the evacuation procedures."

Kwesi's eyes went wide. "You are evacuating Atlantis?"

"We're exploring the possibility, as a precautionary measure only." On the edge of the screen, Elizabeth saw Halling walking back into the camera's range. Behind her, she heard several of her scientists coming into the room, already vocalizing their disputes. The Athosians couldn't be allowed to see this. Panic on the mainland was the last thing this situation needed. "Kwesi, we'll check in on an hourly schedule. Thank you for your efforts."

She ended the connection, granting herself a split second to feel the additional guilt of cutting him off before hardening her nerves for her role as personnel arbiter.

"Dr. Weir, the procedures have been completely shot to hell," Dr. Simpson protested, her voice carrying over the others. "By the book, all essential equipment from the labs should have been packed up by now. Instead, we're nowhere close, because half the Marines designated to assist are occupied with stripping the *Daedalus* and moving what they claim is *its* essential equipment to the Alpha site."

At Elizabeth's questioning look, Caldwell spread his hands. "It has to be done," he said simply. "Atlantis's evacuation procedures didn't take the *Daedalus* into account, and I'm sure you appreciate how critical much of her technology and supplies are."

Elizabeth couldn't fault his logic. The ripples caused by the recent loss of the *Prometheus* had reached the Pegasus Galaxy, and so it was understandable that his priority was to preserve as much

as possible from her sister ship.

"And we can't consolidate our equipment because Dr. Zelenka is refusing to allow prioritized computers to be removed while he's still working on his shield simulations." Eyes flashing in frustration, Simpson snapped, "This isn't an evacuation. It's a free-for-all!"

So their carefully crafted procedures, developed after last year's storm, were being rapidly defeated by yet another unexpected situation. Elizabeth fought the urge to kick something. Would *any* circumstance this expedition faced ever be predictable enough for a response plan?

"I thought Zelenka was assisting Hermiod with the hyperdrive." Caldwell's brows knitted.

"Dr. Zelenka thinks he can reduce the power needs for the shield, Colonel," Elizabeth replied. "He may be able to buy us more time before we have to abandon the city. He's also working on optimizing the program to decode the information Rodney downloaded from Atlas's stasis pod."

"Without a functioning hyperdrive we run the risk of marooning the entire group on the Alpha site, with no way back to Earth."

As if that thought hadn't occurred to her! Bristling slightly, she countered, "Any information that Dr. Zelenka can glean from the Ancient who designed this machine could be crucial to saving Atlantis. And if that's not possible, then configuring the city shield to operate at full strength without the ZPM will allow us all to leave here with both the crystal needed to dial Earth *and* the ZPM to power the 'gate on the Alpha site."

Caldwell's expression darkened, ready to argue his position further, but from within the pack of scientists, someone spoke up. "Ah... Hermiod believes that repairs will go faster if he's allowed to work alone and uninterrupted."

Elizabeth had never been entirely comfortable around Caldwell. In hindsight, that unsettled feeling might be explained by his having been an unwitting hostage to a Goa'uld. However, in the few short weeks since he had been liberated from the parasitic creature,

she had begun to think of the *Daedalus's* commander as a pragmatist. That judgment was borne out since, to his credit, Caldwell appeared willing to adjust his views when presented with a convincing argument. "All right," he said. "What do we need right now?"

The scientists, unfortunately, were less pragmatic, for they immediately interpreted the Colonel's response as an opportunity to petition for their individual needs. Five voices responded simultaneously, each pressing for wildly different actions. Lab-coated arms gesticulated as each determinedly shouted down the others. Noise levels in the control room quickly assumed the volume of a barroom brawl.

Elizabeth braced her hands on either side of the nearest console and drew in a steady breath before calling for everyone to calm down. When that didn't work, Caldwell did the same in an even louder voice. Unaccustomed to taking orders from the military, the scientists ignored him and, if anything, became even more animated and vocal.

Atlantis suddenly resembled a leaky rowboat, springing holes faster than Elizabeth could block them, while the passengers squabbled over whose baggage just had to be saved. Bringing a hand to the bridge of her nose, she closed her eyes and fervently hoped that John's team was faring better on Polrusso.

CHAPTER SEVEN

John hadn't been overstating his desert experience; he really did know what he was talking about. People who had flown a Pave Hawk helicopter through zero-visibility sand conditions and brought it back in one piece tended to think they'd seen it all. As usual, though, alien worlds didn't play by Earth rules. This wasn't like any sand he'd ever seen. This was granulated pain.

It didn't take long to make the connection. The storm seemed to be composed of two types of sand. Yellow grains were no more abrasive than what he'd encountered on Earth; it was the plumes of rust-colored stuff coming through in gusts that were doing the damage. A few grains settled into the folds of his sleeve and started to eat through the fabric before he managed to shake them off. Thankfully, his sunglasses offered some protection for his eyes, but the bulk of the storm hadn't reached them yet. When it did, their clothes would be wrecked in minutes, and their skin would be next.

"Here!" a woman's voice shouted, nearly swallowed up by the wind.

Since he hadn't brought any female team members on this mission, John risked lifting his head to locate the speaker. Through the dusky cloud, he caught sight of a robed, outstretched arm.

"This way. Quickly!"

Not needing to be told twice, John reached back toward Rodney's last known location. He came up with a fistful of his teammate's sleeve and pulled hard. "Come on! We're bugging out."

Ronon had been shielding himself and Beckett as best he could with his long leather coat. Now he ducked his head and yanked the doctor alongside to follow.

Barely visible only a few feet away, the woman's figure was

covered from head to toe in robes that seemed impervious to the windborne assault. *Bedouin Kevlar; huh?* John watched as she moved along a path that had been obscured in the reduced visibility. The path turned down, and the wind and scouring markedly dropped. He shoved Rodney ahead of him and ensured that Ronon and Beckett were right behind before following.

The woman led them under the cliff ledge and down to the village they'd observed from above. "Handy little passage," remarked Rodney, once he'd gotten his mild hyperventilation under control. "Once you know it's there, it wouldn't be hard to locate."

Up close, the buildings were even more impressive than they'd looked from a distance: solid, stable structures designed to withstand the scorching days and frigid nights that most deserts enjoyed. Openings for windows and doors were securely shuttered, presumably against the sandstorm, though a number of animals—medium-sized llama-type things—remained outside, looking unbothered. Half-built, half-carved out of the cliff face, the village might have been constructed ten decades or ten millennia ago.

The wide rock overhang now protected them from the worst of the storm. Still, they needed to find shelter before it really took over. The woman leading them moved swiftly, but without any kind of panic in her stride. John glanced up when the sky overhead darkened, and was relieved when their guide ushered them through a nearby entrance. She pulled the door closed behind them and the furious whistling immediately dulled.

They had entered a tall atrium that looked completely different on the inside than it had from the outside. The walls were painted with swirls of rich color, and large pots holding waxy-looking plants sat between stone benches painted in equally bright hues. The 'ceiling' of the atrium, about thirty feet away, glowed with a light similar to what they'd found in Atlantis. The proximity of the Ancient structure beneath the sand dune suggested a connection.

The woman removed her outer cloak, revealing a short-sleeved dress, featuring the same rich tones as the frescoes, and stylish jewelry accented with highly polished stones.

"The storm will pass, but it may take time." Her expression somewhat apologetic, she shook out her robe and hung it on a peg on the wall beside hundreds of similar cloak-draped pegs. "I hope you were not alarmed."

"Nah, no sweat." Behind him, John heard a snort that sounded like Ronon. Traitor. "But we really appreciate you taking us in. I'm Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard. My friends here are Dr. Rodney McKay, Specialist Ronon Dex, and Dr. Carson Beckett." He gingerly brushed a hand through his hair, hoping to shake out the firebrands that had stung his neck and scalp.

"I am Shira. You are welcome in my village."

Rid of the heavy robes, Shira was slight, with dark, intelligent eyes and a chestnut braid that hung well past her shoulders. If John had run into her on Earth, he would have pegged her for an attractive forty-ish, but he didn't have the first clue how long a year lasted on this planet.

"We do not often receive unexpected visitors." She took several stiff-haired brushes from another row of hooks behind the door and handed one to each of them.

"I can't imagine why not," Rodney said, though his sarcasm was tempered by appreciation for her efforts. He pulled off his jacket and carefully shook it out.

Shira didn't appear to take offense. Instead, she began brushing off Rodney's back. "These storms give little warning. Few people traveling through the Stargate when the red sands blow have a chance to return home. You need not fear the yellow sands," she pointed out when Rodney jerked away from Ronon shaking his dreadlocks. "They will not burn you."

"Yeah, about that." Elizabeth's first-contact guidelines, which John had promptly nicknamed Diplomacy for Dummies, didn't really recommend peppering their savior with questions right off the bat, but they were on a tight schedule. Besides, he was pretty damned curious about this whole setup. "Why did you risk getting caught in the storm to help us? And how is it that your clothes weren't"—his skin still felt a sunburn-like tingle in

places, and he stuck a finger through a newly-formed hole in his sleeve—"damaged?"

"We are less susceptible." Shira turned to Carson next. Unselfconscious, she kneeled and dusted off a few reddish grains from his boots. Before he could object, she had already shifted her attention to John. "Having lived with it for so many generations, we have become tolerant to it. Our children are more at risk, and we do still require some protection. The outer garments you see here"—finishing her task, she looked across at the rows of cloaks—"and many of our possessions are made from plants and animal hides that readily endure the storms. However, our skin will withstand much more than that of any off-worlder."

"I'm a doctor." Carson tentatively reached out a hand. "A healer and scientist. Would you mind if I—?"

With an understanding smile, Shira held out her bare arm for him to examine. Now that John thought about it, her olive skin did look a little tougher than the average human's. It didn't noticeably affect her overall appearance, however.

As Beckett studied her arm, Ronon's gaze fixed on the wide, intricate bracelet that she wore. "I've seen that before," he said when John shot him a quizzical look. "Not that exact one, but jewelry like it. I've heard about these people."

Rodney, who was still patting himself down for red dust, spun toward him. "Is there some legitimate reason that prevented you from mentioning that fact earlier?"

The Satedan shrugged, unmoved by the other man's indignation. "I never said I knew the name or the 'gate address. I just remember hearing some tales. A planet with dangerous storms, people returning either badly scarred or not at all. With the sand, it makes sense."

"Yes, hindsight is terribly accurate that way, isn't it?"

"Give him a break, Rodney. He couldn't have known." John turned back to Shira. "Anyway, we're—"

"I know who you are." She looked unspeakably pleased. "Your ship tells me that the Ancestors have at last returned to Atlantis!"

Well, that was a curveball. Sort of.

"You saw us arrive?" Rodney spluttered. "And didn't think to warn us sooner?"

"We're not the Ancestors," John hurried to say, tossing him a warning look. Hadn't McKay read the chapter on Not Pissing Off the Indigenous Population? "We traveled to Atlantis as explorers, but the city was destroyed by the Wraith." The lie came more easily each time he repeated it. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, but if a lie might keep his expedition alive, that was all he needed to know.

Shira's face clouded, and her smile faltered. "Oh! Such a tragedy." She led them across the atrium. "We have extensive records of Atlantis here. Although many of us have lived in hope that the Ancestors would one day return, an equal number believe their home had indeed been lost to the Wraith."

"The Wraith can be kind of infuriating that way."

"Still, you must be of Ancestor blood." She opened a door at the far end of the room and stepped through into a wide corridor whose walls were covered in more colorful designs. "Only they could operate the ships."

Despite being relatively isolated, these people had a surprisingly decent grasp of all things Ancient. Hopefully that meant finding Atlas's machine wouldn't be too difficult. "We're descendants of the Ancestors, more or less," John answered. The slight pressure change that popped his ears signaled that they'd just gone through a huge airlock of sorts. "Some of us call them Ancients, and we're trying to learn more about them."

Nodding sagely, Shira closed the door behind them. "To answer your question," she told Rodney, "I was collecting salt from the great pans when I heard the 'gate. I climbed the nearest dune in time to see you arrive and assumed you would make for the village. Instead you went to the cliffs. I hurried to you when I realized what would happen."

"You might think about posting warnings," Rodney griped, already examining a row of Ancient lettering on the nearest wall.

"We have, many times, but the shifting sands soon carry them away." A few paces along the corridor, Shira opened another door, this one with distinctive Ancient patterns etched on its smooth surface, and held out a welcoming hand to her visitors. "This is my home."

It was similar to the atrium, except that it had a definite lived-in feel, like an old-fashioned country kitchen. The walls were lined with shelves and copper pots and pans, and on the floor sat baskets of vegetables and grains. A long stone table stood in the middle of the room. Stacked at the far end were a collection of platters, one with a small paring knife and fruit scraps carelessly falling off the edge. Strewn elsewhere on the table were a collection of books and writing implements and mugs half-filled with water.

With an embarrassed shrug, Shira moved to clear the table. "I was not expecting guests. Please, sit, and I will bring you refreshments."

Spotting the imminent objection in Rodney's stance, John shot the scientist a warning glare. The urgency of their mission notwithstanding, in his experience, making friends with people generally got you a lot further than barging in and demanding things.

Shira began collecting the books when a bunch of small children darted in from an adjoining room. Giggling, two pushed between Rodney's legs, making him jump. "Where did they come from?" he demanded.

"Two are mine." Shira sent a scolding look at the oldest child and motioned to the dishes. She then handed the boy what were undoubtedly his schoolbooks and added, "The others are from the village."

Rodney glanced through the doorway. "These buildings are interconnected?"

"The entire community is joined. Were it not so, we would be shut inside our homes more often than we are free. The storms are frequent, and their length cannot be predicted."

"Then by all means, let's see the rest of the village." Rodney was starting to look edgy, and it couldn't solely be due to his focus

on locating the exogenesis machine. When John cast a puzzled glance in his direction, the scientist said defensively, "Do I need to start a list of all the things that are bugging me right now? Acid sand, enclosed spaces...kids..."

"Tetchy," Beckett said under his breath.

John shook his head and gave Shira a smile. "We'd love a tour, if it's not too much trouble."

"Of course, I understand." Facing her children, she gently admonished them, "Finish your work *before* play. And do not leave scraps of food lying around. I'll be back in a few minutes."

The entire structure of the village bore a definite similarity to the layout of Atlantis. The attached dwellings resembled medium-sized apartments connected by wide hallways. These periodically opened out into larger communal areas, some of which, if the cloaks on pegs were any indication, led outside. The levels didn't stack neatly on top of each other, but instead were offset, depending on how far into the cliff they extended. John still couldn't tell if the light originated from the 'ceilings,' but it seemed the most likely explanation, even though most of the walls were made of the same type of stone as the cliff face.

For the inhabitants, life appeared to be going on as normal, in spite of the sandstorm raging outside. People milled around, talking to each other and corralling energetic children. Several markets were doing a brisk business, and an appealing array of smells wafted from a noisy line of food stalls. The whole place had a bazaar-type feel to it, something that Teyla would have appreciated.

For a moment, John's thoughts turned to his absent teammate. He hoped she was doing okay in that monster of a storm back home.

No one paid the visitors any mind except to proffer courteous smiles, and everyone looked reasonably attired, healthy and content.

"Dress aside, they're a bit like the Athosians, aren't they?" Beckett remarked. "Lovely folk."

Ronon seemed to share the sentiment. Although he still showed

the perennial air of alertness that John appreciated, the Satedan definitely seemed to be loosening up a little.

"The Elders govern the village," Shira explained as they walked. "They will be most interested to meet you."

"So status is based on age?" John asked.

"Oh, no—the people choose who shall serve on the council. They are called Elders simply because children are not permitted to govern, although of course we seek the thoughts of all before important decisions are made."

Rodney reacted with surprise. "That sounds remarkably...civilized."

Nothing was wrong here—and that felt wrong. So far Polrusso was shaping up to be the most well-adjusted society they'd yet encountered, complete with dirty dishes and kids shirking homework. No abuse of power, no conflict of beliefs, no apparent servitude. John felt a little unsettled by all this normalcy, which was a sure sign that he had a really weird job.

As if on cue, the sound of muffled sobbing reached him, and he stopped to glance into the open doorway of another chamber. A distraught woman was sitting on a bench by the door, knees drawn up to her chest, rocking back and forth. As she wept, two other women comforted her.

When John looked to Shira for an explanation, her face was grave. "She lost her daughter a short time ago," she told them. "The child was barely old enough to walk."

"Poor lass," murmured Beckett.

Immediately John felt like a jerk for looking so hard for a flaw in this place. No matter how peaceful things looked here, accidents could still happen. Children could still die, and life could still be unjust. That was a universal constant.

"This is the council chamber." Shira led them through another open doorway. Inside, at a conference table of distinctly Ancient design, sat a group of four men and three women engaged in an animated discussion about something that sounded like crop rotation. They looked up at the team's arrival.

An eighth man with curly red hair and one badly pockmarked cheek entered from a nearby room. He was carrying a metal tray with an earthenware jug and collection of cups. "Ah! Shira," he declared, looking curiously at the newcomers.

"I bid you greeting, Elders," Shira said. "These travelers carry the blood of the Ancestors. They have seen Atlantis and can operate its vessels, having arrived here in one such ship!"

With obvious interest, the Elders quickly stood and came around the table while John introduced himself and his team.

"I am Vené, leader of the council," said the redhead, smiling broadly. "The heirs of the Ancestors are most welcome among us. Please"—he placed the tray on the table, ducked back into the other room and returned with additional cups—"please, this is wonderful! You must join us for tea."

"We appreciate that," John replied, shooting Rodney a preemptive glare. Ten minutes over tea could save them hours of searching, and there wasn't much else they could do while the storm continued outside.

"If you will excuse me," said Shira, "I should return to my children. No doubt they have already forgotten my instructions to finish their schoolwork."

Vené set down the mugs and grasped her hands. "I thank you for bringing the travelers here."

"So do we," John added, matching the Elder's sincerity. "Very much."

Bowing her head briefly in response, Shira stepped back from the group and left the room.

"It sounds like your people know a lot about the Ancestors." John wasn't sure where to begin. He glanced around the walls of the chamber, noting that they were decorated just as colorfully as the rest of the village. The semi-abstract jumble of blues and greens appeared to depict a rainforest environment that stood in sharp contrast with the desert world outside.

While Vené ground a few tea leaves into the bottom of each cup, another Elder held out a five-legged chair for Carson. "Most

off-worlders find our dry air enervating. Sit and tell us of your travels."

Carson looked pleased at the prospect. "Thank you," he replied, easing off his pack. "I wouldn't mind a cup of tea."

"Yes, and I wouldn't mind knowing how you get your water," McKay added, making a beeline for the bookshelves along one wall.

"Give them a chance to at least say hello, Rodney," John rebuked, tossing an apologetic smile at Vené while he removed his own pack.

"That's perfectly all right, Colonel," the Elder replied, pouring the beverage. The lack of servants or even aides was, to John's mind, singularly refreshing. "We understand what it is to be curious, a quality we encourage in our children. It is only by asking questions that one can gain knowledge."

Meanwhile a second Elder had lifted a large binder from a bookshelf behind her, and began filing away the papers on the table. The documents were written in Ancient, and the diagrams confirmed John's first impression that the Elders had been talking about agriculture. It made a pleasant change from meeting leaders in the midst of devising battle plans, defensive strategies, or tactics to subjugate an unhappy populace.

"Our people have always kept careful histories," Vené continued. "It is our obligation to those who have gone before and those who will follow us. When the Ancestors were here, they contributed to our histories as well."

"So you know that they were working on a project to transform the climate of this planet," Rodney said, ever direct.

John winced, wondering if these people even knew about the terraforming process, but Vené replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "We have little understanding of the mechanisms they used, but the Ancestors did explain what was to occur. One day, water would flow like sands and fall from a sky turned white with billowing moisture. The abyss below"—he nodded in what presumably was the direction of the cliff—"would be filled to the brim with oceans,

and life would thrive within, while the land would become a beautiful place where plants could grow and creatures roam."

Rodney removed his pack in order to retrieve his notebook, and sat down at the table. He began scribbling notes as the Elder talked.

With a wistful smile, Vené handed Carson a cup. "I have been off-world—not often, but I have seen such things as this. As have you, no doubt."

The doctor smiled and took a sip of his tea. "This really is quite good." His eyebrows lifted approvingly. "Thank you."

Ronon, who had remained standing, accepted a cup from another Elder and downed the contents in a few gulps, while Rodney, prudent as always when it came to matters involving his personal wellbeing, elected to wait until the brew had cooled.

"You don't know the specifics," John said. "But are there any records detailing what you *do* know?" He, too, took a cautious sip of tea and was surprised at its sweet, fruity flavor.

In response, Vené moved to one of the many shelves lining the walls. He contemplated the array of books for a long moment before selecting a slim volume. Placing it on the table before Rodney, he sat down and explained, "It is a children's schoolbook. We can show you books and documents with more detailed accounts, of course, but I think you will find this offers the most concise explanation."

Rodney looked dubious at first, but when Vené leaned across, opened the first page, and pointed to a diagram, the scientist was immediately engrossed. "Okay, this makes sense," he said absently, turning the pages with care. "As expected, in the first stage the atmosphere was created from elements in the planet's crust. Then hundreds of technicians were brought in to assist in the second stage, the robotic mining of preexistent smaller canyons to produce hydrogen and oxygen molecules—thus, water. Experience suggested that the best way to store all the water was in the vast landmasses, where chemical leaching ensured rapid salination, until the final stage when it would be released to form oceans."

"But that hasn't happened," Ronon pointed out.

Before Rodney could get started on his usual rant about obvious statements being the root of all evil, the female Elder who'd spoken earlier answered. "Our histories tell us that after the process had begun, two Ancestors, Atlas and Ea, came with a team to Polrusso to test a new method of faster transformation. The device they brought was called an exogenesis machine."

Hope flared in Rodney's eyes. "And you've just said the magic words." He pushed the book aside.

Just once, John wished Rodney would be a little less free with information. While these people seemed a decent bunch, he saw no reason to lay all of their cards on the table.

Vené's reply held only resigned acceptance. "We have believed for some time now that their research altered the original process."

The hope in Rodney's eyes shifted into incipient panic, and John understood why. If Atlas had triggered his second machine after all, odds were that it was beyond recovery. Like the one on Atlantis.

"Whether it was deliberate or not," Vené continued, "such an action of theirs can be the only explanation for why conditions such as the caustic red sand granules still exist. The Ancestors' records are very clear about the time span of the process. Based on the terraforming procedures used on other planets, Polrusso should have been completed generations ago."

"You've known that for years, and yet you've remained here, waiting all this time for a better world that might never come?" Carson asked.

With a small smile, Vené said, "Our world is our own; it is what we have known all our lives. As difficult a place as it may seem to you, it is not so bleak in our eyes. Still, we would like to see the process completed, so that our children may live on the planet of which our forebears dreamed."

Maybe they couldn't recover Atlas's machine, but with access to an original Ancient terraforming computer John felt confident

that Rodney would be able to figure out something. "If we could take a look inside the building where the process was being controlled, we might be able to help your people."

Latching on to the idea, Rodney became reanimated. He turned his attention back to the book and flicked through the pages.

"We have tried in the past to enter the Ancestors' control facility. It is surrounded by an invisible wall that none can penetrate." Then it was Vené's turn to look hopeful. "But of course! You arrived in an Ancestor's ship." He sat up straighter and examined John intently. "You would help us?"

"We could at least take a look."

The energy in the room altered abruptly, and the Elders went off on a conversational tangent exploring the possibilities. Rodney, on the other hand, had gone unnaturally still. It was so out of character that Carson's query was edged with concern. "Rodney? What is it?" He leaned across to examine the open book.

Eyebrows lifting toward his hairline, Rodney mouthed something that looked like *twelve*, while his finger tapped manically against the page.

"Twelve what?" Ronon asked, also stepping forward to see.

John counted it a good thing that the Elders were otherwise occupied, because the avarice radiating from Rodney was downright embarrassing. "If this is correct..." The scientist looked up and stared at John with saucer eyes. "They have *twelve* ZPMs, none of which is more than ten thousand years old!"

Carson almost choked on his tea. John was getting a bit of a head rush himself, but in purely a good way. If Rodney was right, their options had... well, considerably expanded.

One Elder was pulling folders from a shelf, while the others talked about priority evacuation plans. "Whoa, whoa!" John pushed his chair back and stood. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. First we need to take a look at this place."

"Yes, of course. I'll take you there immediately." Vené rushed to his feet and all but ran around the table.

"It would be wonderful if you could do this for us." The female

Elder, whose name John hadn't caught, added in a more cautious voice, "We have not encountered a people willing to perform a service without payment."

Applying his Scottish charm, Carson replied reassuringly, "My colleague and I are scientists." He lifted his pack and pulled it on. "Such things are of great interest to us."

Nodding approvingly, the Elder walked them to the door. "Gathering knowledge for its own sake is a worthy pursuit—something that I keep impressing upon my students. If nothing else, your being here will set a fine example for them."

Rodney had never been all that interested in architecture, but he'd already noted the use of Ancient-made metals and composites in the ceilings and doors. A few minutes into the group's walk through the village, decorated stone walls gave way to sleek gray corridors that closely resembled those of Atlantis. The laboratory couldn't be far.

According to Vené, the main facility had once been accessible from the top of the cliff—no doubt the structure Rodney had detected beneath that enormous mound of sand that they'd climbed on arrival. He was certain that half of the stuff was still inside his boots. Which raised an interesting point. The yellow sand was annoying, especially since it had worked its way into his socks, but it wasn't harmful. Presumably the rusty hue associated with the coarser granules was due to a highly acidic mineral, because oxidization alone could not be responsible for the burning.

"We'll need to get a sample of that red sand," he said to Carson. Its properties might also explain why his scanner had been unable to provide more detailed information on the Ancient building. The shield that surrounded the main lab unquestionably interfered with the signal, but the energy field couldn't account for everything.

Nodding absently, Carson replied, "I remember this place." At Rodney's look he amended, "You know what I mean. This was an Ancient outpost where their scientists monitored the planetary shaping and performed continuing research." He glanced around

at the numerous doorways that lined the passage. "These were the living quarters for hundreds of technicians, most of whom were human."

"We believe we are descended from the people of which you speak. The buildings were extended by carving into the nearby cliffs." Vené stared at Carson curiously. "How is it that you 'remember' such things?"

From the back of the group, Sheppard spoke up. "It's not exactly a memory."

"Aye," Carson added quickly. "It's something that I...saw."

Vené's expression shifted. "Ah! I have heard of such places. A room where an Ancestor stands on a podium and speaks of things past?"

Smiling weakly, Carson replied, "Something like that."

Rodney lengthened his stride, anxious to save time. He still didn't completely trust Carson's one-week estimate of Atlantis's situation. That aside, the prospect of securing as many as twelve ZPMs had provided an injection of adrenaline to his system that no amount of caffeine could match. His mind was already racing several steps ahead, exploring myriad possibilities.

Sheppard steered the conversation to a less ambiguous topic. "Vené, have your people settled elsewhere on the planet over the last ten thousand years?"

"Many communities have been established across Polrusso, all nestled within cliff faces. The eleven largest villages have been built around smaller laboratories where we believe the power modules to drive the terraforming are kept—the ZPMs, as you call them."

Which instantly rendered Rodney's budding plan inoperable. Or maybe not. "You do realize, of course, that once the water is released—"

"These areas, indeed, all of our homes, will be washed away, yes. Over the last ten generations, each village has built an entirely new settlement with extensive food and water storage facilities inland from their current location. This food and water is frequently

replenished, but we cannot live there for any period of time, for we must plant new crops each season and we can only access the underground water from the cliff settlements. According to the Ancestors' maps, once the great flood begins, these new areas, which are on basement rock, will remain safe during the subsequent months of weather changes. At that point we will be able to plant the seeds we have acquired from other worlds to grow crops suitable to the newly generated climate."

Okay, that was promising. "How long would it take you to move there?"

"According to the texts, we should be alerted two weeks in advance of the release of all water. However, as we believe that there is something wrong with the machine, we fear that if—when—the time comes, we will be given little if any forewarning. Consequently, we have developed plans for immediate evacuation and methods of rapid communication between villages. If one area begins to collapse, we hope that, even if those villagers cannot save themselves, their warning will allow others to flee." Vené's voice became troubled. "It is not easy to live this way. Each dawn I wonder if this will be the day. And if so, will we have sufficient warning to escape with our lives?"

"Must be tough, in addition to coping with the Wraith and all," said Sheppard.

Beside Rodney, Vené's step faltered. He quickly recovered and kept moving. But if Rodney had noticed, there was no way Sheppard had missed it.

"Especially since they've become pretty active of late," the Colonel continued.

The Polrusson Elder was distinctly uncomfortable as he searched for a way to answer. A pause came and went before Ronon said, "One of the tales I heard was that this planet hosts a Wraith hive ship."

This time it was Rodney's turn to stumble. He wheeled on the Satedan. "Don't try to tell me you couldn't have mentioned *that* earlier."

"Does it change anything right now?"

"Other than my blood pressure?"

Ronon's look said something along the lines of *my point exactly*. The man appeared to delight in pushing Rodney's buttons, a hobby for which he seemed to have an unusual aptitude.

Their team leader didn't look thrilled, either. "Vené?" Sheppard asked, his tone pointed.

"Your friend speaks the truth," admitted the Elder, his voice heavy with regret. "We had hoped to conceal it from our trading partners and especially from you. It was when the Wraith came that Atlas and the other Ancestors abandoned our world."

"Well, we're not going anywhere just yet," Sheppard assured him. "But it's good to know these things so we can be prepared."

Apparently dealing with a berserker terraforming machine wasn't enough fun for the week. No, they had to run into some Wraith as well. Nobody could say the Pegasus Galaxy didn't have a sense of humor.

When the laboratory entrance came into view Rodney pushed his various thoughts of doom aside. Because the design so closely resembled many of the devices they'd found on Atlantis, it didn't take long for him to locate the control panel for the force field. "I'll just be a minute here," he told the others. "Feel free to keep discussing the minor problem of having life-sucking monsters in residence."

Taking Rodney up on his suggestion, Sheppard turned to Vené. "I have to say I'm a little surprised that your people have done so well."

"That is only because the hive ship appears not to have fully woken."

"Do you know where this ship is?"

Which was enough to make Rodney lose his grip on one of the crystals. Scrambling to recover it, he swung around to face the Colonel and demanded, "Tell me you're not contemplating—"

"No, Rodney, I'm not quite as dumb as I look," Sheppard replied with a tight smile. "Just curious. How about you get back

to work?"

Rodney was absolutely certain that he could feel Ronon's smirk behind his back, but resisted the urge to comment. The sooner he could get them into this lab, the sooner they could find out what he needed to know—and make a strategic withdrawal before Sheppard went into hero mode.

"Nabu and his minions live in the great abyss that will one day become the deepest part of our oceans," Vené explained.

Small mercies. At least this Wraith already had a name, so Sheppard couldn't tag him with 'Steve' or 'Bob.'

"Although most of their kind still sleep, Nabu and some of his dreaded horde often emerge to wreak havoc on our villages. They defile young women and steal children from their beds."

"That poor lass we saw on the way to the council chambers," Carson said with a flash of insight. "Although we've never heard of the Wraith specifically targeting young children before. If anything, they seem to leave them alone in favor of adults."

"Yeah, but we'd never seen humans worship Wraith before that pleasant little outing with Ford a few months ago, either," Sheppard reminded him. "Different hives don't always follow the same MO."

Still focused on his efforts to disable the force field, Rodney was listening with half an ear. He agreed that it didn't make a lot of sense for Wraith to go out on kidnapping sprees, and assaulting women certainly was a new and ugly twist, but he'd long since given up on expecting things in this galaxy to make sense.

"Nabu is the bane of our existence." Vené's voice had adopted the same bitter tone that Rodney had heard on too many planets. "He only raids the villages during the sandstorms. Some among our people suspect that he controls the storms, or has otherwise caused the terraforming machine to fail."

Although this was an unlikely stretch, it seemed only human to draw a cause-and-effect relationship between bad things happening and the Wraith. Hell, there were days when Rodney considered blaming the lack of butterscotch pudding in the mess hall on the

damnable creatures. After all, it was the Wraith's fault that Atlantis now played host to considerably more Marines, and Marines tended to eat a *lot*.

Resetting the final crystal, Rodney watched in satisfaction when the bluish shimmer of the force field winked out. "And we're in," he announced with an exaggerated sweep of his hand toward the door. Ronon rolled his eyes, but Sheppard gave him a quick nod of acknowledgement. Vené gasped in elation.

The lab's expansive interior bore a striking and unsurprising resemblance to the main labs on Atlantis. Clearly Vené had never seen such a place before. He stood stock-still about two meters inside the doorway, awed and doubtless intimidated by the array of exotic technology.

Rodney set to work on a rapid catalogue of the lab's contents, trusting that Carson could locate the exogenesis machine—assuming it was still here. Finding Atlas's experimental device would obviously be the jackpot, but until informed otherwise Rodney was working under the assumption that it had been used to interfere with Polrusso's terraforming. Given what they knew of the Ancient Council on Atlantis, Atlas had most likely hidden that fact from the Council. Yet one more aspect about the Ancients that Rodney found less than admirable.

For now, he would focus his efforts on determining how to shut down Polrusso's terraforming machine. The implications of obtaining twelve ZPMs for the defense of both Atlantis and Earth were, in short, phenomenal.

Okay, maybe not twelve ZPMs. No reason to be greedy. The Polrussons could probably do with one to power a decent shield that would deal with a necessarily abrupt climate change. And perhaps a second ZPM as a backup. But Rodney had no doubt that the Polrussons' gratitude would assure him of securing, say, eight or nine. Even six would provide sufficient power to implement a scheme that, until now, even he had considered impossible.

The lab had been well sealed from the sandstorms; after sitting idle for ten millennia all the equipment was nearly pristine, although

none of it was powering up in the way that Atlantis had. Of course, Janus and the time-traveling Elizabeth had prepared Atlantis for the team's arrival. Here, Rodney would almost certainly be required to use his gene to initiate the necessary equipment.

Crossing the room to the main database computer, a considerably smaller version than the Atlantis model, he laid his hand against the touch pad. After a moment, the bottom third of the screen lit, displaying a single line of text—the Ancient equivalent of a command prompt. That was a start. Atlantis's computing team had developed a standard set of instructions for initializing equipment found in the city. He'd memorized the complete file months ago.

"Hey, Rodney." Sheppard was moving around the room, eyes scanning a set of storage shelves. "If we managed to reboot the terraforming machine on this planet, the ocean would fill, right?"

He really didn't have time to teach Terraforming 101, but Sheppard would no doubt keep asking until he got an answer, so Rodney decided to humor him. "Gravity isn't just a good idea, it's the law," he replied distractedly, tapping out line after line on the Ancient keyboard. "The reservoirs, like the one I noted on the way in, would be released almost instantly and empty into the lowest point of land."

"Which is the basin where this hive ship is probably buried."

The man had a point. "The ship would be flooded within a couple of hours." Rodney glanced over his shoulder at the Colonel, who raised an eyebrow. "There'd be no way they could all awaken and escape."

"It'd sure be a nice fringe benefit."

"This is possible?" Vené sounded almost afraid to hope. "We can rid our world of the Wraith?"

"Perhaps. Theoretically." When the computer came to life, Rodney allowed himself a moment to enjoy his success before starting a preliminary scan of the database. "First I'd have to get a grasp on how the original terraforming process works. Of course, I'm still hoping to run across Atlas's machine, since it would come

in really, really handy about now. But there's a lot of data here, so I may be able to pull enough useful information out of it to make this work for all of us."

"Go ahead and take notes, or do whatever you need to do," Sheppard told him. "We'll finish up the treasure hunt."

"Treasure hunt?" Vené asked.

"We consider anything new to be treasure, scientifically speaking," Carson explained.

While Ronon and Vené moved into the next room, a storage area, Rodney set up his laptop on a high bench and connected it to the Ancient computer.

Some time later, he heard the Colonel ask quietly, "Got anything?"

He looked up, about to reply, and realized the question had been directed at Carson.

Leaning forward, both arms propped on a nearby bench, the doctor sighed. "No. I can see this entire facility in my mind. I even know what some of the equipment was designed to do. But I can't reach in and find the one piece of information that we need."

"It's okay. Rodney'll figure something out, even if we can't find the exogenesis machine." Sheppard turned. "Won't you?"

"Sure. Well, maybe. At the very least, I think we can solve the Polrussons' problem, and that ought to get us closer to solving our own."

"You have a problem on your world?" Vené inquired, walking back inside.

Swiveling around in his chair, Rodney replied, "Well, of course we've—"

"Got a problem with the Wraith, just like everyone." Sheppard fired a warning look in Rodney's direction. "We're hoping that any technology we find can aid us in that."

"You've had some success?" Vené's whole bearing took on a hopeful air.

"We've done okay," Sheppard replied.

Deciding that he was better off concentrating on the task at

hand, Rodney turned back to his computer. "I need to compare this with some of the records back"—he almost said 'on Atlantis.' Reason number four hundred and sixty-one why he would never have made a good secret agent—"home. And if Radek's done malingering in the infirmary, he can make himself useful crunching numbers." He selected the relevant files and began downloading them onto his laptop.

Wearily lifting himself off the chair, Carson said, "I'm ever so sorry, Colonel. But I'm absolutely certain that it's not here."

"Of what do you speak?" Vené asked.

"We thought that if the exogenesis machine was in this lab," Rodney replied, "we could discount it interfering with the original terraforming program. That would have made my life considerably simpler, because then I could have pinpointed your problem more readily." Which, he thought rather proudly, was an accurate rendition of the truth.

"That's it," he declared when the download was complete. "The Ancient computer here doesn't have the data required to achieve what I need in a reasonable time frame. But even without Atlas's machine, I think I may have an alternative solution." With Sheppard's warning fresh in his mind, Rodney knew better than to elaborate.

"Can we get back to the 'gate yet?" Ronon asked. He studied a large window, but nothing was visible through the pane except unmoving sand. "How do you know when the storm has passed?"

Vené stepped to the door. "We can return to the village and find out."

Moving to follow, Sheppard passed by a small panel mounted on the wall. Immediately it flashed, and a previously unnoticed door slid open, spilling bright, natural light into the room—along with a tremendous cascade of sand.

"Aaahh!" Rodney dived under the lab bench, instinctively hugging the laptop to his chest to protect it against the expected onslaught. When it didn't come, he slowly climbed to his feet, seeing others do the same. To his relief, he noted that the sand was

pale yellow.

Looking guilty, Sheppard came up out of his crouch. "On the plus side, we know the storm's over," he offered lamely.

Rodney glared at him. "Your ATA gene needs a leash."

"I didn't even know the door was there. It's not like I opened it on purpose."

"All the more reason!"

Making his way over drifts of the apparently benign sand, Ronon walked through the airlock and looked out. As usual, the Satedan summed it up succinctly. "Back door."

The team moved to join him, and Rodney couldn't repress a satisfied "Aha!" at seeing his earlier suspicions confirmed. All of fifteen meters away were the Stargate and DHD. Beside the latter rose a bizarrely shaped sand drift that had blown up against the currently invisible jumper.

Sheppard turned to Vené with a broad smile. "Guess we'll be taking the shortcut."

"You will return?" the Elder asked urgently, his eyes wide as he stared at the strangely lumped sand.

"We will. And soon."

"You have no idea how much this will mean to my people," Vené declared, accompanying them into the open. "This gives us tangible hope that some of our youngest generation might live to see our world as it was meant to be."

Outside, Sheppard pulled the remote from his pocket and pointed it in the direction of the weird sand drifts. The jumper materialized, prompting Vené to clasp his hands together in wonder.

"Glad to be of help," said the Colonel in a matter-of-fact voice. "Keep an eye out for us in case another storm blows up."

"On that count, we need to find a way to open and close this door." Rodney clambered over the mounds of sand at the entrance. The air was just as dry and the sun just as relentless as they had been prior to the storm.

"Perhaps it's automatic," Carson suggested. He squatted beside a patch of reddish-colored grains that had collected near

the jumper and carefully scooped some into a tube bearing a biohazard symbol.

Sheppard motioned for everyone to back away from the airlock. The inner door closed immediately. The outer doors followed suit a few moments later, slowing when they encountered the drifts of sand. When he approached the entrance again, both doors reopened.

That settled, Rodney gave a perfunctory farewell to Vené, leaving Sheppard to fill in any remaining diplomatic niceties while he stepped into the jumper. The storm had ended none too soon for Atlantis's sake, and further exposure to the unrelenting sun would exacerbate the wasp-sting sand burns on his face and neck.

"Wonder how Teyla's doing," Sheppard said, heading up the ramp.

"With any luck, she isn't getting blown into the land of ruby slippers and the Lollipop Guild." Rodney did worry about her. If the environment they'd faced on this planet was harsh, the one their teammate had willingly entered was magnitudes worse.

Seated beside Teyla in Jumper Three, Lieutenant Corletti said, "Jumper Five, tell me what you've got up there."

"A hell of a lot of convective activity, ma'am," reported Sergeant Smithson, dispatched to fly weather reconnaissance. "Vertical development on those clouds is twenty thousand feet, easy. Some other storm cells are starting to pop up, too, mostly around the poles. Doesn't make sense—the biggest storms are forming over the land. Give us a minute to get a better look at the weather over the Athosians."

Corletti glanced at Teyla and slid her hand forward on Jumper Three's power console. "Let's drop the hammer, boys and girls," she instructed the two jumpers flanking theirs.

Thanks to the jumper's inertial dampeners, Teyla experienced no sense of acceleration, but the speed readout began to increase. She returned her gaze to the windshield, already sheeted with rain. Ahead of them, she could only distinguish the horizon because of

the huge expanse of darkness that enveloped the sky. "I have not sufficiently thanked you for your willingness to make this flight," she said to her pilot. "You were the first to volunteer, were you not?"

"I've got a big family," Corletti replied by way of explanation. "If I knew they were in trouble this bad, I'd pull a gun on someone to get there."

Teyla wished her relationship with her people could be so clearly defined. She was their leader, and yet so often she could not be among them. In making the choice to live and travel with the Earth team, she had acted to help the suddenly displaced Athosians as best she could. At the same time, she could not fault them if they sometimes doubted her sense of duty.

In truth, she felt duty-bound to both groups. When she had been preparing to brave the storm, Dr. McKay had at first tried to dissuade her. At Colonel Sheppard's subtle urging, the scientist had yielded and eventually given her a brusque but sincere wish of luck. Ronon had even offered to accompany her, but the journey was her responsibility. The expression on the Colonel's face just as he'd turned to leave had spoken clearly enough. He understood better than most the difficulty of divided responsibilities and loyalties.

The jumper bucked then, jostling her into the bulkhead.

"Yikes. It takes an awful lot to exceed the inertial dampeners' capabilities." Her mouth set in a hard line, Corletti made a quick adjustment to the controls and toggled her radio again. "How about that update, Smitty?"

"Ma'am, the worst of the storm looks to be heading away from the camps, further inland," Smithson said. "It doesn't seem to be losing strength, though."

When Jumper Three was again buffeted, nearly knocking them out of their seats, Corletti bit back a curse. "Roger that," she muttered. "Colonel, are you still on the line?"

"Right here," Caldwell's voice replied from Atlantis. "How much daylight have you got left, Lieutenant?"

"Almost none, sir."

"Then I suggest waiting until morning to effect evacuations. It'll give the Athosians time to gather everyone and assemble in the best possible locations for extraction."

Though it was not her place to object, Teyla could not be silent. "By morning, Colonel, the situation may have changed considerably. The storm may be unpredictable, but I believe we can be assured that the situation will only worsen."

"That is by no means a certainty," Caldwell argued. "The fact is, no one really knows what this machine will do. Even its creators never knew, because it was never tested."

Her rebuttal was cut off when the jumper tilted dizzily, dumping her onto the floor.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," Corletti hissed, keeping her seat only by tightly gripping the armrests. "Everybody still hanging together?"

"Sort of, ma'am," came Smithson's answer. The sergeant sounded as though he'd had the breath knocked out of him. "I'm okay, but Donnelly just bit through his lip during the last bump, and he's bleeding pretty much all over the deck. Few stitches should deal with it okay."

"And it'll only be worse with the jumpers full of passengers." Over the radio, Dr. Weir's voice was resigned.

"We have to recall them," announced Colonel Caldwell. "Our resources are already divided between the city evacuation and the *Daedalus* repairs, and if they fly into that mess, we're only going to lose people."

In the pause that followed, Teyla heard her hopes slip away. She was not surprised when Dr. Weir said softly, "I'm sorry, Teyla. Jumpers, return to base."

The latest blast of wind shear rocked them violently, and Teyla barely managed to regain her seat. She heard static in her earpiece, but the view outside the windshield drew her focus. Seeing a rain-blurred area of green and brown beyond the gray, she made one final attempt. "Dr. Weir, Jumper Three has the mainland in sight."

We request permission to continue.”

She looked over at Corletti, prepared to apologize for speaking for the both of them. But the Marine made no objection, concentrating on performing a stable descent.

The response from Atlantis was garbled. Their ship was tossed hard, its nose pitching up to near vertical before slamming back down. “Crap, I’m losing it!” Corletti’s hands flew over the controls, but the planet’s surface suddenly loomed ever larger in front of them. “Oh, God... Hang on. We’re going in!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“The jumpers should have arrived by now,” Halling yelled above the noise. They had erected tenting across a narrow gorge, little more than a cutting in the side of the cliff, and so were protected from the worst of the wind and the rain. But outside—Halling did not need Dr. Weir to confirm that this storm was not natural.

Droplets of water falling from his nose and chin, the engineer, Kwesi, leaned in close to speak into his ear. “If Dr. Weir said they were on their way, they will get here.”

“I do not doubt Dr. Weir’s word, or the pilots’ intent.” Halling moved to the entrance and, ignoring the wind and rain that pounded his face, looked up at the sky before replying. “But it has been too long. Perhaps they were forced to turn back. I should have left sooner to bring the others down from the mountains.”

When they had first come to the mainland, his people’s priority had been to learn what this world had to offer by way of new food crops and animals, medicinal plants, and spices that they could use both for themselves and for trading. Although Teyla’s presence had been sorely missed, their explorations had been filled with the excitement of discovery. After establishing a base, they had then set up outlying hunting camps, including one up in the mountains, on the shore of a lake. There, the waters contained plentiful fish, reeds suitable for making rope grew along the banks, and the shores were thick with an excellent clay for making pots, something in which Jinto had expressed interest. For that reason, and believing that it was safe, Halling had encouraged his son to spend time up in the mountain camp.

“Jinto will be all right,” Kwesi assured him, motioning for him to come back under cover. “They have sturdy shelter and their camp is on high ground, well above the lake’s shoreline.”

Reluctant to turn away from the mountains and his son, Halling replied, "Perhaps, but they do not know the nature of this storm. If the jumpers do come, we have a better chance if we are together." He pushed rain-soaked hair from his face and shook the water from his jacket. "When we came to Atlantis, many of my people feared that the Ancestors did not wish us to trespass on their sacred home. While we are very grateful to you for helping us, perhaps this is a further warning that we should have settled elsewhere."

"I do not believe that to be true. On Earth, my own people have suffered much tragedy through the generations, but through it all, their spirit has remained strong." Kwesi squeezed his arm reassuringly. "Almost as strong as the Athosians. We will get through this together, but you must have faith."

"It is not my faith that concerns me. Those in the other camps and out hunting may suspect that this storm is not normal, but they cannot know that it will worsen, nor that they must make their way here. Can you promise me that, should the jumpers arrive, the pilots will go up into *that* and bring back my son?" He pointed to the maelstrom of lightning and clouds that swirled like an enraged beast around the mountaintops.

Any reply Kwesi might have given him was drowned out by a tremendous noise that momentarily cut through the howling wind and rain. The ground beneath their feet trembled, prompting Halling to step further outside and seek the origin of the sound. It was not an earthquake; of that he was certain, for he had been on many worlds where such things were common.

Ignoring the rain, others now joined him. Was it the river, perhaps? Slogging across the churned-up mud beneath his feet, Halling moved out even further, away from the limited protection of the cliff and into the full fury of the wind and rain, hoping to see if the expected floodwaters had reached the main campsite. It was not something that he relished, on the contrary, but he needed affirmation.

Kwesi, too, had thought to check on the river. Walking just ahead of Halling, the engineer stopped and peered down at his feet,

then abruptly turned to face him. In the harsh storm light, the man's dark skin was pallid, and his eyes grew wide with terror. "Run!" Kwesi took an urgent step towards Halling, grabbed his arms and shook them for emphasis. "Go as fast as your feet will carry you. Take nothing! Flee to the other side of river!"

"What?" Had they not come here to *escape* the rising waters? But Kwesi had already rushed back under the shelter, calling for everyone who was still there to leave. Following him, Halling yelled, "Why?"

Inside, Kwesi gathered together the items he'd used to communicate with Dr. Weir, shouting for people to hurry. Halling did not understand. They were already on high ground, well above the level of even the worst floods. He knew this because he had seen the marks on the riverbanks, and had always respected such signs. "Why?" he repeated. "What's wrong?"

Around them, people were staring at each other in confusion, reluctant to leave what little shelter the cutting provided. It was dangerous outside, not simply because of the river, but because wind gusts had already knocked over trees, and branches were flying everywhere.

"The clay!" Kwesi snatched up his bag, grabbed a fistful of Halling's jacket, and pulled him across to the wall of the gorge. While a few bushes and weedy plants clung tenaciously to the almost vertical face, patches of damp earth were visible in places. Some water dribbled down, but for the most part, it was far drier than outside. Using his fingers, Kwesi scooped a handful of the clay into his palm. "Too much water!" he shouted above the noise of the storm.

Though Halling still had yet to see why that was a problem, Kwesi's distress was enough to hold his attention and that of the others who had now gathered around them. The engineer manipulated the clay between his fingers, pounding and squeezing it. Without warning, it liquefied and flowed from his hands.

Although he did not understand how this could be, Halling instantly understood the implications. Rushing outside, he looked

up at the huge mountain looming over them and was struck by a terrible sense of dread. He grabbed up the nearest child, thrust her into her father's arms, and yelled, "Everyone must go down and cross the river—*now!*"

Teyla staggered to her feet, trying to find order inside the confusion of the puddle jumper. The machine had rolled and, as far as she could ascertain in the dark, flipped over upon landing. It now rested at an unidentifiable angle to...what? The bottom of the ocean? It had been dusk when they had gone in, and the ship was still shifting periodically, as if caught in a wayward current. Perhaps they were still sinking.

A jagged flash illuminated the interior of the jumper. It was almost immediately followed by a second bolt of...lightning! Relief swept through her. They had reached dry land, which meant that they could not be too far from the camp. Testing her com, she was not surprised to hear nothing but static.

The pain above her ear and the throbbing at the back of her eyes were indications that she had been rendered unconscious, although she had no idea for how long. "Lieutenant?" she called.

The next lightning flash confirmed that they had indeed landed upside down. Of Lieutenant Corletti she could see no sign. Teyla took a step—and froze when the jumper slid backward nearly its own length before coming to a jarring stop. She glanced at the windshield and saw nothing but violently thrashing branches. Their landing site, if it could be called that, did not feel at all stable.

"Lieutenant Corletti?" Another sharp ribbon of light allowed her to look into the back of the shuttle, and she quickly located the Marine's form sprawled up against the rear hatch. A pang of remorse struck Teyla. Had it not been for her insistence in continuing to the mainland, the young woman would not have been injured—or worse.

Although the jumper continued to shudder in the gusts, it seemed to have settled in position by the time Teyla cautiously made her way to the Marine. The flashes of stark white light were almost

continuous now, showing all too clearly the lieutenant's grimace of pain. "Lieutenant?"

A soft moan was followed by colorful string of expletives. "My shoulder. It's dislocated."

"You are certain?"

"Oh, yeah. Not the first time." Biting her lip, Corletti brought her right hand across her chest to brace her shoulder before easing into a sitting position.

Having treated similar conditions in the past, Teyla said, "I can help, if you would allow me." The sooner it was set, the easier it would be and the faster it would heal.

"Where are we?" The pilot peered out through the cockpit. "Hell of a storm. At least we landed in one piece—more or less—instead of ditching in the ocean." In the ragged light her grin became a wince, but she added, "You know what to do? I'm pretty sure it's an anterior."

Finding a suitable location for first aid in the upended shuttle took several minutes. Eventually, Teyla braced the woman against the chairs and rotated her arm with decisive force. Corletti clenched her jaw, giving only a brief, wordless cry when her shoulder locked into position with an audible 'click'.

Battling the obvious pain, the lieutenant hissed a series of short breaths through her teeth. "Oh...man," she said finally. "Feels better already—thanks."

"Are you certain that is your only injury?" The Marine's words of gratitude contradicted her pale features.

Corletti frowned at Teyla. "I figure I'm probably doing better than you. Your face is caked in blood."

"It is a scalp wound, nothing more. I have tried to call Atlantis," Teyla continued. "Perhaps the jumper's radio?"

"Doubt it." Allowing herself to be helped up, Corletti reached for the control panel and endeavored to power up the jumper. "Must have busted something when we hit, which makes us the luckiest people in the Pegasus Galaxy. I would have thought that anything violent enough to damage a jumper would have turned

the contents into Spam.”

“Spam?”

Pulling out a panel, Corletti replied, “You don’t want to know—on either count.”

Teyla used the light from her weapon to locate the medical kit. The lieutenant was favoring her left arm, and although the shoulder appeared to be in place, Teyla suspected there was additional damage. “Your arm needs to be strapped.”

“Just a sec.” Corletti managed to activate the HUD. “Oh, crap... Well, it could be worse. We could have gone right over the edge.”

It took Teyla a moment to interpret the inverted display, but it seemed they had landed atop the uneven cliff directly behind the main camp. A careless movement might send them plunging to the ground. With no inertial dampeners to cushion the fall, it could prove to be fatal.

Under normal circumstances it would have been prudent to stay with the jumper, but Teyla knew only too well that a rescue was out of the question, at least until her teammates returned from off-world with a machine that might or might not exist. And while she had every confidence in Rodney’s ability to operate such a device, it would take time. “Most of my people would have taken refuge in the gorge below us.”

“How far below?”

“Perhaps two hundred feet.”

“Okay.” Corletti fastened her with a determined smile. “We have rappelling equipment stowed in the back.”

“Your shoulder—”

“Is fine. It was a dislocation, not a break. Like I said, it’s happened before. Nothing to get excited about.” Corletti was already moving to the rear of the jumper.

Perhaps the Marine was being truthful on one level, but Teyla knew that the injury would be a hindrance. “I believe it is best if I climb down to the ground and locate a suitable anchor point.” She found her pack and pulled it on, then crouched by the hatch, prepared for the onslaught.

Corletti opened the hatch. “Don’t climb back up. I’ll throw down—”

The howling wind tore the words away before they had fully left her mouth. Teyla had expected rain and wind, of course, but the water’s impact on her face was like a million tiny punches, making it almost impossible to draw breath. The violent wind slammed her back into the bulkhead. Even the sound was like a physical force.

Ignoring the fierce pain of shredded twigs and branches slapping against her, Teyla lunged across the jumper and hit the mechanism to close the hatch, for Corletti had lost her grip and also been flung back. When the jumper was once more sealed and some order reestablished, she looked back to see the lieutenant. The woman’s dark hair was plastered back off her dripping face, and she was clinging to the bulkhead that divided the two sections of the jumper. Only inches from her face, one end of a splintered branch had speared deeply into a supply kit.

Eyeing the near-deadly missile, Corletti spat out a mouthful of water and said, “Okay, let’s rethink that. As much as I like shish kebabs, I really don’t want to end up as one—*whoa*, what was that?”

The jumper abruptly slipped another short distance, but that did not concern Teyla so much as the blast of noise that reverberated through the hull.

Halling waited until everyone was clear of the shelter and making their way back down to the main camp before following. He understood that some of his people would be injured in the ferocious storm, but he also knew that the consequences of remaining under the shelter of the mountain would be catastrophic.

“We must keep going,” he declared. “Move as if the Wraith were in pursuit!” Through the flashes in the sky he could see people fall and slip in the mud, but none were left behind. By the time they had all reached the outskirts of the main camp, two ominous cracking sounds had come from higher up in the mountains. He looked back but saw nothing. The storm had eased for a time, which, though it

made for a smoother journey, provided them with less light.

At the main camp several hunting parties ran to greet them, wanting to know what was happening. Kwesi gesticulated wildly and pointed back the way they had come. When he motioned toward the river and headed in that direction, several people made as if to return to their tents.

"No! We must stay together," Halling told them, looking around for those who had been up at the lakeside camp. "Has anyone seen Jinto?"

"No one from the mountains has returned," replied a new arrival. "Perhaps we should stay here and wait?"

Kwesi's normally soft voice broke through the discussion. "Listen to me! We must cross the river and take shelter in the caves on the far side. Staying here is dangerous. Look!"

As a group, they turned and peered into the darkness. It took several moments, but the next series of lightning strikes confirmed what Halling had feared. Beyond the next valley, the entire face of two mountains had sheared away. He could not see what had become of the earth, but there was no doubt that it filled the valley beneath, cutting off the path to the lakeside camp. Any hope of going in search of Jinto was now lost.

The despair that gripped Halling was like none he had ever known, not even when he'd seen his wife taken by the Wraith. Losing her had been devastating, but they had lived under that danger all their lives. To abandon Jinto in a storm—

Cries and shouts of warning pulled him from his shock. Someone tugged at his sleeve, and he blinked away his momentary paralysis. His duty now lay with those still within his reach. "Make for the bridge!" he called unnecessarily. He would find another way of reaching Jinto, but to do so he had to stay alive.

Ahead of him, people had reached the section where the path narrowed through the trees and were beginning to cluster together. Halling was alarmed by a new sound, one familiar to them all. Now that the wind had lessened, he could hear the gushing of the swollen river. The roar grew louder with every step. Branches slapped

his face, and several times he stopped to help children who had slipped and fallen. At the next bend, the sound of water became a roar, and people stopped moving. Someone was urging them to go back the way they had come.

Halling made his way though the group. "...don't have any choice!" he heard Kwesi declare.

"We barely made it across," replied one of the hunters who had spent the day on the far side of the river. "Uprooted trees have smashed into the embankment on both sides. Some of the places where the bridge is fastened are dangerously unstable. If anyone attempts to cross now, I believe it will break." The man shifted a brace of animals to his other shoulder.

The sense of desperation Halling had been fighting off now engulfed him, smothering his ability to think clearly. He was not a leader of his people. Not for the first time, he felt Teyla's absence deeply, and he suffered a momentary flash of resentment. The Wraith would come as they always had, and the arrival of people from Earth would not change that inevitable fact, no matter what Teyla hoped. She should have remained with her own people. She should be here to lead them.

"The risks of staying here are greater," Kwesi urged.

A particularly bright lightning strike seized everyone's attention. A deafening roar of thunder and another, more explosive crack followed. Halling saw a long, narrow rent, as if a large knife had slashed a horizontal wound, high up along the face of the mountain directly behind the camp. The rain in his eyes and temporary darkness combined to disguise the motion, but the next flare of storm light revealed a far greater rift, as if the gash were opening. But this was no mere injury. Like a monster stalking them in the darkness, the slipping mountainside was captured in a series of still images momentarily frozen in position by successive flashes. Each terrifying glimpse revealed that the avalanche was headed towards the camp—and them.

On the next bolt, an involuntary cry tore from his throat. Mixed up among the cascade of earth and uprooted trees and boulders

was a lifeless-looking puddle jumper. The awful realization turned Halling's stomach. Teyla had indeed come for them, but her ship had crashed on this most terrible of nights and was now being carried along by the torn mountain as if it were nothing more than a speck of dust.

Kwesi was the first to pull everyone from their morbid fascination, screaming through the rain that they must run for the bridge. Someone slammed into Halling's shoulder, bringing him swiftly back to the situation at hand. There was nothing he could do to help Teyla and anyone else who might be in the jumper.

Breaking into a run, Halling caught up with the others sprinting through the bushes. He now had his first glimpse of the river, swollen and churning at a great speed. Branches and darker objects, perhaps unfortunate animals, were being swept along. Among the noise, he heard Kwesi's voice, then spotted the engineer directing people onto the bridge. It appeared intact, despite the great tangle of trees that had rammed up against both banks. Many of the supporting ropes had broken, causing the bridge to sway, but it was nevertheless negotiable.

"You go across!" Halling urged Kwesi. The engineer shook his head and helped a pregnant woman take her first steps. "Go! Help Ansi across and head for the caves. You have the radio—you must inform Dr. Weir of what has happened."

Two-thirds of the way across, another supporting rope snapped, and the bridge sagged until it dipped into the savage waters. Gripping Ansi close, Kwesi shouted for everyone to space out more evenly. On the far side, people were scrambling up a path that led to solid rock and the shallow caves. There, though exposed to wind and rain, Halling knew they would at least be safe from avalanches.

On the bridge, yet another rope snapped. Halling could not be certain through the rain and flashes of lightning, but five or six people appeared to slip and fall into the tumultuous river. They were carried from view before anyone could react. Others clung to the ropes, their feet dangling in the water, while hands reached

out to pull them to safety. Those on the far side, including Kwesi, pointed back the way they had come. Halling could not hear their voices, but their faces twisted into awful screams.

Halling looked over his shoulder. Again, it took moments for the lightning strikes to illuminate the area, but when they did so, a vise clutched his heart. It appeared as if the crumbling mountain had swallowed a section of the permanent camp. Part of his mind registered the fact that there was no longer any sign of the jumper.

Those negotiating the bridge—now little more than a few ropes and dangling planks—somehow managed to increase their speed, but then the last rope snapped, tossing many into the water. He rushed to the embankment, grabbing at hands and pulling people ashore, thankful to see that most had clung on and made it to the far side.

His thanks were short-lived, though. In another moment, he and all of those remaining on this side of the river would be overwhelmed by the disintegrating mountain. In those few brief seconds remaining to him, Halling decided that at least this would be a more merciful death than that which he would have suffered at the hands of the Wraith.

The rumbling grew so loud he could no longer hear the river. He stood quietly, waiting, and said a silent farewell to Jinto.

Elizabeth leaned on the railing of the gallery and watched the jumper emerge from the wormhole. Through the windshield she could see John's boyish grin, while Rodney was gesturing excitedly. "Welcome back, Jumper One," she called through her com. "Can I take it from your expressions that you've located Atlas's second machine?"

"Not exactly, but we may be able to go one better," replied the Colonel. "I'll let Rodney explain." The ship ascended from the control room floor to the jumper bay overhead, and Elizabeth left to go up and meet them, hoping that their news was better than hers.

The team had already disembarked by the time she reached the

bay. Her hope took an immediate hit when she found them mostly empty-handed and sporting what seemed to be varying degrees of sunburn. Upon closer examination, she noticed that their uniforms were also rather the worse for wear and Ronon's coat appeared to have been attacked by some truly ferocious moths. "Gentlemen." She stared pointedly at the container in Carson's hands. "That doesn't look like what we were hoping for."

"This?" Carson lifted the vial. "Oh, no, on the contrary. Whatever this stuff is, it's quite dangerous." His gaze took in the others. "I want to see all of you in the infirmary as soon as you've gotten cleaned up and made your report to Dr. Weir. I'm sorry to be in such a rush," he added, moving past Elizabeth, "but I really need to get working on this."

"Oh, and my time is somehow less valuable?" Rodney brandished his laptop. "I've only got a planet-wide transformation to halt, but yes, by all means, let's spend a few minutes to confirm that none of us is getting the sniffles from the killer sand."

His atypical reaction set Elizabeth back a step. If Rodney, who was pathologically conscientious about his welfare, felt he had higher priorities than a post-mission exam, that was a weighty statement indeed.

"I'm sure you can keep your computer open while you turn your head and cough," John assured him dryly, starting the group in motion toward the doors. Addressing Elizabeth, he asked, "How's the evacuation of the Athosians going?"

As much as she hated being the bearer of bad news, Elizabeth had gotten a depressing amount of practice at it. "We've lost contact with Dr. Anané at the Athosian camp. Conditions deteriorated rapidly, and we had to recall the jumpers. Teyla and Lieutenant Corletti were unable to return. Based on their last known position, we presume their jumper crashed on the mainland."

Both John and Ronon froze at that, their expressions going carefully blank at almost the same moment. Their disparate backgrounds notwithstanding, it seemed the two men had similar traits, at least when it came to their concern for a teammate and their

desire not to make that concern obvious to others.

"Corletti's good," John said resolutely. "If they were anywhere near land, she put it down all right."

"And Teyla can take care of herself," added Ronon.

Neither sounded fully confident.

"I believe you're both right," Elizabeth said, leading them down the stairs. "Unfortunately, there's no way we can start search-and-rescue operations right now." For John, who had SAR in his blood, she knew this was a particularly galling choice, but she also knew he would understand. "The other jumpers just barely managed to make it back ahead of the storm. We've had to power up the city shield in order to prevent damage to Atlantis."

One of the large windows came into view, illustrating the magnitude of the storm and the glow of the shield. Rodney's pace slowed. "Tell me you're not operating it at full strength," he demanded. "Tell me somebody had the brains to—"

"Of course," Elizabeth reassured him. "Radek is still fine-tuning the optimization, but he's certain he can keep power usage to a minimum."

When they reached the briefing room they were joined by Caldwell, who acknowledged the team's return with a nod.

"Good. Conservation and protection are our new goals in life," Rodney said, taking a seat and setting his laptop down on the polished table. "We need to safeguard every nut and bolt in the city if we're going to have any chance at what I have in mind. I'm going to pull Radek off his shield project. In fact, all work needs to stop, because I need everyone's undivided attention."

"With the exception of the *Daedalus* repairs," Caldwell corrected.

"No. When I say 'all work,' I mean *without* exception." Rodney ignored the impending objection from the ship's commander and pushed ahead. "We may be able to get the star drive operational and turn Atlantis back into a space ship."

His announcement was met with stunned silence. Elizabeth felt a rush of the same excitement that had accompanied her first steps

into the city, nearly two years ago. Biting her lip in an effort to contain a smile, she sat forward. "Are you serious?"

Looking faintly smug at their reactions, Rodney continued. "I'll admit that I didn't completely believe it was possible at first, but I know exactly what needs to be done. I didn't have any trouble firing up the engines in the sister city we found on that delightful, intrigue-laden Renaissance Fair planet. Our only constraint up to now has been our limited power supply—and we've just found a veritable mother lode of ZPMs. By my count, Polrusso has twelve."

"*Twelve?*" Obviously the revelation had been played for maximum effect, and Elizabeth had to admit that it worked. "How solid is that information?" she asked.

"The tech doesn't lie," John confirmed. "But before Scrooge McKay over here gets carried away, you should know that it'll be tough to get our hands on that many. For one thing, the Polrussons have built their villages around the ZPMs. Since the terraforming process was never completed there, they depend on the power."

With even half that many ZPMs, they could conceivably fulfill the Atlantis expedition's original mandate to enhance the defensive capabilities of Earth. God, what an opportunity! "Tell me about the Polrusson people." Elizabeth rested her forearms on the table.

"Not the usual crowd." John shrugged out of his battered jacket. "They have a surprisingly good grasp of history, their own as well as the Ancients'. They're aware of the situation with the terraforming and have adapted well to a harsh environment. The government's democratic, with a group of Elders that hold down day jobs—one's a teacher. Artistic bunch, too. All in all, really normal and well-adjusted."

"Sounds too good to be true." Caldwell folded his arms. "What's the catch?"

"I had pretty much the same reaction." John grimaced. "Turns out they've got a hive ship parked somewhere on the other side of the planet."

Blinking, Caldwell replied, "That's a hell of a catch."

"The Wraith don't disturb the village all that often on the relative scale. The villagers tell ghost stories about a Wraith named Nabu, but the vast majority of the hive is hibernating." Rodney was dismissive. "For our purposes, it's a minor detail."

"Doctor, when it comes to the Wraith, there's no such thing. If all the other hives are awake, why not this one?"

"What makes you so sure that they're *all* awake?" Ronon asked.

That proclamation was met with four worried glances. "Oh, wonderful. Thank you. That's just the positive reinforcement I needed right now," Rodney snapped.

"Be that as it may, I have to agree with Colonel Caldwell," Elizabeth said. "If that hive is disturbed—"

"Two birds, one stone." Her chief scientist clearly had no intention of letting anyone rain on his parade. "Three birds, actually. These people want the terraforming machine shut down. We want the ZPMs. The hive ship—well, we know what it wants, but that's irrelevant. More importantly, it's located in a pre-oceanic basin. Pulling the ZPMs will release the reservoirs. The Wraith will be underwater before they know what hit them."

"Unless a Wraith comes along beforehand and feeds on someone with knowledge of the plan." Caldwell's counterargument was directed at Rodney, but his gaze was on John. Elizabeth recognized his implication, and felt a flicker of fresh sorrow at the loss of Aiden Ford. Not flinching from his superior's gaze, John remained silent.

"Okay," said Elizabeth, hoping to steer the conversation down a more productive path. "So whatever we plan to do should be close-hold information, kept to only the Elders on Polrusso."

Rodney was already shaking his head. "Not possible. Most of the Polrussons live in settlements near the ZPMs because they need the Ancient-designed wells that tap into the reservoirs in order to irrigate their crops. Once the ZPMs are removed, those areas will be wiped out by the massive outpouring of water."

"Where will everyone go, then?"

Ronon, whose taciturn nature always seemed more pronounced in briefings, spoke up. "They've made plans."

After John elaborated on the villagers' intentions to move inland when necessary, Elizabeth began to warm to the idea. It did appear to solve a number of problems, not only for themselves but also for Polrusso. "You're certain that the Polrussons will be okay? There's no chance that removing power will leave them with an even less hospitable environment?"

"The Ancients terraformed countless planets," Rodney said. "From what I've seen, they had it down to a fine art. The Polrussons will be fine, but they *all* have to be ready and willing to move—every man, woman, child, and camel-looking thing. The good news is that they've spent generations expecting imminent shut down so they're prepared to pull up stakes at a moment's notice. The bad news is—"

"—that the entire population of the planet will need to know what's coming, which means it would only be a matter of time before the Wraith find out and react." Caldwell's reluctance seemed to be at least partly linked to Rodney's enthusiasm, but Elizabeth agreed with his assessment of the risk.

"What sort of time frame are we looking at to prepare Atlantis?" she asked.

Rodney made an impatient sound in the back of his throat. "The sooner I'm allowed to stop talking about the issues and start working on them, the sooner I'll be able to provide that answer."

"Why wait to collect the ZPMs?" Caldwell wanted to know. "If it'll reduce the amount of time for the Wraith to pick up on the plan, we ought to tell these people to start moving ASAP."

"You didn't read the diplomacy primer, did you? It's generally bad form to waltz in and say 'excuse us, but you need to beat it so we can take your ZPMs to power up a cityship we pretended had been destroyed.' Look, it's going to take me most of a week, even if I forego sleep"—Rodney pointedly checked his watch, reminding them that it was past midnight—"to get everything set up both here and on Polrusso. As far as we know, Atlantis hasn't

been a space ship for several million years. We can't just fire up the engines and expect everything to work perfectly. That's why we need every last technician and, dare I say it, Hermiod to stop working on the *Daedalus* and concentrate on prepping Atlantis."

"There was no sign of Atlas's machine?" Caldwell pressed, still looking for options.

Irritated at being diverted from his message, Rodney threw him an incredulous glare. "The thing is, what, a twenty-centimeter-long piece of pipe, misplaced ten thousand years ago?"

Caldwell was unfazed by the obvious scorn. "So that would be a no."

"Yes, Colonel, it would indeed." Rodney gingerly touched a raw patch of skin on his cheek. "In fact, I suspect Atlas actually triggered his device, thus causing the malfunction in the original terraforming program. Before I shut the terraforming down, I'll need to know if that's the case."

He looked to Elizabeth expectantly, waiting for a go-ahead. While she would have much preferred to have found a way to prevent the nanites from destroying the planet, she couldn't deny that the idea of Atlantis once again taking to the stars held a considerable thrill. So far, however, it was nothing more than an idea. Sometimes Rodney tended to get a little ahead of the curve. "All right, proceed. But do so with extreme caution. We can't risk alerting the Wraith on Polrusso."

"I'll ask Hermiod to stop work on the hyperdrive repair. I can tell you right now that he's not going to be happy about it." The set of Caldwell's jaw made it clear that his Asgard crewmember wouldn't be the only one displeased.

"Dr. Weir," said a voice in her earpiece. "We have an incoming call from the mainland. No visual, and the signal's weak."

She hurried out to the control room, the others hot on her heels. "Kwesi, can you hear me?"

"Just barely," Kwesi called. His words were fragmented by static, but she could tell he was upset. "We have moved as many people as possible to a more protected location across the other

side of the river. Our original location and the main camp have been inundated by a mudslide."

And things just kept getting worse. "Casualties?"

"Some. I cannot guess at a number." The engineer paused. "How many jumpers were sent to retrieve us?"

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "Kwesi, I'm sorry. They couldn't reach you, and we had to recall them. We've lost contact with Jumper Three—the ship Teyla was on."

"That is what I feared. During the slide, we saw a jumper being carried down the mountain."

The tight knot in Elizabeth's chest that had begun to unwind with Rodney's proposal instantly snapped back into place. *Damn it.* She wanted to scream at the blatant unfairness of it all, but she didn't have that luxury. Looking at Teyla's teammates, she found the same bitter conflict reflected in their eyes.

"Until I see them dead, they're alive," the Satedan stated bluntly.

John hesitated for a second before nodding. "I'm with him."

Elizabeth wished she could share their faith.

CHAPTER NINE

Rodney heard his teammates' words, but his reaction was a bit different. "Let me see if I've got this straight. Teyla and Corletti are out there in a wrecked jumper, and you're sitting in a cave?"

"We are now on the wrong side of the river," Kwesi replied. "The wind and rain are very strong, and we have minimal light to work by."

"Oh, and I've never had to save an entire city while held at gunpoint by a madman under those exact same conditions!"

"The jumper was lost in the mud—"

"So a little dirt is a problem now?" Rodney couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Rodney, be reasonable," said Elizabeth. "Let Kwesi finish."

"Nothing about this is reasonable—why should I be the exception? The man is just sitting out there while Teyla—"

Her look of exasperation stalled his protest but not his seething anger.

Kwesi's response would have sounded clipped even without the static. "I may have been understating our circumstances. This is not a little mud. It is no exaggeration to say that half a mountain has collapsed on the camp. Those of us who managed to escape are on the far side of a river now swollen to three times its normal volume. Squalls coming through have gusts of over two hundred kilometers an hour, and the rain is so violent it is difficult to breathe at times. So I am sorry, Dr. McKay, but I do not have the ability to search for the jumper—no one here does. Even if the sun were to shine bright and clear come morning, I would expect the valley to be buried and the river to be five times its normal width. We are only praying that the squalls will die down and that you also experience a break in the storm so that it will not be so dangerous for you to

lend assistance. We have many injured here”—there was a break in the transmission—“...understand if that is not possible.”

While Rodney had not been unsympathetic to the plight of the Athosians, the situation was entirely different now that it involved Kwesi and Teyla. His anger at the engineer abruptly morphed into worry. “Kwesi, we need you back here!” he blurted, but received only maddening static in reply.

Elizabeth stood in front of him, ever poised despite her obvious concern. “Let me worry about the mainland,” she suggested. “You have to focus on your work. That’s as much as you can do for now, and I’m sure you’ll agree that you’re singularly good at achieving impressive results under pressure.”

“It does seem like I do my best work under the threat of disaster, doesn’t it?” Rodney got the distinct impression that he was being handled, but he didn’t have time for an abundance of indignation. “All right, give me a couple of hours to go through the files I brought back with me. After that I’m going to have to speak to everyone, and I do mean everyone, about what we need to do to get this city prepared for spaceflight.”

“Woo-hoo!” yelled Lieutenant Corletti. She flashed a triumphant grin at Teyla as the puddle jumper pulled free of the grasping mud and took to the air.

“Well done, Lieutenant,” Teyla acknowledged with a relieved smile. The Marine had been unable to bring the jumper’s flight systems online until slamming her fist down on the control panel. “Is this a standard technique for encouraging recalcitrant equipment to operate?”

Corletti mumbled something about a *Millennium Falcon* before adding, “Okay, we’re not as functional as I’d like. Inertial dampeners aren’t responding too well. I’m having to fight every gust—and man, that wind is howling once we get any kind of height.”

The view through the windshield was a jumbled mess of lightning strikes and impossibly heavy rain. The HUD, however, clearly showed Teyla the extent of the mudslide that had carried them

down the mountain’s face. The cascade of wet earth had stopped just short of where many life signs were clustered on the near side of the river. Though fully half of the camp had been destroyed, it appeared that no one had been injured, except—“There!”

“I see ’em, but I’m not sure how much help we’re going to be. I can barely keep this thing in the air.”

“We must at least try.” Teyla stared in concentration at five life signs moving rapidly along the same course as the river. She felt a deep pain seize her heart as, one by one, the life signs winked out, until only two remained.

“I’m sorry, Teyla.” Corletti’s voice was tinged with regret. “But I’m going to have to put us down someplace until the wind lets up. I can’t control it much longer.”

“Can you reach this group?” She pointed to the closest life signs clustered on the near side of the river, then gripped her armrests to prevent herself from being knocked out of the seat. The jumper was, as Corletti had said, difficult to control in the storm.

“Yeah, I think so. Hang on. This could get bumpy...well, bumpy.”

The atmosphere on the *Daedalus* was charged with a familiar tension. Crewmembers moved purposefully through the corridors, barely paying notice to the two members of Atlantis’s senior staff making their way toward the bridge.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” John asked.

“There’s naught else I can do at the moment,” Beckett replied. “I’ve examined the sample. Though I’m not a mineralogist, I can say that the red granules aren’t really sand at all. They’re more like tiny flakes of a substance that I can only assume was brought in for terraforming. Heaven knows why, since it’s incredibly destructive.”

“Maybe the Ancients weren’t the environmentally sensitive miners we first thought.”

“Perhaps not,” the doctor allowed. “Under UV light, the surface of the flakes quickly degrades and develops an inert yellow crust,

rendering them relatively harmless. However, once airborne, the grains abrade each other or whatever else they come into contact with, causing the flakes to fragment and exposing the caustic interior."

"So the sand lying on the ground is harmless?"

"Aye. You could pour it all over your hands and not feel a thing. But rub off the surface of the flake and you're in trouble. With millions of grains tearing into you during one of those sandstorms, the abrasiveness alone would guarantee an ugly outcome. Add the caustic component and there wouldn't be much left of you at the end."

John recalled seeing a few people who'd lost battles with sandstorms back on Earth, and remembered Vené's ruined face. "Yeah, I think I'll try to steer clear."

Arriving on the ship's bridge, they caught the tail end of Hermiod's expected complaint to Caldwell. "I do not believe it prudent to discontinue work on the hyperdrive. Nor do I have any desire to assist Dr. McKay in his misguided plans to prepare Atlantis for interstellar flight. Several million years have passed since the city was used for this purpose. If the Ancients had considered it capable of flight, do you not think they would have returned to Earth in the ship instead?"

"Well, they were under siege, for one thing." John was willing to admit that the short gray guy still weirded him out. Unlike most of the expedition, John hadn't done any time at the SGC, so in his experience, intelligent aliens usually were either humans by another name, or Wraith—which, as they had recently discovered, were sort of human. The Asgard, on the other hand, bore a disturbing resemblance to something that he'd seen once too often on the covers of supermarket tabloids.

The odd noise that came from Hermiod might have been a reply, but sounded more like something related to its—John wasn't sure if it was a he or a she—digestive tract.

Caldwell, apparently, had mastered Asgard-speak. "Hermiod is certain that he can have the *Daedalus*'s hyperdrive repaired within

a week," he explained, confirming at least that Hermiod was a he. "If the engineers can fabricate the necessary replacement parts. That's not going to happen if McKay commandeers all our resources."

"For a plan that is bound to fail," Hermiod added.

It wasn't a stretch to say that Rodney's ego occasionally got in the way of progress. John hadn't forgotten about the disaster on Doranda. Still, he felt compelled to stick up for his friend. "That's a little pessimistic, isn't it?"

"Colonel, my first responsibility is to my ship," Caldwell stated, his voice taking on an edge. "I've got a choice to make. I can put my resources toward Hermiod's ability to fix something that he knows well and that generally works without any problems. Or I can put them toward Dr. McKay's ability to fix something of which he has yet to acquire sufficient knowledge, only after sorting out some other planet's problems, most likely while fending off some angry Wraith."

Hermiod did his eye-blinky thing, the strangeness of which distracted John just long enough for Beckett to get a word in. "Colonel Caldwell, with all due respect, we're not here to argue Rodney's case."

Caldwell crossed his arms and looked at them expectantly. John obliged by coming right to the point. "How long would it take to get *Daedalus*'s sublight engines, shields, and inertial dampening systems operational?"

"You're not thinking we should take the *Daedalus* to the nearest star system, are you? Because my great-grandkids will be in a nursing home before we reach it, even at top speed—unless we get the hyperdrive repaired."

"I was thinking of somewhere a little closer. Sending rescue jumpers to the mainland in that storm would be like sending a row-boat. But *Daedalus* is more like an aircraft carrier."

Eyes narrowing, Caldwell pointed out, "An aircraft carrier is still vulnerable if ninety percent of its systems are down. In order to repair the hyperdrive, we've taken the sublight engines, shields,

in fact pretty much everything offline. We can't risk running power to anything that interfaces with the hyperdrive while we're in there tinkering around."

Which, John knew, was why Caldwell had been on edge. A warship existed to project strength, but the *Daedalus* was by no means invincible. The recent loss of her sister ship had made that all too clear. "There has to be a way to take the hyperdrive out of the circuit and put the other systems back together long enough to take a short flight to the mainland."

"That may be, but mounting a rescue mission in that condition would risk the ship in more ways than one. What if these nanites have already been let loose?" He held up a hand, forestalling John's objection. "Don't get me wrong, Colonel. I share your concern for the Athosians, but I need to consider the further ramifications of your request—not just here and now, but back on Earth. The threat of the Ori has become significantly greater, and now that we've lost the *Prometheus*—"

"Respectfully, sir, you're talking about theoretical benefits somewhere down the road. There are *real* people here who need help *now*."

"Careful, Sheppard. Unless my memory's failing, this is starting to look a lot like the situation that got your ass busted back on Earth."

Instinctively, John's spine went rigid. That was one decision he'd never regretted. "The life of a fellow officer was at stake," he replied, voice hardening.

"And if I were that man, or his parents, I'd be damned grateful for what you did. But the fact remains that you sacrificed a hell of a lot more in the process. You're now asking me to endanger the lives of considerably more people."

John had had his moments of deliberately antagonizing superiors, but this wasn't one of them. He could see Caldwell's point. The *Daedalus* was an ongoing concern with a repairable problem. All they needed was a little more time, which Rodney would likely be able to buy them with another ZPM. However, he still had one

more ace to play.

Turning to Hermiod, he said, "You were asking for the engineer who designed the interface for the hyperdrive's overheat detection system?" When the Asgard blinked at him again, he took that as an affirmative. "Well, his name's Kwesi Anané." From the corner of his eye, John saw Caldwell's expression shift. "He's currently sitting in a cave on the other side of the river by the Athosian camp."

"Desperately trying to perform first aid on several badly injured Athosians," Carson put in for good measure.

The bizarre noise from the Asgard sounded louder this time. John's gaze slid to Caldwell. The older man looked slightly exasperated at his crewmember's stubbornness. "It must be nice to be so sure of yourself," he grumbled at Hermiod. In spite of the tension, John had to fight to keep a knowing smile off his face. When it came to brilliant and socially inept colleagues, he could definitely relate.

"Sir," the communications officer interrupted from across the bridge. "We have a call from Jumper Three."

"Teyla?" John took an involuntary step forward, his throat suddenly tight. He hadn't let himself think too hard about her odds of survival until now, recognizing that it would have wrecked his focus. But if there was anything to know, one way or the other, he needed to know it.

"It's Corletti, sir," came the relatively static-free response through the shipboard speakers. "Teyla's outside with Halling. She'll be here in a minute."

Thank God.

"What's your status, Lieutenant?" Caldwell requested.

"Sir, it's just after dawn, so we've finally got some light to work with. Sorry about not checking in before now, but we had a few problems for a while in there. The storm over the mountains is still looking ugly, kinda hurricane-like. It's heading away from us, though. Down here at the main camp, it's about eighty percent cloud cover, wind gusts of about forty knots, but I don't know how long our luck's going to hold on that count. The campsite itself is

a full-blown disaster area. A mountain more or less fell on half of it, and the rest—most of the tents were shredded by last night's winds."

"Casualties?" John asked.

"We've made contact with the Athosians on the east side of the river, and I'm about to start ferrying them up to join Dr. Anané's group in the rocks on the west side. So far, we have several with broken limbs, just about everyone with lacerations and contusions, some severe, and a couple Teyla dug out who I'm pretty sure inhaled some mud."

Beside him, Beckett visibly stiffened. "What about Kwesi's group?" he asked.

"From what we've been able to ascertain by shouting across the river, it's about the same. I'll be over there to confirm that as soon we get everyone on board." John could hear movement in the background as Corletti spoke. "Stragglers are making their way here now that the weather is clearer. A separate landslide has blocked the path to the lakeside camp. Halling has gone downriver a ways to look for two people who fell into the water last night. We had them on the life signs detector for a while, but some of our subsystems are on the blink. There's no way I can risk flying back to Atlantis, even if the weather holds. Once we get everyone together here I'll attempt to evacuate the lakeside camp."

"Negative to that, Lieutenant," Caldwell replied. "It's too risky if the jumper is disabled."

"I understand your reluctance, Colonel Caldwell." Teyla's voice joined the conversation, allowing John to finally reassure himself that she was all right. "However, I do not see that we have much choice."

"From where I'm standing, I think staying put is a legitimate option."

"Hey, Teyla," John put in, cursing the screwy rank structure of the expedition and trying not to notice Caldwell's sharp look. This was Caldwell's ship, but the jumper and its crew were

Atlantis's responsibility—John's responsibility. He'd deal with any ruffled feathers later. "How many people are in the hunting parties?"

"It is difficult to say," Teyla answered. "Colonel, please. If we have any hope of rescue, we will have a better chance if everyone is together. If a rescue is not possible, then nothing will be lost if we die in the attempt. And we will be together at the end, which is important to us all."

"Listen, sirs." Corletti's voice returned. "If nobody can come get us, we'll understand. But we'd like to know."

Caldwell was silent for a moment, and John suspected his resolve was beginning to crack. For all his pragmatism, the man clearly wanted to save as many people as possible, just as they all did.

"Colonel, I need to get to that camp," Carson put in, his tone calm but insistent. "There are injuries there that need treatment sooner rather than later, and after all I..." He didn't finish the sentence, but John could tell he was feeling some guilt, however misplaced, over what was happening.

At Caldwell's inquisitive glance, Hermiod muttered about having to reassemble something unpronounceable before the *Daedalus* would be airworthy. Before John could ask for clarification, the Asgard turned toward the door, speaking as he went. "We can be ready for lift-off in two hours, but I will require an additional hour after that to reinstall the necessary components to beam anyone aboard."

"Teyla, Corletti, stand by," John called. "Help's on the way."

"Be aware that this will also result in a delay in rebuilding the hyperdrive," the Asgard added matter-of-factly, "which may result in the destruction of this ship."

When Hermiod had stalked off the bridge—who knew little gray aliens could stalk?—Carson remarked, "And I thought Rodney was a mite tetchy to work with."

"You have no idea," said Caldwell under his breath. He

turned to John. "I just hope for everyone's sakes that by the time we get back, you'll have bought us some time with another ZPM."

Me, too, John didn't reply.

In Atlantis's main lab, Rodney pushed his chair back and blinked rapidly to restore some moisture to his still-dry eyes. "That confirms it, then."

Glancing up from his computer, Radek concluded, "If we can obtain four charged ZPMs, then, purely from a power standpoint, we could fire Atlantis's main engines." He held up a warning finger. "But that does not necessarily mean that all systems will be operational."

Coffee cup in hand, Elizabeth arrived ahead of a train of technicians, engineers and assorted military personnel. Nodding a greeting to Radek, she said, "Rodney, are we ready for the briefing?"

"That would be exactly why I called this meeting," Rodney answered Radek, standing from the chair and giving Elizabeth a smile. "I can now say with a high degree of certainty that Atlas did not test his exogenesis machine on Polrusso."

"Then what would account for the interruption in the planet's terraforming?"

"It wasn't interrupted. It completed the process of water creation roughly two hundred years ago and is now inactive. With no Ancients around to shut it down, it's just idling."

Atlantis's leader frowned. "You mean someone simply needs to hit the off button?"

"Removing the ZPMs from the matrix would have the same effect. Which brings us to Atlas's machine, which I am now certain is still somewhere on Polrusso, possibly in one of the smaller labs where the ZPMs are located. Fortunately, when tracking the machine that's active on this planet, I had the foresight to analyze the component materials. It's a unique composite structure, so it shouldn't be too difficult to locate that same structure on Polrusso once we upload the data into a scanner."

"Sounds very promising." Elizabeth looked as pleased as Rodney felt. And with good reason. If he was right, and there was no reason to think otherwise, in a short while they should have acquired an exogenesis machine to save their planet, sufficient ZPMs to power the Starship *Atlantis*, taken out a hive ship, and made another planet full of surprisingly pleasant people very happy indeed. Not a bad day's work.

The new arrivals had managed to squeeze inside the relatively confined room, a fact that would normally have made Rodney edgy, but he was not about to let a little claustrophobia interfere with his mood. Explaining to them what he had in mind, he emphasized the need to bring Atlantis up to space-faring standards. "The entire city needs to be shipshape, or space-shape, whatever term you prefer. I want everything checked and rechecked: flight and life support systems, inertial dampeners, navigation systems, star charts—"

"Pegasus Galaxy or Milky Way?" someone called. The sense of excitement was palpable, even to Rodney.

"Let's not get too ambitious at the outset. Initially, we just need to maintain the integrity of the ship and know that we can find our way around without ending up in some backwater star system. On that count, we'll also need to make certain that the Stargate will continue to operate as per usual. As far as we know, the DHD automatically compensates for stellar drift, but I'd like to run several tests once we're in space to confirm that."

The murmurs in the room grew louder as various once-incredible possibilities began to take shape in everyone's minds. For once, Rodney couldn't bring himself to shush them. Atlantis in flight had been beyond their imagination, and now they were ready to make it happen. A brief daydream of a thought flitted through his mind, and he pictured the look on Sam Carter's face upon seeing the city sail into Earth's solar system.

But even if he believed that travel to Earth was a good idea—and he wasn't sure he did, because there was a lot to be said for continuing their mission in this galaxy—that decision was about five steps too far down the line for the time being. "I'm currently planning an

incremental shutdown of the Polrusso terraforming machine," he continued, "so I should be able to send at least one ZPM back here very soon. That will allow us to test-fire one engine, just to clear two years' worth of barnacles."

"Very well done, Rodney," said Elizabeth, enthusiasm and pride lighting her eyes. "This is quite a moment for us all. Everyone, you have your instructions. Please be careful and thorough in your preparations, and report any updates or problems back to your supervisors." She spread her hands. "Let's get to it."

The group filed out like a hockey team charged up for a game, carrying with them a sense of purpose not seen since the early days of the expedition. Once the lab had cleared, Radek approached Rodney with a clipboard in hand. "With sufficient power, I am confident that the city shield will comfortably sustain the hazards of interstellar flight."

"Good, that's one thing checked off the list. In that case, you can come with me to Polrusso."

The clipboard fell to Radek's side. He peered suspiciously at his colleague. "First it was underwater. Now it is another planet?"

Rodney dismissed the reaction. "You've been off-world before. Don't tell me you're still sulking over a little face painting."

"So," Radek continued, folding his arms across the clipboard. "You need me."

Oh, no. No way was he going to start that game all over again. "Only in the sense that I need an additional pair of hands that are at least two sizes smaller than Ronon's, preferably attached to a person educated in something other than shooting things. Yours will do. I might have considered taking Kwesi, but even assuming he gets back in one piece, our illustrious military commander is currently negotiating a trade arrangement for him."

"I don't understand. Trade with who?"

"Whom."

"Is what I said. Who?"

Unwilling to explore the deep and meaningful subtleties of English grammar with the Czech, Rodney let out an exasperated sigh. "With the *Daedalus*'s resident Asgard to recover the Athosians from the mainland."

"Ah! So you agree that the calibrations I designed for the *Daedalus* force field will keep it safe from nanites."

"I never said—ow!" His intake of breath prompted a sudden flare of pain. He pressed a hand to his jaw and ran his tongue experimentally across the tooth he'd chipped earlier. "I don't believe it!" Withdrawing a fragment, he demanded, "What the hell kind of shell did they drop in that bar, a bullet casing?"

Without any trace of sympathy whatsoever, Radek said, "Go see the dentist."

Suppressing the sudden urge to hyperventilate, Rodney replied hurriedly, "It's just a chip, barely scratched the enamel."

Radek shot him a knowing look. "I do not wish to endure your pain."

Ignoring the jibe, Rodney began packing the equipment he would need on Polrusso. "I'll get a Tylenol...or maybe a Vicodin. Don't forget to download the analysis of Ea's machine and bring it."

"That data is on your computer."

Rodney was about to snap out a reply when Sheppard poked his head around the doorframe. "Hey. Elizabeth said you were ready to go back to Polrusso?"

"Almost," he replied, running his tongue across the damaged tooth again. Obviously he was paying the price for the military's policy of buying everything, even food, from the lowest bidder. "I need to see Carson first."

"He's on the *Daedalus*, headed for the mainland."

"Well, that's just great." Couldn't the man have sent one of his underlings? No matter—Rodney could still get a couple of pills from whichever voodoo specialist was currently on duty in the infirmary. Pointing to the equipment he'd stacked by the door, he

told Radek on his way out, "All of that needs to come with us."

With selective hearing skills honed long ago, he ignored the scathing bilingual comment about indentured servitude that followed him into the corridor.

Teyla stepped out of the jumper and trudged through the mud to Halling, standing by a tree whose roots hung over the newly carved riverbank. Like every piece of vegetation that remained, it had been stripped of leaves until nothing but broken kindling remained. Further down in the valley the torrent of water had spread far across the lowlands. Except for the speed at which it continued to flow, it could have been mistaken for a large brown lake. Dead animals and birds lay scattered across the ravaged ground, but of the Athosians who had fallen into the river the night before, Teyla could find no sign.

"The Ancestors do not want us here, Teyla," Halling said by way of greeting. "We are being punished."

Teyla felt compelled to deny his words, and yet he had uttered Ea's very sentiments. "As children we idealize our parents. It is only when we grow older that we come to understand that they are both flawed and fallible." Halling went to speak, but she motioned for him to let her finish. "That does not diminish our love and respect for them. Indeed, our greater understanding allows us to judge their shortcomings, and our own, less harshly."

"Then should we no longer aspire to be worthy of them?"

Gently clasping his arm, Teyla looked up into his troubled eyes. "Not all of the Ancestors were as pure in spirit as we once believed. We should aspire to be worthy of those who were. But perhaps more importantly, we should aspire to be worthy of each other."

Taking a step towards the jumper, she added, "Come. The *Daedalus* will be arriving soon to evacuate everyone." When Halling did not respond, she turned to see him staring bleakly up at the mountains. For his next question, she could provide no answer.

"I wonder how Jinto is faring."

CHAPTER TEN

"Very efficient designers, the Ancients," Radek commented when he saw the proximity of the lab entrance to the Polrusson 'gate. Anxiously looking across the sand dunes, he added, "Not a step wasted."

"I'd classify it as a healthy sense of self-preservation more than anything else. It's always prudent to have an escape route nearby." Rodney checked his pack one last time, wishing it wasn't always so crammed full of equipment. Ancient technology was great stuff, but if their designs had all been a little smaller and lighter, they would have made his life a lot easier.

"Could be that they were just lazy," suggested Ronon, drawing a smirk from Sheppard as the Colonel eased Jumper One to the ground on the opposite side of the 'gate to the DHD.

"Yes." Radek glowered at Rodney. "Which would explain why I was required to load everything into the jumper when we could have walked through the 'gate considerably faster."

"I want to go for a spin around the planet," Sheppard replied. "The HUD can tell us real-time specifics about the location of the water reservoirs and the ZPMs."

"You sure that won't alert the Wraith?" Ronon pointed out.

"Flying cloaked has never been much of a risk before."

"It's incredibly foolish to assume that, because something has been done successfully in the past, it carries less risk. That's how your government manages to keep losing space shuttles." Rodney waved a hand toward the lab. "In any case, we've got all the information and monitoring equipment we need right here—including systems built into the jumper." He glanced at Radek. "So, Colonel, clip your wings."

Radek continued to glare at him while Sheppard merely shook his head and powered down the jumper. "Looks like they rolled out

the welcome mat for us.”

Outside, a small crowd had gathered near the 'gate. Rodney recognized Vené and Shira among them. When the team stepped out of the jumper's hatch, the Polrussons moved in to greet them with obvious enthusiasm.

Vené reached them first, a welcoming smile lighting his features. “Forgive us,” he said. “It was not our intention to overwhelm you. These people are waiting for family to return from traveling before we begin the journey inland to our new homes. They are excited to see the Ancestors' children who have come to give us the glorious new world we have so long awaited.”

Well, that wasn't a bad state of affairs. Certainly being hailed as saviors beat the reception they received on a lot of planets.

Shira approached Radek, studying him inquisitively. “You are not the one who was here before—the healer.”

“His name's Radek. He's delighted to meet you.” Rodney turned in the direction of the lab, confident that the Czech was currently giving him a murderous stare and not particularly concerned about it. “Given our time constraints, I think we should get started.”

“If it is acceptable, may we observe what it is that you will be doing?” Vené asked, indicating himself and Shira. “Shira is a historian, and this is indeed a historic time.”

Sheppard glanced at Rodney, who responded with an indifferent gesture. “The more, the merrier.”

Leaving their adoring fans behind by the 'gate, the team approached the entrance to the lab, the floor of which, he noted, had been swept free of sand. Both the inner and outer doors opened at the Colonel's command as easily as they had before.

Once inside, Radek's gaze swept the room, taking it all in. “I expected it to be more... tidy.”

“I think we can assume that the researchers left in a pretty big hurry when the Wraith showed up.” Sheppard rested his hands on the stock of the P-90 clipped to his vest, which bugged Rodney more than he wanted to admit. They could be on a mission to a planet of pink fluffy bunnies, and they'd still be armed to the teeth,

because you just never *knew* in this galaxy.

“Since you are frequently eager to direct the course of my work,” Radek asked, his expression falsely innocent, “perhaps you would like to tell me where to begin?”

“Cute.” Rodney crossed the room to the lab's records interface. “The reservoirs couldn't contain all the water of this planet through geology alone, so it stands to reason that the terraforming process must employ a type of shield technology. Since that's been the focus of your research for some time, you're as likely as anyone to be able to decipher whatever notes the Ancients left.”

“We are certain that otherwise the process should have been completed by now? Perhaps something further needs to be done before we shut this down.” Radek withdrew his laptop from his pack and set up an interface with the Ancient computer, demonstrating the other reason Rodney had wanted to bring him along: he never needed to be led by the nose.

“Our timekeeping is accurate,” Vené said. “As I explained to your friends earlier, we can ascertain by the level in our wells that the process of creating water ended more than ten generations ago.”

“A fact verified by the program files,” Rodney confirmed.

For a time, the two scientists worked in silence, accessing the files left by the researchers. As was so often the case with Ancient records, the problem was having too much data rather than too little. Sifting through file after file for relevant information was, to put it politely, an exercise in patience.

“I have found a diagnostic program,” Radek announced some time later. “It should confirm the status of the terraforming process.”

“And?”

Adjusting his glasses, he fixed Rodney with an irritated look. “The program requires input from sensors all over the planet and has not been accessed in quite some time. Pestering it or me will not make it go faster.” No sooner had he finished complaining, though, than a completion message flashed on the screen.

Rodney went to stand at Radek's shoulder. "I repeat: And?"

"Diagnostic confirms it. Atlas's machine was never used, and the original process is complete. The force fields surrounding the reservoirs have been set to manual release. We need only shut down the shield generators."

"Yes, we've been through that, thanks." Ignoring Radek's rolled eyes, Rodney added, "It's the order of operations that requires careful handling."

"Which will not be a trivial task." Radek pointed to the geological data of the ZPM located nearby.

While the lab was situated on solid rock, the structure housing the ZPM and shield generators was not so well placed. "Okay, that presents a minor obstacle. We're being a bit ambitious in our aims here, attempting to drown the Wraith hive ship and yet prevent the ZPMs from washing away in the planetary flood."

Sheppard didn't appear concerned about the details. "But you can do it?"

"Of course I can do it." Rodney reached over Radek's shoulder to type in a command. "I'm just submitting advance warning that there'll be an optimal sequence for shutting down the force fields, and it may take a while to figure that out."

"Duly noted."

The next order of business was to pinpoint the locations of the eleven remaining force fields and their associated ZPMs. If the tedium of the search was getting on the scientists' nerves, Rodney could at least take comfort in the fact that their military counterparts were even more restless. Sheppard and Ronon looked about ready to climb the walls, taking turns wandering the room and pretending they weren't in fact pacing. Vené and Shira eyed them with curiosity and a hint of bemusement, while Rodney mostly tried to block their antics from his mind.

At last, he stretched his arms up over his head and cracked his back. "All right, we've got the ZPM locations mapped out. The topography's well marked in the database, so we ought to be able to run some simulations on our own computers and determine

which force fields should be released first." He stood and went across to his laptop. "The possible combinations are minimal, so it shouldn't take long. Meanwhile, I'll enter the data on the material components of exogenesis machine and resume our treasure hunt using the scanners."

Ronon glanced up from the knife he'd been sharpening rather obsessively. "What about the hive ship?"

"What about it? Based on previous experience, it's big and bad and we hope it doesn't somehow float."

"I think he wants to know if your sensors picked it up," the Colonel suggested helpfully.

"The sensors were only intended to monitor the terraforming. Wraith detection wasn't included in the design, which, I admit, was yet one more oversight on the part of a supposedly enlightened race. We're not going to locate anything other than the ZPMs and the shield generation equipment—and presumably, once I enter the data, the exogenesis machine."

Sheppard turned to Vené. "How confident are you about where this hive ship is?"

"I can show you the general location." The Elder approached the Ancient computer screen and studied the map Rodney had called up. With a callused hand, he indicated one of the deepest areas in a pre-oceanic basin on the opposite side of the planet.

Ronon tucked the small blade back into his hair—which raised no shortage of logistical questions all by itself—and folded his arms. "We need to be more certain than that."

"And more precise." Indicating the placement of two adjacent ZPMs with his finger, Rodney said, "That canyon could be flooded one of three ways, and if we don't pin down the Wraith's exact location, the wrong sequence could give them enough time to get the whole ship powered up."

He'd nearly forgotten that Shira was present until she spoke up. "There was once a small settlement not far from the ship. It was destroyed many years ago, but a few of its people still live in our village. I have heard an old man speak of what he saw

there—something that looked like a hill, until the Darts emerged from it and flew off to begin raiding.”

Having seen the immense crater left by the first hive ship they’d encountered, Rodney had no trouble believing that, even without a sprinkling of trees, a few sandstorms would help the hill camouflage succeed on Polrusso.

“Can we talk to this old man?” asked Sheppard.

“I will take you to him.” Vené moved toward the door leading to the village, and Sheppard and Ronon started to follow.

“Whoa, hold up.” Rodney scrambled to find a datapad compatible with the computer. “You need an accurate map, or all you’ll get is story time at the nursing home.” Uploading the map to the datapad, he thrust it into Sheppard’s hands. “We’ll stay here and get started on the simulations.”

Once the others had left, he bent over the computer again, wondering idly if he’d restocked his ibuprofen bottle. Not only was the Ancient lab bench ergonomically deficient, but there had to be some fine particulates in the air, irritating the exposed nerve in his aching tooth.

“So,” Radek began. “In an ideal reality, we will do what? Release each force field and fly in to extract each ZPM as soon it powers down? Hoping, of course, that the water does not move quickly enough to require either of us to engage in another under-sea jumper ride.”

“And I’d been doing so well at avoiding that thought until now—thanks ever so much. At least, if we do this right, we shouldn’t have to worry about the Wraith at that point.”

“By all means, then.” Radek smiled. “Let us do it right.”

The complexities of the terraforming program were undeniably intriguing. However, Rodney found himself more fascinated by the physical reality of what they were about to set in motion. It presented a bit of a perspective shift for him. For most of his life, it had been the purely theoretical nature of research that held his interest. Now, the practical applications of that research felt more immediate and more important. Samantha Carter’s influence, he

suspected.

For some reason, she’d been on his mind a lot lately, mostly after having been trapped underwater with her—or rather some manifestation of her in his head. Very strange. At least, as strange as having an attractive woman on the brain could be.

He was also starting to understand why Atlas had worked to accelerate the process by creating the exogenesis machine. It was heady stuff, the idea of flipping a switch and turning a planet from a barren dustbowl into a Garden of Eden. The science behind it could have innumerable uses elsewhere. Properly calibrated, it could reverse decades of environmental damage on Earth or create new homes for races devastated by battles with the Goa’uld and Ori.

So much could be learned, if they could only find the machine that Atlas had left on Polrusso. “Did you input the data on Ea’s machine yet?”

“I do not have it.”

“What?” A familiar flash of annoyance jerked Rodney back to the here and now.

“You had it on your computer on Atlantis.” Radek’s forehead crinkled. “I reminded you of this.”

“I told you to bring it!”

Pushing himself back from the bench, Radek threw his hands in the air in defeat. “Fine! I will go back for it.”

“And waste valuable time in the process.” Rodney scrubbed at his eyes and decided that ibuprofen was sounding better and better. “All you had to do was burn it to a DVD.”

With a jaundiced look, Radek shook his head. “Yes, it will waste all of ten minutes. Disastrous. The ‘gate is just outside the door. As I have clearly failed you by not reading your mind, I will go.” He rose from his stool and started toward the exit, favoring his twisted ankle.

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Rodney rolled his eyes skyward. “I’ll go. You set up the water-release simulation matrix and make sure the computer doesn’t choke on this new diagnostic.” Tapping his

radio, he hailed their team leader. "Colonel, if you and Ronon are okay where you are, I'm going to briefly head home to pick up some necessary data."

Sheppard replied immediately. "You want me to go? We're only a few minutes away."

"No, you're better off getting the location of the hive ship. I'm waiting for a diagnostic to finish here. Besides, I have my doubts that you could successfully identify anything in my lab without a yellow sticky note on it, much less download something from my computer."

"Don't knock the sticky notes. They got me through college."

"I'm sure. I'll be back in a few minutes." He rubbed his face. The broken tooth was beginning to feel like a spear through his skull.

"Check in when you get back. Sheppard out."

Once outside, Rodney found himself caught up in the crush of people hanging around the 'gate, joined now by their recently returned friends. As before, they wasted no time in cheerfully getting inside his personal space, which had the added bonus of aggravating his headache.

"You are returning to your home?"

"Temporarily." Rodney shook his arm loose from a child's enthusiastic grip. "Just need to go get something."

"We could wait for you if you wish."

Wonderful. A fan club. "No need. You'll have plenty more opportunities to smother me later."

"Please allow me to help," offered an eager young man hovering by the DHD. "It would be an honor to open the 'gate for you."

If Rodney had learned one thing from their various meet-and-greets gone wrong, it was to never let strangers see his home's address. "That's all right. It's, um, enough that you were here to greet me. But you've got lots of work to do before the big move, I'm sure, so go on. Take care."

Starting to dial a false address, he turned to the crowd and gave a jerky wave, hoping they'd get the hint. They did, waving back

and calling out their thanks as they departed. Rodney waited until they were a reasonable distance away before redialing the correct address. A round-trip 'gate transit for a damned DVD with a smidgeon of data. Embarrassing.

"Hey, honey, we're home," John announced as he entered the lab. It occurred to him a moment later that, since his current companions were a Czech and a Satedan, neither of them were likely to find his comment the least bit funny. It didn't bother him; he was used to his jokes bombing. "What's for dinner?"

"Torture bars, if you ask Rodney." Radek either understood the reference or ignored it, his attention focused on the computer screen in front of him. "He is still rather irate that a power bar caused him dental distress. Legal action has been mentioned."

Typical. John hopped up to sit on an unused lab bench. "He's not back yet? It's been two hours."

"Perhaps the dentist made him wait." Radek sounded a little too amused by that notion. "Do you have the location?"

Ronon pulled the datapad out of his pocket and handed it to the scientist. "The old man was pretty specific about where the ship is."

Studying the map for a moment, Radek nodded, satisfied. "*Jo Dobře*. This will work. In fact, it is a good place to begin the water release. Flood this location first, and pressure will be relieved in the adjoining areas. This will allow us to collect the ZPMs in an orderly manner."

"All of them?" Once again the phrase 'too good to be true' sprang to mind. "Aren't there twelve of the things?"

Radek shrugged. "It is possible that we may lose one or two, but with several jumpers participating, I do not foresee a problem retrieving them."

John glanced over at Ronon, who looked just as surprised. "Sounds like we caught a break for once."

Their radios signaled simultaneously. "Sheppard, McKay. I'm coming back through."

"How's the tooth, Rodney?"

They heard a huff of indignation from the other end. "Excruciating, thank you, but that had absolutely nothing to do with the delay. If people would just respect the workspaces of others, we wouldn't *have* these problems. Someone made a unilateral decision that my computer had to be evacuated to the Alpha site, and consequently I wasted far too much time—"

There was a break in the transmission as Rodney presumably entered the wormhole. "Calm before storm," muttered Radek.

Then Rodney's voice returned. "—could have...Ow! What... Um, got a slight problem out here, guys. Except—no, not slight at all. *Massive* problem."

John vaulted off the bench and ran to the exit. The inner doors obligingly opened, but the outer set refused to budge. "Rodney? What's going on out there?"

Something pounded on the door. Rodney's urgent "For God's sake, let me in!" was immediately followed by cry of agony unlike any John had ever heard. "It's *burning* me! I can't see—*it's in my eyes...*"

A surge of horror-fueled adrenaline raced through John's veins. He turned around and yelled, "Radek! Open the doors!"

Color fled from Radek's features, and his fingers flew madly across the keyboard. "I can't. The system will not allow me!" He leaped from his chair and hurried to the control panel by the doors, calling, "Rodney! The jumper—you must get inside!"

Fists banged ineffectually at the closed doors. "I can't see... Someone help me! *Please!*"

The words ended in a choking scream that tore through John like a knife. "Rodney! Dammit—get to the jumper!"

It was less than thirty feet away, but in a sandstorm, just as in an Antarctic blizzard, that might as well have been thirty miles.

Radek shouted in triumph. John dimly heard a warning yell from Ronon, but then the doors abruptly opened, and a blast of blood-red sand flung John back.

Instinctively, he turned his head as he fell, fiery pain spraying

against the side of his face. Before he could get his bearings, a force field snapped into existence across the outer doorway, sealing them off from the raging storm. Where the hell was Rodney?

"...located DHD—I'm...dial by feel!"

"Airlock has a failsafe," Radek realized, his eyes wide with shock. "It must have detected the sand."

"There has to be a way around the failsafe. Find it!"

Behind the force field, a dark red rain of grit whipped past. Scrambling to his knees, John stumbled back inside the lab, and noticed that Shira and Vené had arrived. He wouldn't make it through the sand unprotected, but with some help, maybe... "Vené, give me your robe!" He pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the acid sand that stung his hands.

Next to him, Ronon was slamming his fist into a large window, but nothing was happening. Furious, he kept striking it, then drew his weapon. Radek shouted, "No! It is protected by the same force field. The entire laboratory is sealed. You shoot in here and—"

Face contorted in rage, Ronon jammed his weapon back into its holster.

"Give me your damned robe!" John yelled at Vené again, taking a step towards him. The Polrusson stood frozen with shock and sorrow.

Radek grabbed John's arm with a surprisingly fierce grip. "You cannot get out; Rodney cannot get in. The lab is sealed!"

Over the screech of the wind, Rodney's voice was weakening. "God, it's pulling the skin off my fingers! *I can't feel the symbols...*"

Damn it, he couldn't listen to this and not do *something*. His throat constricting, John turned a desperate gaze to Radek. "Get us out there!"

The scientist only shook his head, as helpless as the rest of them. "I cannot."

"Perhaps this way?" Shira suggested, running to the doors that would lead them back to the village.

John knew that it would take at least twenty minutes to reach the

'gate by that route, but he had to try. He bolted to the door, only to stop when the signal from Rodney was abruptly cut off. Even the hiss of the storm no longer reached them. Afraid to do much more than breathe, John reached for his radio and turned back into the lab. With his view obscured by the wall of sand beyond the force field, he couldn't even verify that the 'gate had opened. "Control, do you read?"

"Reading you fine, Colonel," a tech's voice replied promptly. "Did you dial in?"

Thank God. Some of his tension ebbed away, but it didn't stray far. "No, McKay did. When he gets to you, he's going to need a medical team ASAP."

"Sir, we haven't received his IDC."

"What? Lower the shield! McKay's already inbound."

"I'm sorry, sir, without an IDC—"

"Lower the damned shield!"

There was a disturbingly long pause before the tech replied, "Sir, I've had to override the inbuilt safety protocols... 'gate shield down."

"Clear everyone out of the control room and get essential personnel into HAZMAT gear. The sand here is a killer."

"Yes, sir. We're getting some coming through already. No sign of Dr. McKay yet."

The next few seconds stretched intolerably. In a subdued voice, Radek said, "The sand will keep the 'gate open. The particles have sufficient size and momentum to be detected by the system."

Spinning around, John speared Vené with his stare. "Why didn't you warn us?"

His lips trembling in obvious distress, the Polrusson replied, "I...came to do just that, to warn you not to leave. The storm came upon us suddenly. We did not know your friend had not yet returned!"

A yell issued from the tech. "Sir, we still don't have Dr. McKay, and sand is blasting through the 'gate! People are getting hit—" The man's pained scream melted into a cacophony of cries from

the Atlantis personnel.

"Colonel!" Dr. Weir's voice joined the bedlam. "I just got to the control room. What's going on?"

"McKay arrived back here in a sandstorm, and the lab locked him out," John said tersely, clutching at a few last threads of hope. "You have to give him more time. He can't see—"

"We can't wait! Our people are suffering terrible injuries. The sand is eating away their skin! God knows what it's doing to the equipment. We may not be able to function much longer."

John sat down hard on the floor, determination evaporating as reality began to set in. It had been too long by now. Raising his head, he saw Ronon's distant gaze and knew that he believed Rodney had to be dead. Wild anger and grief swamped John's soul, and he turned away until he could regain some control.

"This cannot be," whispered Radek, pulling his glasses off and bringing a hand to his face. "He only returned for some data. That is all. There was to be no danger!"

"John, I don't have a choice!" Elizabeth was yelling, and the piercing screams around her triggered memories that John really didn't need to replay just now. "I *have* to raise the shield. Get back here as soon as you can."

The transmission ended. John detached his radio from his vest and looked at it for a long moment. Deciding that control was overrated, he hurled the device against the wall.

When the brilliant white flare faded from her vision, Teyla found herself on the bridge of the *Daedalus*. Beside her, Halling was already looking around at all the activity in the room.

Colonel Caldwell greeted them, perfunctorily returning Corletti's salute. "We've picked up everyone near the camp, from both sides of the river, and a number of your people from downstream," he told the Athosians. "Some of them were badly injured, so we beamed the entire group to the infirmary. Dr. Beckett is attending to them."

Teyla smiled in relief, feeling the weight of loss lift from her

shoulders. "Thank you, Colonel."

"We are most grateful for your efforts," Halling said. "Is there any news on the other hunting parties?"

"We have some of them on board. Due to the electromagnetic interference from the lightning Hermiod's having some trouble detecting everyone. We're getting there, though. I understand from the others that there's also a group up in the mountains?"

"Yes, Halling's son and five—"

"Sir," Novak called. "Sorry to interrupt, but we have a report from Atlantis. In an attempt to retrieve Dr. McKay from Polrusso, they have sustained a number of severe injuries due to caustic sand coming through the Stargate."

"What's their status?" Caldwell took a step toward her station.

"They're asking us to return immediately. Dr. Weir isn't sure they can even dial out to the Alpha site, and they're afraid they won't be able to activate the city's star drive without Dr. McKay's help."

"They didn't get him back?"

The nervous young woman shook her head. "No, sir. He's presumed dead."

Feeling a deep stab of sorrow, Teyla said a short, silent prayer for her friend. There was little time for anything more.

Exhaling heavily, the *Daedalus's* commander turned back to her. Before he could begin, she spoke for him, knowing what was coming. "You must return to Atlantis."

"With evacuation options diminishing, our priority now has to be repairing the hyperdrive. We can't do that while we're out here. I'm sorry." His regret was sincere, she knew, and she appreciated it.

"I understand." Giving Halling the briefest of glances, she continued. "We must ask you to send us back to the surface."

"Teyla, you need not go," Halling said immediately. "Jinto is my son."

"And I am your leader, and his. I could not claim to be so if I abandoned either of you." She was dismayed that Halling had

thought to make the comment. Had she been separated from her people for so long that they no longer knew where her heart lay?

Corletti cleared her throat. "Sir, with your permission, I'd like to go back as well. I may still be able to get Jumper Three operational."

Surprised, Teyla opened her mouth to voice an objection, but Caldwell reacted first. "That shoulder looks bad, Lieutenant."

"Due respect, sir, I can't screw it up any worse at this point. It'll keep."

Caldwell's gaze moved over each of the trio in turn. "All of you need to understand that, if I send you back, the odds are good that it'll be a one-way trip. I can't make any promises about being able to return for you before the exogenesis machine begins producing nanites."

"We understand, Colonel," Halling said. "Our choice has been made."

Her superior's scrutiny did not cause Corletti to waver. "That's a *kid* out there, sir," she said simply.

"All right. Good luck."

Teyla closed her eyes, thinking of Rodney and hoping that his death had somehow served his cause. The *Daedalus* was the last hope for both his people and hers, and she understood that leaving it now made it unlikely that she would ever be reunited with any of them. But her people's best chance for survival lay with her adopted team, and that was enough.

If she were to die this day, she would do so unafraid. She nodded to the Asgard, and the beam swept her away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

John dropped his head and stared at the floor of the lab, feeling beaten and aged. A few grains of sand still lanced the side of his face with pinpricks of heat, and he brushed them off. Hadn't he learned by now never to take anything for granted in this godforsaken galaxy? He'd had the possibility of a sandstorm half in mind; it was the reason why he'd brought the jumper despite the lab's proximity to the 'gate. But he'd never actually voiced that thought, never pointed out the obvious fact that *arriving* in a jumper assured their protection against the vagaries of climate.

"We...we came as soon as we realized a storm was upon us. Often we have no warning!"

Vené was stammering about some guy who'd offered to wait by the 'gate for Rodney to return, but John couldn't make himself listen. For a brief moment his anger redirected itself toward Rodney. Had he taken the jumper back to Atlantis and left it there, or not used it at all? The man had an advanced degree in self-preservation—why hadn't the risk crossed his mind? Such a pointless, inexplicable, infuriating, *stupid* waste... God, what were they supposed to do now?

A loud crack jerked him from his thoughts. Ronon had punched the glass again. John pushed himself up from the floor, knowing that trying to make sense of it all would be a waste of time. Rodney was gone. Atlantis was not, and they all needed to get their heads in the game fast if they were going to be of any help in protecting the city.

Still chalk-white, Radek lifted shaking hands to reposition his glasses. "I should have gone," he murmured. "I told him that it was in his computer, but I did not bring it. My ankle is not so bad that I could not have gone..."

"Radek, knock it off," John said quietly but firmly. "You can't

hold yourself responsible for anything that slipped Rodney's mind, whether it's data or the jumper. Right now, we have to concentrate on what we can do for everyone else. All right?" He turned to the Polrusson, who was still babbling on about the abrupt nature of the storms. "How long will this last?"

Visibly shaken, Vené replied, "There is no way of knowing. Sometimes it takes hours, sometimes days. Although this is difficult and unpleasant, you must understand. We are able to bear the storms, so their length has never held much importance."

"To you. It matters a lot to us." Ronon stalked toward him, letting his anger show. "If your people can stand being outside, they need to go out there and find McKay."

"There will be little of him remaining by now." Shira cast her gaze downward, but the sadness in her voice was evidence that she spoke from experience. "Sometimes only yellow sand blows, other times a mixture of both, as you encountered on arrival. As you can see, this was a red storm."

"Even so. Having the body is important to our people."

At that, John glanced over. *Our people*. He'd never heard Ronon use such a phrase before, and he hoped it hadn't taken a teammate's death to make the Satedan feel that way.

"Of course," said Vené. "We will assemble a group immediately to search for your friend's body. After all he has sacrificed for us, it is the least we can do—but do not hope for much. As Shira has said, this is a red storm."

John swallowed, recalling Carson's words just a few hours earlier.

"I will accompany you back to the village," Vené offered. "I assume that you want to return to your home when possible."

"You assume right." Seeing Radek motionless in front of the computer, John reached out to grip his shoulder. "Radek?"

After a moment, the Czech shook himself and looked up. "We can still accomplish the water release and gather the ZPMs. I will need time to run more simulations, but...this is something Rodney would have wanted."

"Yeah, it is." And maybe it would keep Radek, and the rest of them, functionally sane in the process. John addressed Vené and Shira. "Can you give us a minute? We need to finish up some things here."

The Polrussons nodded and stepped out into the corridor, their faces darkened with regret. Once they were out of earshot, John said, "I didn't want to say too much with them hanging around. Elizabeth said that a lot of the sand got into the control room. What kind of damage could it have done?"

It took Radek a moment to process the information before he admitted, "I do not know the systems as well as Rodney. Could be big problem. I will not be able to say without investigation. But I can extend the life of the city shield once we recover the ZPMs from this planet. At least there will be time then to repair *Daedalus*."

He was staring at the computer screen as he spoke, focused on something undefined. John didn't know Radek Zelenka all that well, didn't know anything about his background or life experiences, but he recognized and respected the determination he saw in the other man's features.

Rubbing distractedly at his right ear, which felt like it had been scoured from the inside and was starting to ache, John listened as the scientist continued. "There remains a possibility that I will be able to locate Atlas's exogenesis machine, if the Polrussons can retrieve the data disc that Rodney brought back."

John's stomach lurched at the idea that they might find the blasted thing clutched in his friend's dead hand. He forcibly pushed that thought aside. "So, do you want to work here or back on Atlantis?"

"Here. I need to get more of these systems running." Radek eyed him with an unreadable expression. "If you are willing to stay, your gene will be most useful."

John wondered if he was being offered a coping tactic and decided he didn't care one way or the other. "Sure. I'll let Vené

and Shira know you and I are going to hang out here for a while."

Passing the HAZMAT-suited personnel moving swiftly toward the 'gate room, Elizabeth headed for the infirmary, vainly trying to imbue order on all the information thrown at her in the space of moments. They'd been able to raise the shield by remote access to the computer system, and the wormhole had just recently disengaged after the requisite thirty-eight minutes. The control room, her office, and the surrounding areas were off-limits while a hastily assembled emergency crew removed the worst of the corrosive sand.

Simpson's team had completed its survey of the subsystems Rodney had deemed necessary to make Atlantis spaceworthy, and the news wasn't good. Many of the systems appeared to have problems that were beyond the team's understanding, let alone their capacity to repair. Simpson had told her honestly that it simply couldn't be done without Rodney's input.

And even though she had no evidence, Elizabeth knew that holding out any hope of Rodney's survival would be nothing more than denial. Two of her control room techs were now in critical condition after being struck by far less sand than anyone on Polrusso would have gotten. Most likely, Rodney had been dead before they'd even enabled the 'gate shield.

A sudden thought chilled her: it was possible that he'd fallen victim to the 'gate shield itself.

The professionalism of Carson's staff kept the infirmary from falling into chaos. A number of people had received injuries and burns of varying degrees. Elizabeth affixed a reassuring smile to her face and strode through the main bay, toward the bed of the 'gate operator. The young man opened his eyes at her approach.

"Sean, how are you feeling?" she asked, sliding into a chair by his bed.

"Okay, ma'am. I didn't get hit too badly." His hoarse voice and the heavy bandages enveloping his hands and forearms belied that

statement.

"That's good to hear. Can you tell me any more about what happened?"

"I wish I knew. We didn't receive an IDC when the 'gate activated, but then Colonel Sheppard came on the radio and said that Dr. McKay was on his way. I tried to lower the shield, but it wouldn't respond. I don't know if it detected the sand or what, but the Colonel was yelling that Dr. McKay was already in transit and I had to get the shield down." Sean lifted a troubled gaze to her. "I thought it was the right thing to do, ma'am, but then Samir got hit right in the face... Do you know if he's all right?"

"The doctors are working on him now. He's in good hands." She knew that Samir would be lucky if he only lost his eyesight. Since the Ancients had told the Polrussons that the sand was a normal component of terraforming, it stood to reason that the 'gate shield would be programmed to guard against it. Not that any of them could have known. "It was the right thing to do," she assured Sean, leaning forward and laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I would have given the same order if I'd been in the control room. I just—I need to know something." It was an awful question, but there was no way around it. "Before you were able to lower the shield, did you hear anything large strike it?"

His eyes widened. "No."

"You're certain?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd know if anything... anyone hit the shield. You can run a diagnostic to make sure."

While Elizabeth wanted to do just that, everyone qualified to run the program was either stuck on Polrusso, on the returning *Daedalus*, in the infirmary, or dead. "Thank you, Sean. Get some rest."

She couldn't bear to stay there any longer, looking at all the people who'd been hurt in their failed attempt to bring a colleague home. Escaping into the corridor, she was waylaid by

the engineer in charge of monitoring Ea's exogenesis machine.

"I was hoping I'd find you here, Dr. Weir." The man's grim expression elevated her tension even more. "The device is gaining speed. It's digging through the ground at nearly triple its previous rate, and it's still getting faster. We're theorizing that it recently hit softer rock."

Just what we needed. "How long?"

"Impossible to tell. It could slow down again if it encounters a harder layer. If it continues at its current pace, days at most before it reaches the mantle." He sighed. "But if it continues to gain speed, or stops drilling because it's tapped into sufficient heat to power the next stage of operations, we'll need to consider enhancing the city shield as soon as the *Daedalus* returns. The longer we wait, the more we risk an uncontrolled nanite infestation on Atlantis."

She hadn't thought it would be possible, but Elizabeth felt yet another spike of anxiety. "If we increase the power to the shield too soon, we'll drain our reserves before the *Daedalus* can complete repairs."

"That's true. But the exogenesis machine is already beginning to separate." The engineer withdrew a printout from a folder in his hand and showed her the progression over time: first a single bright area of the Ancient composite material, then two, then four. "For all we know, these could be the component parts of the nanite manufacturing process. I plan to ask Dr. Beckett about it as soon as he arrives—he might know more."

"Please do that. And keep me informed." Elizabeth's com signaled, and she bit back a multilingual slew of curses. "Go ahead."

"Dr. Weir, we've just finished the diagnostic on the main dialing computer," another engineer reported—God, she was starting to lose track of who was doing what. "We can't dial out at all, even by remote access."

She ran her fingers across her temples and leaned against the wall. "Can you fix it?"

"We'll make it happen, ma'am, but..."

"But what?"

"But it would go a lot faster if Dr. McKay or Dr. Zelenka were here."

Ronon hefted a large sack onto the nearby cart and gave the animal hitched to it a wary look. The creature snuffled and ducked its head. "He will not provoke you," Shira promised, lifting another sack.

"He keeps looking at my hair like he wants to chew it."

The Polrusson woman laughed. "It probably reminds him of his mate. She had a long mane."

That didn't reassure him in the slightest. Ronon eased out of the animal's reach and continued to load the cart with goods. The storm still raged outside, and he'd grown increasingly frustrated with doing nothing in the Ancient lab, so when Shira had timidly requested his help in packing her cart with food and water for the new village, he'd agreed without a second thought.

While they worked, her children chased each other around the cart's wheels and through the adults' legs. In the market square, a dozen or so other carts were also being loaded with possessions. From what he had seen on the walk there, the entire village was gearing up for the exodus to its long-awaited future home.

A barrel of water stood beside the cart, and he reached in for a scoop. When he raised it to his lips, the salty taste caught him unawares, and he spat it out.

The children shrieked when the water fell on them, then they began to giggle. With an apologetic smile, Shira picked up a gourd lying next to the barrel. "You must drink through this. It filters out the salt."

Self-consciously, Ronon accepted the gourd and dipped it into the water. Sure enough, the water that seeped out through the slits at the bottom was sweet. "Everything around here has adapted to a hard life."

"You could say that. All of our plants have this ability. Their

tough skins make them resistant to the sand. We have long traded with other worlds who find such plants useful." Shira's voice took on a note of wonder. "I can hardly imagine what it will be like to see water fall from the sky. Many people have seen this on other worlds, and they say it is amazing. A cousin of mine even speaks of a planet that is nearly covered by a single, vast ocean." She turned shining eyes to him. "Have you ever encountered such a thing?"

He was considering how to reply when several people, still wearing their sand-resistant robes, entered the open area from an atrium that led outside. Ronon recognized the men as the search party sent out after McKay. One of them produced a small, flat metallic object from under his cloak.

"Where did you find it?" Ronon demanded, striding forward with his hand outstretched. The scientist often packed data discs inside such cases in order to protect them.

"It was lying right next to the 'gate," the man answered, passing it to him. "I regret to say that it was the only evidence we found of your friend."

"No clothing or shoes? Not even bones?" Although Ronon rarely paid much attention to the scientists' chatter, he knew the lightweight case was made of a soft metal called aluminum. Since it had survived with only deep pitting, something of McKay should have been nearby.

The man shook his head. "Perhaps he was able to travel through the 'gate after all."

"He wasn't," Ronon said, resolute. "We were talking to our people at the other end. He never made it through."

Shira looked away and busied herself with the cart once more. Her sudden reticence set off an alarm in his mind. Ronon's first instinct was to grab the man and force the truth from him, but his time on Atlantis had taught him that something called diplomacy might actually work more efficiently. "Thank you for your efforts," he told the man, then went back to her. "I have to take this disc back to the lab. Walk with me?"

After a moment's hesitation, she agreed. They traveled in

silence for a few minutes. Despite this effort at diplomacy, his style of information gathering had never been subtle, so he simply came out and asked the question. "Why did you look so uncertain when I asked about McKay?"

"I am merely grieved that your people have suffered such a loss. The storms are cruel. They are the reason why so few are willing to travel here, why you had heard such dark tales about Polrusso."

Still she wouldn't meet his eyes. "That's not it," Ronon said bluntly. "I know what it's like to be an outcast. The Wraith hunted me for sport for years, punishing anyone who dared show me kindness. If it weren't for the people I travel with now, I'd still be living that life."

Shira blinked, surprised. "You are not of their world?"

"No. What binds us together is our desire to vanquish the Wraith—not just for ourselves, but for every world in this galaxy." He was sure he could see an inherent sense of honesty in this woman, and he wasn't above instilling a little guilt if it accomplished his ends. "If you know something that could help us, you shouldn't hide it, especially when we're trying to help your people."

She hesitated again, long enough for them to reach the lab. Stepping inside, Ronon noted through the still-open doors that the storm was abating. Sheppard was leaning on the lab bench a little too heavily, lines of strain etched into his face. "You okay?" Ronon asked.

"Headache. Damned sand," Sheppard replied curtly. "They find any sign of Rodney yet?"

"No, not even his GDO," Ronon answered. "But they did find this." Turning so that Shira couldn't see the expression on his face, he met Sheppard's gaze meaningfully as he handed Zelenka the disc.

The Czech hardly reacted, and Ronon wondered if he'd picked up on the situation. Sheppard surely had, because he froze, and his tone became deliberate. "Radek, if it doesn't work we'll need to go back for the other one."

After examining the glistening, unmarked disc inside, Zelenka met his eyes for a moment before nodding. "It has been damaged by the sand. We will need to return for a duplicate before we can continue." Pausing, he turned to Shira and added, "However, I have finished my calculations of the necessary sequence and timing to shut down the terraforming machine."

"The storm's almost passed," Sheppard said pointedly, his gaze also trained on Shira. "We need to get back to our people and find out what happened on their end."

Shira's eyes darted from him to Ronon and back. Her suddenly worried expression suggested that she knew exactly what was going on. "Of course," she said at last. "I will inform the Elders."

Zelenka had already packed away most of the equipment he'd brought. Outside, the wind had dropped away to nothing, and the three of them left the lab via the rear entrance and started back to the jumper. Only a few steps past the door, Sheppard began to list to the right, nearly falling. Ronon instinctively seized his arm and held fast until he was sure the other man wouldn't collapse. "This is 'okay'?"

Cursing viciously under his breath, Sheppard righted himself. "Later."

Shira must have moved fast, because Vené and some of the other Elders arrived at the jumper as they finished loading the last of their equipment. The Polrussons looked stricken, terrified that their dreams of a better world were about to vanish through the Stargate.

Sheppard appeared to be in no mood to reassure them. "Dial the 'gate," he told Zelenka, who nodded stonily and moved to the DHD to comply. Ronon positioned himself at the jumper's open hatch, keeping one hand on his weapon and wondering why the Czech never came to the Marines' poker nights. Zelenka seemed more than ready to leave this wretched planet—ZPMs and all—behind. Perhaps permanently.

When the wormhole appeared, the Colonel activated his com. "Dr. Weir, this is Sheppard."

"It's good to hear from you, Colonel." Dr. Weir responded. "We've taken some damage to our dialing computer, so I'm relieved to know that establishing an incoming wormhole is still possible. You're on your way back?"

"We are," he confirmed, his eyes fixed on Vené. "Listen, I have to ask. Did Rodney ever make it back?"

None of them had expected to hear any differently, but the pause still hurt. "No, he didn't."

Vené couldn't hear the reply, of course, but he flinched under Sheppard's gaze, and Ronon felt a spark of fury. These people *knew* something, and even after all this, they were holding back.

"Surely you would not leave us when our deliverance is within reach," an Elder pleaded when Radek walked past him and stepped into the jumper.

"If we're being fed a lie about what happened to our friend? You bet your ass we would." Sheppard's voice was cold. "Yes, the sand is destructive. But even if we accept that every last bit of Dr. McKay, right down to the fillings in his teeth and buttons on his shirt, was either eaten away or blown away, you can't stand there and tell me with a straight face that a lousy DVD survived out here while McKay's weapon and GDO mysteriously vanished. That's impossible just based on weight alone. So either you tell me something that makes sense, or we're done here."

"John, we need your team back here now," Dr. Weir said over their coms. "We're running out of time. The exogenesis machine is gaining speed, and Teyla and Halling are trapped on the mainland, searching for Jinto. We need Dr. Zelenka to direct repairs to the dialing computer, for a start, and the list just keeps getting longer."

When his hard stare failed to break Vené's resolve, Sheppard turned around and stalked into the jumper. Covering him, Ronon reached toward the hatch controls.

"Vené, we must tell them," Shira blurted out suddenly.

"Tell us what?" demanded Ronon, pausing.

"It will not bring your friend back," Vené warned. "One way or

another, he is dead...but one of our people was outside when the storm hit and saw a Wraith beam take Dr. McKay. By then, there was little that remained of him. His face was gone, his hands nothing but stumps."

"What?" Sheppard lunged out of his seat, catching himself on the bulkhead to stay on his feet. "Why didn't you tell us before?"

"Does it make any difference? Your friend is dead. We feared if we told you, the threat of the Wraith would drive you away."

"Well, apparently you didn't need the Wraith's help." The Colonel, it seemed, possessed more capacity for anger than Ronon had ever realized. "You're doing a really expert job of driving us away all by yourselves."

"Please," Shira called softly, her eyes darting to each of them inside the jumper. "Do not abandon us simply because our courage failed."

"Is there a problem?" Dr. Weir asked, sounding increasingly tense. "Power's becoming an issue here."

Her voice was soon replaced by Caldwell's. "Colonel, get moving. Things are going to hell and you are needed here."

For an instant, Ronon wasn't sure what their next move would be. Then, abruptly, Sheppard returned to the pilot's seat, not sparing a glance at the Polrussons. "Yes, sir."

Ronon kept his eyes fixed inside the jumper as he activated the hatch, cutting off the villagers' anguished pleas.

Teyla pushed onward, climbing the next rise even as her legs protested. She was learning just how long muscle cramps could be ignored when one possessed sufficient motivation to keep moving. Of course, time had held little meaning since the first moments of this nightmare.

After beaming into the main camp, Lieutenant Corletti had risked flying Jumper Three above the mudslide that blocked the main path to the lake. But the jumper was clearly in no condition to travel further than a rocky ledge just above the section of the mountain that had collapsed. Unfortunately, on foot, they had been

forced to deviate around several uprooted trees and smaller landslides along the path.

"Jinto!" The winds were dying down, but Halling's voice was faltering after so many shouts. "Do you hear us?"

So accustomed had she become to hearing no response that the resulting cry caught her off-guard. "Father! We are here!"

Ahead of them, Corletti broke into a wide grin and hurried up the clearest path—down which Jinto came barreling.

Halling swept his son into his arms, and Teyla ran to greet the others. Six Athosians had composed the lakeside group, and now, finally, all of them had been found.

"The storm is ending," Jinto said happily, pointing to the clearing skies. "We can return home."

Over the boy's head, Halling exchanged an uneasy glance with Teyla. Sensing the need for a diversion, Corletti called Jinto and broke open a bar of chocolate for him to share with his friend Tiro.

"We should prepare for the ritual," Halling said quietly, his gaze resolute.

"No." On this point Teyla was unwilling to negotiate. "Our deaths are not yet certain. If that changes, there will be time left for the ritual."

Halling looked like he wanted to disagree, but conceded. "Perhaps you are right. There may yet be time."

Approaching them, Corletti said, "If the weather keeps improving and I can get a little technical advice on what to do, the jumper ought to be able to get back to Atlantis even without the dampeners. It'll depend on their status."

"I agree." Teyla motioned to the group to gather.

"Why must we leave the land and go back to Atlantis?" Tiro asked, looking up from his share of the chocolate.

"I will explain as we go, but we must move quickly. Should the storm return, if nothing else, the jumper will provide us some protection."

While they covered the trail at a pace the Marines called a jog, Teyla attempted to describe the effects of the exogenesis machine

and the impending nanite infestation. The adults seemed to understand, and the pace quickened. Jinto, however, frowned and hurried to run alongside her at the front of the group.

"I still don't understand what nanites are," he said.

Looking for a way to explain, Teyla suggested, "Imagine if this world were made from the small blocks that Colonel Sheppard brought for you from Earth."

Jinto nodded. "He called them Legos."

The boy matched her stride without difficulty. Proud that Halling's son was growing into such a strong young man, Teyla allowed herself a brief smile in spite of the situation. "This machine will break apart the entire world, just as you break apart those blocks in order to build new toys—except that these blocks are so small that you cannot see them without Dr. Beckett's microscope, and they are all the exact same size and color."

"What color?"

"According to Dr. McKay"—the name nearly caught in her throat; in her joy over finding her people, she had nearly forgotten—"gray."

Jinto glanced over his shoulder. "You mean, like that?"

Teyla paused. In the distance, a tiny portion of the mountainside, already a patchwork of leafless grays and browns because of the storm, appeared to have taken on a flatter, more ubiquitous hue, as if a portion of the land was...smudged. It might have been her imagination, but that was a risk she was unwilling to take. "We should hurry," she called, and the pace accelerated again.

A few minutes later, she looked back. "I'm pretty sure that patch is getting bigger," Corletti said, as if reading her thoughts. "I vote we double-time it." She winced as the running jostled her injured shoulder but did not reduce her pace.

"And then?" Halling asked.

Teyla glanced over her shoulder again. This time, there was no doubt. The gray mass was expanding. "We will determine that when we arrive."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Conflicting instincts warred in John's mind as Elizabeth asked Caldwell commanded Jumper One to return. Learning that Rodney had been taken by a Wraith beam changed the picture considerably, in spite of what Vené had said about his condition. As badly as John wanted to stay on Polrusso and search for Rodney, Teyla was in just as much danger on the mainland. With two missing teammates pulling him in different directions, he decided to head for Atlantis. They needed Radek there, and John could return to Polrusso and begin the search after getting up to speed on the situation back home. The jumper's dialer would allow him to establish an outgoing wormhole without need for the main computer.

Assuming, of course, that he could still fly at that point. Although sitting down seemed to improve matters, his balance was off and getting worse. He'd never been prone to vertigo, but his ear was aching mercilessly, and he was beginning to suspect that the sand was somehow to blame.

On the other side of the event horizon everything seemed to tilt, and he drew in a sharp breath, grateful for the jumper's gate-linked autopilot. When he managed to focus again he saw that the control room doors to the balcony were open and giant fans had been set up to remove the sand. A half-dozen personnel in HAZMAT suits wandered through the contaminated area, working on the controls.

While the autopilot smoothly lifted them into the jumper bay, John shut his eyes, gathering himself for a moment before selecting a berth for Jumper One. The bay had remained relatively sand-free, and so Elizabeth was waiting for them, surrounded by a throng of scientists.

"I believe this is my cue." Radek stood up from the copilot's seat, his eyes narrowing worriedly when John didn't follow.

John turned in his seat, but indicated he should leave first. "Be there in a minute."

The moment the hatch opened, Radek got mobbed. Ronon stood back, one eyebrow cocked at the free-for-all. The Czech couldn't even finish answering a question before someone else broke in with what John supposed was a more urgent request. Even through an ear that felt stuffed with steel wool, he could hear enough of the various subjects to know that they'd get nothing accomplished this way.

At last, Radek had had enough. "*Ticho, debilové!* Quiet! No wonder Rodney rails at you so!"

The effect was instantaneous. Silence fell, and John, who had by now carefully made his way to the rear of the jumper, realized just how much losing Rodney had shaken them all. *Present tense*, he noted. Did Radek believe Rodney might still be alive, too? Or was John reading way too much into one word?

Elizabeth, who was hovering by the rear hatch, took the opportunity to restore order. "There are a lot of important issues to deal with, everyone. I trust Dr. Zelenka to assign the appropriate priority to each of them. Please get him up to speed—one person at a time."

The jumper bay doors opened to admit Colonel Caldwell. Figuring he'd better report to his superior, John started to disembark from the jumper, only to stagger as he stepped through the hatch. Again, Ronon steadied him.

Damn it, I do not need this right now. No matter what he tried, he couldn't seem to get his balance. Pain was radiating down through his jaw; it felt like somebody had punched him when he wasn't looking.

Concern was immediately evident in Elizabeth's bearing. She approached him, saying something he couldn't make out.

"What?"

"Are you all right?" she repeated.

"Yeah, just got a little rocked by the transit." Aware of how flimsy it sounded, he immediately turned to Caldwell. "How did

Teyla get left behind on the mainland?"

"It was her choice. She understood that we had to leave and asked to continue the search for the rest of the Athosians." Caldwell's lips compressed in regret, but he also looked resigned to that decision. "We'll go back for them if at all possible, but right now we have more immediate priorities."

John nodded, realizing a half-second too late that any such movement was a bad idea. "One of those priorities needs to be me going back to Polrusso. It's possible that Rodney's still alive."

Elizabeth's eyes flared wide. "How can that be?"

"Apparently the villagers saw one of the local Wraith beam him onto a Dart." John leaned on the extended drive pod of Jumper Eight, currently down for maintenance, and willed his head to get its act together. "From what the Elders said, I didn't get the feeling that the hive was awake, just that a few Darts go out on occasional snack runs during the storms."

"If the Wraith have McKay, they may know about Atlantis by now." Caldwell looked none too thrilled with that possibility.

"Not necessarily. The villager said that Rodney was barely alive when he was taken."

"But the Wraith need healthy victims."

"Which means they might not feed off Rodney right away, or even at all. They might put him in one of those damned cocoons, dump him in a corner, and leave him to a slow and agonizing death." Elizabeth's horrified reaction told John he was hitting below the belt, but being delicate wouldn't serve anyone's purposes right now.

Caldwell was studying him a little too carefully. "Colonel, forgive me for sounding skeptical, but this seems like a risk we may not be able to take. For starters, you don't appear to be in any condition to lead a rescue mission."

"I just need a couple hours of sleep—"

"John, you're white as a sheet and barely upright," Elizabeth cut him off gently. "And your face and ear look... Well, you certainly need medical attention."

"Given the situation here," the *Daedalus* commander continued, "we're not in a position to go mounting an attack on a hive ship. An attempted extraction would most likely awaken the hive, and they'd be apt to finish the job the exogenesis machine started on Atlantis."

"This is not necessarily true," countered Radek. John hadn't noticed him break free from the science team, but the Czech now came over to join them. "We can still carry out the original plan to acquire the ZPMs and simultaneously flood the Wraith ship. But if I am to do this, I will need to return to the planet as soon as we have taken care of the worst of Atlantis's problems."

Elizabeth held up a hand to slow him down. "I understand the urgency here, but I need more information. What would be the impact to the Polrussos? You said they needed time to complete their move."

"They'll move fast enough now." That statement came from Ronon, and received a look of mild suspicion from Atlantis's leader.

Even talking was starting to hurt, but the anger John still felt toward Vené and his people spurred him on. "It took far more than it should have to get the Polrussos to be honest with us about the Wraith. Given the way we had to drag the information out of them, and the way we left, they have to assume that we've gone for good. When we go back, we can tell them that we'll only help if we're allowed to release the water now, because we're as worried about the Wraith threat as they feared. While Radek gets everything set up, we'll have the opportunity to take a team in to extract Rodney."

Caldwell didn't appear convinced. He turned to Radek. "How confident are you that we'll be able to acquire the ZPMs and flood the Wraith ship?"

The scientist's brief hesitation put the differences between Rodney and Radek into sharp relief. "I cannot guarantee," he replied truthfully. "We must remember that a hive ship is indeed a ship, and has the capability to seal itself against water as it does

against the vacuum of space. Still, Atlantis was submerged for a purpose. Perhaps the Wraith do not like water. But whatever the reason, we can only work to minimize the time the Wraith will have to recognize the threat and defend themselves or escape."

"What's your plan for shutting down the terraforming system and collecting the ZPMs?" Elizabeth asked.

In response, Radek withdrew his laptop from his pack and quickly called up a schematic. From what John could see through a fog of pain, it was a diagram of the ZPM locations on Polrusso. "The ZPMs form a type of power matrix across the surface of the planet. If we go by jumper to remove them sequentially from the matrix, the remaining units will attempt to compensate, and the system will weaken. We will remove the first ZPM from the area where we wish the force field to fail initially, but this does not assure that the water will rush out at once. It may do this, but equally it may take days or even weeks for the water pressure to break through the rock holding it back." Radek pushed his glasses up on his nose. "It may also still be possible for me to locate the second exogenesis machine. This I cannot promise, either, but if there is time—"

"Time we can only buy ourselves by doing everything in our power not to alert the Wraith," Caldwell interrupted.

Radek's head bobbed readily. "Hopefully by then we will have acquired sufficient ZPMs to power the city shield, against the Wraith as well as the nanites. That will give us time to repair the *Daedalus*."

Even before Caldwell spoke, John knew he wasn't going to like what he heard. "If you go barging into that hive ship now, the Wraith will be all over you before you can blink, and we'll kiss off any chance of acquiring even one of those ZPMs."

"Not necessarily," John insisted. "We've learned a lot about the layout inside those ships. And if we do wake them up, we can go for some of the furthest ZPMs right away, before they can stop us."

"You don't know that you'll make it."

"You don't know that we won't!"

"Gentlemen." Elizabeth sounded utterly torn.

John felt for her, but there was nothing he could do to make this easier.

"Our best chance to save the most people is to initiate Radek's plan," she said at last. "With any luck, we'll also be able to find the second exogenesis machine and bring it back here, but that must be our secondary priority."

"Understood. Radek, is two hours enough—" John's world tilted again. By the time he managed to straighten up, four pairs of eyes were watching him with varying degrees of alarm and doubt.

"Major Lorne's team will go," Caldwell concluded. "You, Colonel, need to face facts and go see Dr. Beckett. You're injured, and you'd be a liability out there."

The sick feeling that settled in his gut had nothing to do with the sand or the pain, and everything to do with a disturbing sense of déjà vu. John looked to Elizabeth. "You're not going to let Lorne search for Rodney, are you?"

"John, we have to be realistic. The odds—"

"Since when has this expedition relied on the odds?" he demanded. "I recognize that Rodney's chances aren't good. But as long as there is a chance, don't we have an obligation to try?"

"Don't think that I like this any better than you." Elizabeth sighed. "God knows we can't afford to lose Rodney. But it's overwhelmingly likely that he is dead. It's my call, and with this level of risk I can't allow a rescue mission to proceed."

Starting to feel a flicker of desperation, John held her gaze. "You once asked me to tell you if I thought you were making a mistake," he said quietly, remembering the mission that had followed the long-past storm. "I'm telling you now."

Her eyes held endless empathy but also resolve. "The answer's no. I'm sorry."

And there it was. "You're sorry," he repeated, not bothering to mask the edge of contempt in his voice. "I feel better already."

Elizabeth flinched, but didn't falter. Caldwell moved in front

of her, arms folded over his chest. "In case I wasn't clear before, *Lieutenant Colonel*, you're to stand down and report to the infirmary immediately."

Before John could figure out how to respond, Ronon stepped up beside him, staring the older man down. "You told me your people placed high importance on your loyalty to your comrades, Sheppard."

Bristling, Caldwell drew himself taller. "I don't like what you're implying."

John knew he should shut Ronon up before this got ugly, but he was too pissed off and too wrung out to try.

"I don't care what you like. I don't like leaving my teammates to suffer and die!"

"You are way out of line, Specialist!"

"Don't use my rank like it means something to you," the Satedan growled. "I didn't take your army's oath. You don't get to decide where my line is."

"Maybe not." Still as stoic as ever, Caldwell signaled to the Marines standing guard in the corridor. "Confine this man to his quarters until further notice," he ordered. "This much I *do* get to decide."

"Hold on a minute," John objected, only to feel Caldwell's iron gaze fall on him next.

"Infirmary, Sheppard. And under no circumstances are you to leave until cleared by Beckett."

Out of the corner of his eye, John saw another pair of Marines inching toward him. This day just kept getting better and better. "Is this a joke, sir?"

"Put yourself in my place, handling someone with a record that reads like yours," Caldwell said, unmoved.

So, because he'd bucked orders in a similar situation before, that justified preemptive confinement? What the hell kind of ship did this guy run? John stared at Elizabeth, willing her to stand up for him. "You're going along with this?" he accused.

"I hope Rodney can forgive me," she said softly. "But if it

keeps you from blindly tilting at windmills, then yes, I am."

The feeling was familiar, and yet infinitely more of a betrayal. "Well, this has been... educational."

His body turned traitor next as a rush of dizziness sideswiped him, dropping him awkwardly to one knee. Elizabeth took a step toward him, but he pinned her with a fierce glare and staggered to his feet unassisted. With as much dignity as he could summon, he turned and started toward the infirmary, the two Marines moving to flank him as he went.

Without blinking Corletti accepted the dried meat Jinto offered her. "Good stuff," she proclaimed after taking a bite. "Best jerky ever."

"Jerky." Sitting cross-legged at the top of the jumper's open hatch, Jinto tested out the unfamiliar word. "What does it mean?"

"Um... To tell you the truth, kiddo, I don't actually know."

Teyla smiled as she finished binding Niva's leg wound. They had reached the jumper and taken it back down into the hunting camp. Clearing skies and the discovery of food and drink in the camp had improved the immediate situation measurably. The nearby mountains, though, were a testament to the power of Ea's exogenesis machine. They were being steadily torn apart in a series of landslides, evidenced by an almost continuous rumble in the air. The group had been fortunate to escape more than one close call on their journey down.

If hunting had been their goal today, their bounty would have been great. She watched as many animals, sensing the terror to come, picked their way across the mudslide that had enveloped part of the camp. Overhead, thousands of birds fled the area as well.

"Oughta think about building them an ark," Corletti said, half to herself. Teyla did not bother to question the meaning of the comment, and the Marine headed into the jumper's cockpit and activated the radio. "Atlantis, this is Jumper Three report-

ing in. You guys forgotten about us yet?"

"Not a chance, Jumper Three," a tech responded. "Stand by while I get Dr. Weir."

Only moments passed before Dr. Weir's voice came on the line. "It's good to hear from you, Lieutenant. What's your status?"

"Ma'am, the good news is that we've rounded up all the Athosians and made it back to the main camp. The bad news is that we can see the beginning of the nanite influx, and it's moving fast."

Beneath them, Teyla felt a reverberation through the ground. Not a tremor, but the hooves of many large-bodied grazing beasts stampeding through already churned soil. Even from this distance she could see the vapor puffing from their wide nostrils and the fear in the way they snapped at one another even as they ran. She slid into the copilot's seat to listen to the conversation. Outside the windshield the gray continued its relentless progress. It would not be long now before they were engulfed, but she would not give up hope.

"The jumper's not exactly firing on all cylinders," Corletti continued. "And I don't like our chances of making it to Atlantis. Can you spare a technical specialist to talk us through some troubleshooting?"

"I'll get someone to assist." Dr. Weir paused. "You realize, though, that—"

"Yes, ma'am." Corletti shared a look with Teyla, unnoticed by Jinto only a short distance away. Both women understood that even if they could get the jumper operational, returning to Atlantis would risk infecting the city. "Our goal is to move to another area of the mainland, farther away from the nanites. If we can buy ourselves a day or two, the brain trust back on Atlantis should be able to figure something out."

Teyla wasn't sure if the Marine's words stemmed from true optimism or from a desire to put forward a brave face. She chose to believe it was the former, but she felt a renewed sadness as

she remembered that any solution the expedition might devise would have to be reached without its chief scientist.

Watching from the doorway while Radek Zelenka simultaneously tackled a dozen problems from a dozen people, Elizabeth was struck by the sharp contrast between his working approach and Rodney's. Radek's quiet, competent manner was a stabilizing influence, but it was clear that he was becoming overextended. He worked more slowly, more methodically, and was less inclined to take risks. Seeing him in action now highlighted all the reasons why he and Rodney had complemented each other so well.

Radek looked up and, noticing that she was waiting, lifted an open hand toward her. "You are in need of updates," he guessed.

"I'm afraid so." Ready herself for bad news due to sheer habit, Elizabeth entered the room and leaned her forearms on the lab bench. "The star drive?"

Immediately he shook his head. "I wish I could say differently, but it cannot be done. Given the problems I have already seen, not to mention the others that surely exist, Atlantis is simply not capable of space travel in its current state."

Against her better judgment, she allowed a rueful smile to slip free. "Rodney wouldn't have said that."

"No, he would not," Radek admitted. "But neither would he have succeeded with the repairs."

She wanted to believe that, but the uncertainty fed into other doubts. She'd been questioning her decision not to mount a rescue mission almost from the moment it had been made. Not because of John; although she understood that the situation had to be tweaking all of his Afghanistan-related defenses, he was clearly too sick to lead such a mission. Ronon and a team of Marines might still be able to bring Rodney home, but at what cost? And what would be left of him if they found him?

Right now, survival for as many as possible was Elizabeth's only goal. Anything else had to come second. Her com alerted her to the check-in from Jumper Three, and Radek listened in, looking

progressively tenser, while Lieutenant Corletti described the situation on the mainland.

"We can wait no longer," Radek said regretfully, covering his microphone with his hand. "If the nanites have appeared on the surface, I must reconfigure the city's shield and boost power to it immediately. We have no way of knowing if or when they will become airborne. When that occurs, it will still be several hours before they can reach Atlantis, of course, but we must act now to be certain."

The consequences of that proposal hung like a solid weight around her neck. While Radek expertly multitasked, packing equipment and rattling off instructions to other scientists and, at the same time, explaining to Corletti how to reroute the auxiliary power systems in the jumper, Elizabeth sank into a chair. The other jumpers' DHDs afforded them the ability to dial out to the Alpha site, but it still remained a race against time.

Vaguely aware that the many scientists, engineers and technicians in the room were looking to her for a decision, for leadership, she lifted her chin and gave the order that would result in a death sentence for those left on the mainland. "Reconfigure the shield."

Radek went to the computer and typed in his access code. "It will have to be at full strength. Rodney is—was—correct. We cannot risk allowing anything to enter, not even air. At this rate our ZPM will be depleted very quickly. I must get back to Polrusso and make preparations for obtaining at least one more."

Elizabeth nodded and watched him go, feeling a creeping sense of despair and a weariness deeper than she'd ever known.

Midway through the fifteenth straight hour of tending to the injured Athosians on the *Daedalus* and the control room personnel on Atlantis, it occurred to Carson that the entire expedition was now engaged in a form of triage. Everyone was attempting to treat the most critical issues first, keeping the city alive for as long as possible. It wasn't the most eloquent metaphor ever dreamed up, but he couldn't be faulted for being a bit sleep-deprived.

After checking on the control room techs again, he'd hoped to retreat to the relative safety of his office and rest his eyes for a few minutes. Then two Marines had all but carried in an ashen Colonel Sheppard, and suddenly Carson was putting the Ancient equivalent of an MRI machine into service.

When the results of the scan appeared on the screen, Carson had to fight to rein in the despondency that threatened to surface. Certainly he'd been the bearer of considerably worse news in his career as a doctor, but this was one diagnosis he dreaded giving.

The sand had done extraordinary damage to the Colonel's middle ear and sinus cavities—it was a wonder that the man had stayed on his feet as long as he had. From the evidence, Carson could only theorize that the residual properties of the *iratus* retrovirus in Sheppard's system had somehow stopped the caustic substance from reaching his brain. Either fate or coincidence had prompted a virus that had once nearly killed him to save his life now, but it still felt like a cruel trick. The pain, severe though it surely was, would be treatable. The vertigo would be a bit more complex—but...

Given the physical and mental gauntlet Carson had run over the past couple of days, he'd almost expected to hit his breaking point sooner or later. This might just be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Outside, the nanites had begun their destruction. Inside the city, people he called friends were injured or dead. All of it a consequence of events set in motion by his own hands. The ravaged face and utterly destroyed eyesight of that poor lad from the control room, the Athosian woman whose leg had been so badly mangled—God, an entire planet brought to ruin. Had he really expected to be able to *sleep* after seeing that? Or ever again?

"Carson."

Sheppard rarely called him by his first name, and it swiftly brought him out of his introspection. As directed, the Colonel had hardly moved since settling on the bed, to mitigate the pain as well as to facilitate the scan. Now he only turned his head far enough to better listen with his good ear. "Cut it out."

With false cheer, Carson said, "And what is it you'd like me to cut out, Colonel?"

"You know what I mean. Quit thinking that what's happening is your fault. It isn't—none of it."

He sighed. "That's all very well to say, but it's hard to get around the simple cause-and-effect nature of it all."

"Yeah, I know. Remember, I'm the one who kept skulking around here after Ronon got shot." Sheppard looked at him intently, not letting him off the hook. "You don't owe anyone any apologies. You couldn't have done anything to stop Ea."

And that was the heart of it. Carson badly wanted to believe that, but one thing held him back. "I could have stayed away from that pod."

"Yeah, you could have. But you're a doctor," Sheppard said, as if it explained everything. Someday, perhaps, that sentiment might not ring so hollow.

Trying to regain his professionalism, Carson stepped closer to the bed. "You may not feel so sympathetic when you hear your diagnosis."

Although the pilot's expression didn't noticeably change, the openness he'd shown only moments ago suddenly vanished. "Hit me."

"There's a fair bit of damage. A lot of it can be rectified with surgery, and we can manage the vertigo with medication until then. As for your hearing...I'm not a specialist, but I believe a cochlear implant would help you regain enough to meet the military's medical standards."

A flash of unbridled anguish tightened Sheppard's features as the implications became clear. "Doc, you know what the limits are for the flight physical."

"Aye. I'm so sorry, John."

The Colonel closed his eyes. A familiar mask of control slid into place within seconds, but its edges were frayed. "Can you get me on my feet to go back to Polrusso?"

Carson hesitated, not sure he'd made himself clear. "Right now,

lad, I don't think you'd be able to fly even as a passenger. The worst of the inflammation will subside in time, but only in the event of an evacuation would I want you going through the 'gate. Just rest here for a while. If the pain gets too bad, or you start to feel any nausea, let me know so we can adjust the meds."

With a quick, awkward pat to Sheppard's shoulder, he moved away, sure the other man wouldn't want anyone hovering while he came to terms with the shattering blow he'd just been dealt. Before Carson could leave the room, though, Sheppard spoke up again. "Just for the record, this isn't your fault, either."

Turning back, Carson asked, "Then whose, Colonel?"

Sheppard stared up at the ceiling, his eyes lifeless. "Does it matter?"

That point, at least, Carson was forced to concede. He'd never doubted his decision to join the expedition before this. Maybe in time, the doubts would fade, but right now he wondered if the risks they'd taken had ever been worthwhile.

"Next you must reconnect the tertiary data bus—third crystal from the left."

Teyla followed Dr. Zelenka's instructions precisely, determined to leave no room for error. Across from her, Corletti was standing on one of the rear seats to gain better access to the bank of Ancient crystals. "Dr. Z, which one was the grounding slot again?"

"Top compartment, all the way to the rear," the scientist replied patiently.

"Okay." Corletti tossed a sheepish smile over her shoulder as she reached in with her good arm. "I keep forgetting which ones I'm not supposed to move, and I don't want to fry us."

The Marine didn't show it, of course, but Teyla knew she had to be running on her last reserves of energy. Facing a seemingly endless series of challenges had drained them all, in spirit as well as physically. Still, no one had mentioned the end-of-life ritual since Halling's comment hours ago, and she refused to consider it herself. While they had the jumper, there still was a chance. A brief

glance outside told her that it was slim. "What next?"

"That was the last reroute," replied Zelenka. "You may try the start sequence now."

"All right! Let's do this thing." Corletti climbed down and headed for the cockpit. "Powering up." She placed her hand over the panel and slid it forward.

The expected hum of energy never came. The pilot let loose with a string of curses that only ceased when she noticed Jinto listening in from outside the open hatch. "Dr. Z?"

"I have gone through the entire auxiliary power system schematic." Zelenka sounded almost as frustrated as Corletti. "Perhaps there is more damage than we anticipated."

Dropping into her seat with a groan, Corletti pushed back the strands of dark hair that had escaped from her braid. "It's the Ancient equivalent of a battery pack. Maybe it has a loose lead somewhere."

"Teyla!" Halling rushed to the hatch, the others hurriedly gathering their belongings behind him. "The gray now streams down the hills like water. It will be here momentarily." The look in his eyes warned her that they had run out of time. "The ceremony. If not for yourself, then do not deny it to Jinto."

Going to investigate, Teyla came to the rear of the jumper and looked outside. As she suspected, even were they to run, they would soon be outpaced, for the grayness moved like nothing she had ever encountered. It was not alive, and yet it held a malevolence that she could not define. She watched in repugnance as it easily overtook a herd of unfortunate animals attempting to flee before its relentless path. Their squeals of terror brought cries from those on the far side of the jumper who also watched. Within seconds the carnage was assimilated into the amorphous gray substance.

"Teyla?" Halling's voice was insistent. "We must begin now, with or without you."

"You must do what you think is best, but I will not give up so easily." Meeting the eyes of several, she then went back inside to the cockpit.

"Teyla!" She heard Halling's footsteps inside the jumper, and then felt his hand on her shoulder. "You need this, perhaps more than we, to make peace with yourself. There is no more time."

She turned to confront him. The plea in his eyes, Teyla knew, was out of concern for her, and yet for some reason it felt wrong. Before her stood a man she had known all of her life, calm in the face of impending death, preparing himself for that final, inevitable journey. Behind her in the pilot's seat, Lieutenant Corletti was equally calm, but determinedly refusing to give up. The Marine would not abandon her efforts until the grayness swept over her.

In that brief moment, Teyla understood that the genes bequeathed to her by generations long past, generations before the Wraith had even become as they were, had traveled to a distant galaxy in the bodies of the Ancestors and bred a world of humans who refused to surrender in the face of adversity. Neither Corletti nor Halling was right or wrong, but Teyla knew now that a part of her was from both worlds. The ritual was a good and necessary ceremony—but it was one that should only be undertaken by those who were ready to die.

Glancing firstly through the rear hatch and then the windshield, she saw that the gray had now surrounded their elevated position on a hillock. Teyla turned her attention to the power unit and said, "And I am not yet ready to die." When Corletti tossed her a grim look, she added, "Perhaps a variation on the procedure you employed earlier?" She directed a well-placed kick into the side of the unit. The jumper hummed to life.

"Oo-rah!" Corletti beamed at her. "You just earned yourself an honorary commission as a Marine."

Dashing to the hatch, Teyla beckoned the rest of the group inside. The jumper soon filled with refugees, far more than she had ever seen the craft hold, for the last of her people, the two she had thought lost to the river the previous night, had finally staggered into the camp. The gray death pursued them relentlessly, drawing ever nearer as everyone piled inside. As soon as the last person stepped aboard, Corletti yanked the jumper off the ground,

not waiting for the hatch to fully close. Just before it sealed, Teyla caught a chilling glimpse of a filament of gray only a body length away.

"Atlantis, Jumper Three is airborne," Corletti reported, her tone a mixture of relief and exuberance.

"Good work, very good work. And your jumper-starting secret is safe with me." There was a hint of a smile in Zelenka's voice, but it soon faded. "I only wish I could tell you to come home."

"It's okay, Dr. Z. We can outrun this crap for a while."

This time Teyla was sure the confidence in the young woman's voice rang of false bravado, but it had an effect on Halling and the others, for there was no more talk of rituals.

"I must return to Polrusso now," Zelenka informed them. "When I come back, I will have the means to stop this monstrous thing."

"We'll hold you to that. Safe trip."

The jumper climbed, and Teyla looked through the windshield at the astonishing sight below. The grayness had spread outward from its starting place up in the mountains, leveling everything in its path. It now flowed like water through and over the riverbanks, perhaps using the speed of the river itself to facilitate its progress. At the rate it now traveled the planet would surely be overwhelmed in days.

"Lieutenant!" Zelenka's animated voice broke in again, startling them. A few rapid words about halting the dialing sequence were spoken to someone off-radio, and then he was back. "Please, take a reading of the gray goo. Of what exactly is it made—not just the chemical breakdown, but the molecular structure?"

"Stand by." Calling up the HUD, Corletti watched a list of options scroll across the screen and struggled to manipulate the sensors with only her uninjured hand. After a few seconds the results came up on the screen. "Okay, I've got a material analysis, but it's Greek to me. Can I transmit it to you somehow?"

"Yes, yes. I am in Jumper Two, preparing to leave, but I have just had an idea." He rattled off a series of short instructions, and Corletti obeyed. Another minute passed before they heard an exul-

tant shout in his native language. "I believe it can be done!"

"What can be done?"

"Recalibration of the jumper's shield. Much like we calibrated it to repel water while on the sea floor, we can attempt to configure it to repel gray goo."

"Will that allow us to reach Atlantis?" Teyla asked.

"If I am right, Atlantis's shield can also be programmed to match the jumper's. Then you should be allowed to pass through without bringing any undesirables with you."

The survivors behind her broke into a hopeful murmur, loud enough that Corletti had to raise her voice. "All right, what do we need to do?"

"Wait one minute, please." Another pause, punctuated by a few hushed, unintelligible mutterings. "Ah, now. Please activate the shield. I will talk you through it."

With Zelenka's guidance, Corletti made the necessary adjustments. "Okay, that's it," the Marine announced at last. "Now how do we know if it's working?"

The response was subdued. "I can think of only one way."

Peering down at the mass of writhing gray below the jumper, Corletti glanced over at Teyla, looking for confirmation. Although her stomach lurched at the prospect of what was to come, Teyla turned in her seat to face Halling and the others. She did not have the right to endanger their lives, especially as she had denied them the ritual.

Halling offered her a tentative smile. "You must do what is necessary." Drawing Jinto closer to him, he nodded once, briefly, and turned his gaze to his son. "I love you."

At that moment, Teyla could not have been more proud to call herself an Athosian.

Corletti put the craft into a shallow descent and drew in a long breath. They would no doubt be dead before much longer in any case, and at the very least, a failure here would be swift.

Jumper Three settled onto a mass of gray goo—and was immediately engulfed by darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Consciousness returned slowly, many of its usual signs jumbled or missing. He heard nothing and saw only blackness. There was no pain, which was strange because he had a distinct recollection of an extremely unpleasant toothache. A few seconds passed before other memories coalesced in his mind: the sandstorm closing in on him with a predatory howl—

Heart racing, Rodney jerked halfway off the bed. His bandaged hands were numb and failed to support him, but someone was immediately there, easing him back down into soft pillows. A gentle hand stroked his forehead, and a soothing, melodic voice broke through the hazy panic that had begun to set in. “Rest and do not fear. You are safe.”

The human body, Carson had told him on several occasions, cannot remember pain. Well, Carson was full of it. The pain Rodney had recently endured would be imprinted on his psyche for all time. He was certain he’d felt his eyeballs burst, felt the skin being ripped away from his face. He remembered terror and agony and... And yet he was here, his skin whole and warm under the nurse’s touch. She smelled of honey and jasmine, and the comfort she offered felt so incredibly pure. He found his pulse slowing and the memory of that shocking trauma fading. The drugs, no doubt. “Is Carson here?”

“I do not know of Carson.”

All right, not a nurse. He was sure he would have remembered such a voice if he’d ever heard it on Atlantis. For some reason that didn’t bother Rodney as much as he might have expected.

“You are in my home on Polrusso,” the voice continued. “I am called Turpi.”

Forgetting the bandages, Rodney lifted a hand to his eyes, and succeeded in knocking bound fingers clumsily against his face.

“Why is it so dark?”

The woman—Turpi—caught his hand and lowered it to his chest. “Your eyesight will recover,” she assured him, holding his arm in a loose grasp while her other hand still lay against his face. “But the damage was great, and it will take time for you to heal. You must leave the bandages in place for several days. If you remove them too soon you will lose your sight permanently.”

“Permanently?” He should have been monumentally freaked out by that warning. Somehow, he wasn’t. Which was worrying in itself, but even that argument failed to take root, and he found himself simply...accepting.

“Lie still. You have much healing yet to do.”

“Wait.” He wasn’t sure why he’d said that. She’d made no move to step away, but even the idea of her leaving frightened him. *Probably because you can’t see, genius.* “The others—the people traveling with me. Where are they?”

“I know of no others. They may still be in the village near the Stargate.”

“We’re not there now?”

“We live in a different village. It is some distance away.”

Turpi’s hand moved up and down his arm. The motion was soothing, but unusually dulled. “Why can’t I feel my hands?” The flood of panic that he knew he should be experiencing refused, for whatever reason, to make itself known.

“Like much of your body they were badly burned. Your clothes and whatever possessions you had were taken by the sand. My father found you struggling and wrapped you in robes to protect you. He could not see the path to the cliff-dwellers’ village, so he took you inland away from the storm.”

As she spoke an image became sharper in his mind. He recalled a rider in swirling black robes, face shielded from the sand and hidden from view. The rider had been astride a white animal—a stallion, maybe, although it seemed to feature some traits that he’d seen in the llama-like village animals. The whole thing had a very Lawrence of Arabia feel to it, and although the image

wasn't entirely clear, it reassured him nonetheless. If he'd seen this man—and he knew he had—then his eyes couldn't have been destroyed after all.

But he'd known that already, hadn't he? Turpi had promised that he'd regain his sight, and he knew on an instinctual level that he could trust her word. Her presence calmed him immeasurably, her hand on his cheek as soft as a newborn's. "We will get word to your friends when the storm abates. Rest, and heal. All will be right."

And it would. He remembered the crisis on Atlantis, but it seemed remote. They would be all right without him for a while longer. Secure, Rodney slid back into sleep.

When Carson first heard the discussion between Zelenka's and Teyla's jumpers over the com, he considered taking his earpiece out. He wasn't sure he could bear yet another loss if the shield modification failed. Looking across the crowded infirmary, he found Sheppard listening intently. A couple of hours of rest and medication had allowed the Colonel to sit up with only minor dizziness, and now he was fully focused on his teammate's plight.

Many of the wounded Athosians and sand victims who filled the infirmary were stealing occasional glances in Sheppard's direction, realizing that something important was going on. Changing tack, Carson went over to Atlantis's military commander. "Colonel."

He had to repeat the call before Sheppard glanced up. Carson mentally slapped himself. Of course Sheppard would have the earpiece in his undamaged ear, leaving him with only limited ability to hear the room around him. "Colonel, I think everyone would like to know what's happening with the jumper," Carson said, careful to enunciate. "It will have a large effect on our actions once the nanites reach the city."

Sheppard considered for a moment, then touched his earpiece. "Elizabeth, can you put this on the citywide channel?"

A second later, Carson heard the com chatter echoing from the PA system rather than through his earpiece. The Athosians notice-

ably straightened upon hearing Teyla's voice over the speakers, and Sheppard nodded, taking his earpiece out. "Good call, Doc."

Lieutenant Corletti was the first to report on the jumper's surroundings. "Well, um, it's dark. And gray."

"That's it?" asked Elizabeth.

With a faint smirk, Sheppard commented, "Rodney would have her head on a platter for that one."

Carson tried to smile in response, but couldn't quite manage it. Though he believed there was almost no chance that Rodney could still be alive, it was a viewpoint the Colonel evidently didn't share, and Carson feared that acceptance would not come easily if no evidence of Rodney's fate was ever found.

"Now that the inertial dampeners are functioning again, I have no sense of our passage forward," Teyla added, "no motion at all. Beyond our shield it is just...gray."

"Can you send me another material analysis?" Zelenka asked from inside Jumper Two, about to depart for Polrusso. Several seconds passed before he replied, "Good. Dr. Weir, were they transmitted to the control room as well?"

"They were. Can you recalibrate the city shield to match that of Jumper Three?"

"I am sending you the procedure now. This is all that will be necessary to let Jumper Three through, and it will minimize the amount of energy required to maintain the city shield until the ZPMs from Polrusso are available."

"We're on it," said Elizabeth. "Good luck, Jumper Two. Be safe."

Carson watched Sheppard's expression flatten slightly as the sound of the 'gate activation signaled the departure of Zelenka and Lorne. "They're big boys and girls," he reassured the Colonel. "You can afford to let them out to play without your supervision every once in a while." From the way Sheppard's eyes went cold, it became clear that the comment was a gross miscalculation. "Too soon?"

Sheppard suddenly appeared to find the far wall worthy of

study. "Just a little."

An apology on his lips, Carson was interrupted by another report from Teyla. "We are now free of the gray, and have set a course for Atlantis."

The Athosians scattered throughout the infirmary reacted with noticeable relief. "We're very glad to hear it, Jumper Three," said Elizabeth. "How does the situation look out there?"

"The sky is no longer as clear as it was a short while ago. There appear to be more storm clouds gathering, though they look different... an unnatural hue. I believe—"

"The goo's airborne," Corletti announced shortly.

Sheppard immediately looked to Carson. "Were we expecting that?"

"Once the concentration of nanites reaches a certain mass, some of them go into a kind of dormant mode." Carson's lack of surprise came as something of a surprise in itself. "They're light enough to be blown up into the atmosphere, where they form the nuclei of further rain droplets."

"They don't break down the water?"

"Apparently not—that must be why I'm thinking of them as going dormant. Stealth, if you prefer. They stop duplicating and follow the atmospheric depression cells created by the first wave of storms. The lower air pressure allows the nanite-seeded clouds to rise higher in the atmosphere, and thus travel further and faster around the planet. Once they rain down on land, ice caps and large bodies of water, the nanites change mode again, re-initiating the replicating sequence. It's quite fascinating, actually, similar to the way some viruses—dengue for instance—hitchhike on macrophage cells to disperse inside the human body."

Shaking his head gingerly, Sheppard said, "You go into a whole other mode yourself when you're talking about this stuff. You know that, right?"

"May I have everyone's attention, please?" Elizabeth's voice on the citywide channel quieted the room. "We've completed our recalibration of Atlantis's shield, which will allow us to stretch our

power reserves and give us more time. However, as yet we cannot afford to divert enough power to the Stargate to dial Earth. It's also an unfortunate reality that the repairs to the *Daedalus* hyperdrive will not be complete before the city's power supply is exhausted. We are hopeful, of course, that Dr. Zelenka's team will return soon with at least one more ZPM to augment our shield. Even so, I've decided to proceed with the evacuation of non-essential personnel and equipment to the Alpha site. Please report to your department heads for further instructions."

The faint click that ended the transmission seemed inordinately loud to Carson. "So this is to be the way Atlantis ends, after millions of years," he murmured.

Sheppard raised an eyebrow. "With all due respect to your former hitchhiker, Doc, the city's still here, and we simple humans do have our moments."

Teyla's voice sounded in Carson's earpiece again. "Dr. Beckett, are you still on your radio?"

"Aye, Teyla, I'm here. Do you have any injured among your group?"

"Several people were hurt while fleeing the storms. Earlier it seemed a secondary concern, but now that we are able to return to Atlantis, we will gladly accept any available medical attention."

"We'll be waiting in the jumper bay for you." Carson turned to see Sheppard easing himself upright. "And who told you getting up was a good idea, Colonel?"

"You've got wounded coming in, and you're running short on beds as it is," Sheppard replied reasonably, placing one cautious foot on the floor and then the other. Experimentally, he lifted his supporting hand off the bed and only swayed for an instant before straightening. "The meds are keeping the vertigo and the headache under control. You said yourself that there wasn't much else to be done. The Athosians on that jumper need your help a lot more than I do."

The Colonel was clearly not at full strength, and the hard set of his jaw bothered Carson in a way he couldn't pinpoint. It made

little sense, though, to keep the man in the infirmary when there was no treatment available to give him back what he'd lost. Feeling another pang of remorse, Carson gave in. "Off to your quarters with you, then. Stay off your feet as much as possible, and no sudden movement. Assuming the world hasn't gone to hell in the meantime, come back in eight hours so I can reassess the inflammation and the medication levels."

Sheppard was headed for the door almost before the instructions were given, tossing a halfhearted wave over his shoulder. "I'm quite serious about your staying off your feet," Carson called after him, but he couldn't be sure that he'd been heard. Shaking his head, he went to round up a team to greet the wounded from Jumper Three.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The silent scream tore from his throat before he was fully awake. Rodney's bandaged hands pushed at empty space, breath coming in short gasps that provided too little air. The sensation of drowning clung to him until he recognized the familiar nightmare that had plagued him for weeks.

Then, instantly and easily, Turpi was there, drawing him close. She murmured words of safety and reassurance over and over, and at last he began to comprehend that he had nothing to fear. Surrounded by her embrace, he let his head sink against her shoulder, inhaling her sweetness. If he'd ever known such comfort before, it could only have been by his mother's hand, when he was very young—in the brief time before bitterness and sadness defined their lives.

Turpi began to sing a wordless lullaby. She sounded amazing, but there was something far more at work here, something profound. Unable to see, his whole world became focused within this cocoon of warmth and...love?

He instantly tried to withdraw from the emotion. Love had no place in his world except on a pure, intellectual level, and that was absolutely by his own design. It was fine for Hallmark cards and banal movies, but it didn't fit in his life. He would not allow it, because it exposed him, made him vulnerable to the ravages of rejection. Having faced that pain many times before, he never wanted to do so again.

Perhaps it was Turpi's lullaby, the tenderness of her embrace, or something else that he could not put a name to—but no matter how much he needed to refute the unwanted feelings, the withered husk of a seed buried deep in the corner of his soul refused to remain confined. And in a spark of comprehension, he understood why. It was Turpi's offering of love, deep and unconditional, that

had driven this awakening.

He'd never been able to truly convince himself that he was worthy of love, and it came so unexpectedly that something within him seemed to break. His sobs mingled with her angelic voice until sleep overtook him again.

Radek did not relish his return to Polrusso. Arriving through the 'gate by jumper, he avoided looking in the direction of the DHD pedestal, because a coldly logical voice in his brain insisted on pointing out that Rodney might very well have died on that spot.

Instead, Radek focused on a large group of cliff-dwellers milling about. A work crew, if the digging tools were any indication. Their half-completed task appeared to be to clear out a wide path between the 'gate and the entrance to the lab. Interrupted by the vortex, they soon got back to work once it closed, though not without some gestures of surprise and gratitude at the arrival of the visitors.

The lab's supposed 'back door' had looked overly wide before, and now the reason was apparent: it was an airlock designed to accommodate a jumper. *A bit late for such a discovery.*

"Huh. Let's see if Tab A really does fit into Slot B." Major Lorne rotated Jumper Two a half-turn and eased it backward into the doorway. An audible click announced their correct positioning, followed by the hum of activating machinery.

Lowering the hatch, Lorne stepped out. Radek started to follow, then halted. Where the lab had previously been in a sort of minimal-energy caretaker mode, consoles lighting only when touched by Rodney or the Colonel, now it had fully come to life. Lights, computers, and panels glowed just as Atlantis had when coaxed out of slumber. The air immediately felt fresher, cleaner, and not as dry now that the Ancient life support systems had come online. Sunlight abruptly burst in through windows that still had been buried just moments earlier. The force field surrounding the lab now extended a few meters farther than before. Its expansion was pushing aside millennia of accumulated sand.

"It was waiting for the jumper," Radek murmured, enthralled. "Like a key in a lock."

Through the windows he saw villagers skittering away from a billowing cloud of airborne particles, crouching and turning their backs and covering their faces. Briefly concerned for their welfare, he soon remembered that the fine-grained yellow sand was inert. It was over in a few seconds, and the villagers, used to dealing with sand squalls, lifted their heads with expressions of unfettered awe.

They were at last seeing the Ancient structure as it really was, Radek imagined. He, by contrast, had more pressing matters to attend to. With the lab completely active, access to the databases would be unlimited. This place could conceivably contain all the blueprints to the planetary terraforming process.

He glanced over at Lorne, who was still taking in the grandeur of their surroundings. "I tell you what, Doc," the Major said, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth, "this never gets old."

Smiling his agreement, Radek went to the main computer console. A massive list of files and programs scrolled down the screen, tempting him to explore, but he could afford no distractions. His objective was to retrieve the data necessary to save Atlantis—all else was secondary. Still, he was a bit dazzled, and his thoughts turned to his colleague. *Rodney, kamarad, you complained without end about going off-world, but I knew you lived for it, and now I believe I know why.*

He connected his datapad to the interface. The ZPM removal sequencing simulation he'd run on Atlantis had been based on an extremely limited set of parameters available during his last visit. Now he had access to real-time three-dimensional imagery of, among other things, the planetary geology and projected hydrology. *Amazing.* He was able to zero in on any location he wished and examine it in detail.

Using the new data as a baseline, Radek ran the simulation again and watched it evolve. As commanded, the ZPM nearest to the hive ship blinked out first, and then—

Caught off-guard, he paused the program and reran the last few

intervals. That was not the result he had expected, nor was it the result he'd seen in the original simulation. Then, the power load had been redistributed among the remaining ZPMs. This time, once power was removed from the initiation point, the continental wall collapsed without delay.

Upon further examination, he realized why.

Looking up, he noticed that a group of villagers had gathered near the nose of the docked jumper. Lorne located a smaller access door by the airlock and cast a questioning glance at Radek, who shrugged and nodded.

The Major opened the door to admit Vené, Shira, and a few others. Vené studied the unfamiliar officer with some puzzlement before recognizing Radek and hurriedly crossing the room. "We feared you would not return," he greeted them, immense relief showing through his somber demeanor. "Colonel Sheppard was angry, and understandably so. Did he not come with you?"

"He was injured during his last visit. I'm his second in command." Lorne's face was impassive.

"We are deeply sorry for our earlier pretense. We have lost so many to the Wraith, more than you know—most of our children, in fact. In our growing desperation, our fear that you would leave outweighed our desire to be open and honest. Please be assured that such a mistake will never be made again, and know how thankful we are for your willingness to return."

Radek's ire still simmered on Rodney's behalf, but the accident had not been the fault of the Polrussons, and he recognized that fear could drive people to take extraordinary measures.

"We came back to help," Lorne said, "but only on the condition that we be allowed to remove the ZPMs immediately."

Taken by surprise, the Elder opened his mouth and closed it again. Finally, he replied, "We had hoped for more time—"

"Unfortunately, that's not an option. Either we do it now, or we leave."

"Without the ZPMs that you desire?" Vené's eyes narrowed in an attempted challenge. Playing hardball, the Americans called

it. However, many of those same Americans often behaved as if they'd invented the strategy. Lorne's posture showed him to be no exception.

Disconnecting his datapad and stowing it in his pack, Radek played along, wishing his fledgling acting skills had not been getting so much practice of late. "As you wish."

"A lot of our people were injured by the sand when it came through the 'gate," Lorne told Vené, hefting the second of Radek's two equipment cases onto his shoulder. "The ZPMs would be useful to us, but we're not willing to accept the risk of continued operations here."

"Surely you could wait and return in a few days, when all of the people around Polrusso have moved to the new villages," said Shira anxiously.

Radek shook his head and walked to the rear of the jumper. "I am sorry. That will not be possible." The regret in his expression as he gazed around the lab was not entirely false. "A pity."

Aghast, the villagers turned to Vené, who was seemingly trying to hold onto his illusion of leverage. "We cannot get everyone to safety in less than a week," he maintained.

Lorne stepped into the jumper, unmoved. "We know you have contingency plans for this situation. If you want us to do this, I suggest you implement them."

"The lab and the Stargate will remain unaffected," Radek offered. "Some people could remain here without difficulty, but they will be unable to leave the resulting island—except by 'gate, of course—for many months. Still, it is one option."

At last accepting that his position was tenuous, Vené's shoulders slumped. He spoke quietly to the villagers surrounding him, and they scurried outside through the recently discovered door. "It will be done. But you must help us as we discussed."

"We will."

Radek hesitated, heading back to the computer and the simulation still open on the screen. "There is one slight problem."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When he woke the second time, she was there with him before he could even ask. Gentle fingers smoothed his hair, grounding him. "You must be hungry."

Despite the intensity of the emotional release that had overwhelmed him the last time he'd been awake, Rodney was startled to realize that something as fundamental as eating had never crossed his mind. Now that he thought about it, he was starving. A burst of memory caught him unawares, and he felt his throat on fire, his lungs filling with sand. *Oh, God! He was choking on the burning sand and he couldn't breathe, couldn't...*

The incipient terror melted into an image of the dark-robed man and his steed, carrying him to safety. And Turpi was here with him, as she always was, as she always would be, soothing his pain and making him whole. The memories of agony were only fading nightmares; they had to be, because a magnificent smell came his way. His mind cleared then, and he knew that he was awake and this was real. Turpi was real, helping him to sit up.

The bed dipped as she settled beside him. He wanted very much to reach out and hold her, but the smell promised something wonderful.

"All living things must eat," she said, a smile evident in her voice.

He felt the bowl against his lips and, placing his wrapped hands on top of hers, took a cautious sip. It was a soup, rich and delicious.

After a few gulping mouthfuls it occurred to him that he didn't need to hurry. Turpi wouldn't leave him; she'd promised. Gently halting her hands before she could lift the bowl again, he said, "I haven't thanked you yet. You and your father saved my life."

"Father will be pleased to see you well, but we do not need

thanks. Knowing you, being with you, is already more than I ever could have hoped."

That jarred something inside of him. It hadn't been a dream. She had been there with him all the time, taking his pain away, giving completely of herself. But now that he was fully awake, the emotional walls he'd built so sturdily over the course of decades slipped into their habitual place. She was nursing him because he was hurt. There was nothing more to it than that. There couldn't be, because he'd done nothing to deserve such devotion.

She raised the soup bowl, and he took another sip before replying. "But you barely know me at all."

There was light in her laughter, a chiming sound as perfect as everything else about her. "Look within. You'll see that isn't so."

He wanted the walls to fade again, but they were unrelenting, telling him that he needed them to survive—and then, once again, she was there, inside his heart and mind, and the walls seemed less important than they once had. Still, an insistent core of logic prodded him until he asked, "All right, but I don't know that much about you. Would you describe yourself—tell me what you look like?" It seemed a shallow question, one that had held significance for him in the past yet became important now purely because he couldn't see.

"If you wish it. I am near to your age, and not as tall. My hair is short and the color of the sun."

A likeness of Samantha Carter rose in his mind. Without thinking, he reached up to touch Turpi's face and was stymied by the bandages again. She cupped his chin in her hands and dabbed at a corner of his mouth. "Have faith. It will not be long before you can touch again."

For the first time he could remember, he did have faith—in her, this amazing creature who cared so deeply, who made him feel wanted and treasured. He'd become so adept at hiding aspects of himself from others that he had come to believe the mask had fused to what was real. How is it that this woman could so easily separate the two?

He also noticed the silence outside. "Has the storm ended?" he asked, his voice sounding oddly distant.

"It has, but another has come." He felt her move off the bed, and although he couldn't hear her, he was sure that Turpi was moving around the room, collecting things. Then he felt her hands along his legs, smoothing the covers. "In recent days it seems the storms have been more numerous. It is too dangerous to travel to the cliff-dwellers' village while the path is masked by sand."

Remembering the close call his team had faced upon their first arrival, Rodney agreed. His team... He should be concerned about them, and about Atlantis. There was work to be done—but he couldn't do much to help them from the other side of a sandstorm. "This village where we are now. It's separate from the cliff-dwellers' village, right? You said your father rode inland to come here. Are you from the newer settlements? Do you interact with the other villages at all?" A vague memory prodded, something about a rapid system of communication with one another, but it eluded him.

"I believe my father will be able to answer that better than I could," Turpi replied. "He is a leader here in our village. Unlike the cliff-dwellers, our people understand the true nature of the sand."

"The true nature—what do you mean?" Admittedly he had been distracted by his own work, but he had taken note of Carson's description of the red grit. And his memory of that diagnosis was very clear.

After a pause, she explained. "The sand does not immediately harm our people the way it does yours. But there are properties in it that have damaged our genetic code over the course of generations. This has resulted in a growing number of children with horrible deformities. In some the deformities are manifested as physical birth defects, while in others a violent madness takes hold without warning."

If he'd been able to see, Rodney would have stared in surprise. Her description had been remarkably scientific. The villagers he'd met before had been blandly pleasant, with relatively astute leaders and a surprisingly just system of government. If Turpi was any

indication, though, some of the communities on Polrusso were considerably more advanced than others. Still, a doubt surfaced. "I didn't see anything like that in the cliff-dwellers' village. All the kids looked fine."

"You did see something, but you could not have recognized it." She came to sit beside him again, and her hand smoothed away the furrows in his brow. "The woman whom you saw crying after your arrival did not lose her daughter in the way you believed. The child went mad, as many have done before, and so it is said by the villagers that her mind was lost. Her mother was forced to abandon her to the sand storm, as all such children are abandoned to protect the village."

"What?" Appalled, he jerked back, and his arm knocked into something. The soup bowl, most likely, but since he didn't hear it hit the ground, there was probably no harm done. "They send their own children off to die? What kind of people can *do* that?" Granted, he didn't like children, but then he'd never much liked them even when he'd been a child. But to undertake such deliberate cruelty—

"It is not a deliberate cruelty," Turpi assured him. "Many babies are born with deformities so shocking that they cannot live. Others appear normal, but turn insane during puberty and go on murderous rampages, killing their families, friends and mentors. The village has no system of incarceration and its people no heart to put children to death by their own hands. The children's skin is still vulnerable until after puberty, so returning them to the sand seems the only action the cliff-dwellers can take to protect themselves."

"No amount of school shootings could justify that," Rodney insisted, outrage still simmering. "I may, as a teenager, have harbored a few dark thoughts and orchestrated the occasional electric shock of a classmate, but I got *over* it, for God's sake."

"You need not grieve." She placed a finger against his lips to quiet him. "The cliff-dwellers do not know it, but over the generations my people have taken in and raised the abandoned children. We discovered that their deformity is in fact a gift, in a way, for the

madness comes from voices in their minds.”

Stunned, Rodney turned his head and stared blindly at her. “They’re telepathic!”

Turpi’s fingers continued to stroke his face, then reached behind to gently massage the stiffness that he hadn’t even realized was in his neck. “Untamed, it brings madness, but when educated to control it, these children are...extraordinary.”

When it all fell into place, he felt like he’d been kicked in the stomach. The only way Turpi could have known about the village woman was by seeing into his mind. And his concern for Atlantis should have been far more acute. What else had she planted in his head? How many of his thoughts over the past few hours had actually been his own?

Betrayal, while it should have been familiar, nevertheless stung him, painfully tightening his chest. All this time, he’d thought she cared for him, and like a fool, he’d believed it was because she—

Refusing to even think the word, he batted her hands aside and tried to rise from the bed, but she held him fast. “Please forgive me,” she whispered urgently. “I meant no deceit. Your injuries were so very severe, your mind so filled with pain and suffering that I wanted to ease your distress until your health was restored. Now that you are gaining strength, let me tell you the complete truth, so you will see that I have no wish to manipulate you.”

Rodney wasn’t convinced, and he felt entitled to his suspicions. Between the incident with Cadman and the underwater hell that had left him questioning what was and wasn’t real, his sense of control had taken a beating of late. Turpi had made him feel so many things he’d always locked carefully away, and if any of what she’d shown him had been false, he’d feel unspeakably violated. Even so, he sensed a genuine plea from her now. And what choice did he have at the moment? “I’m listening,” he said finally. “Although I suppose you don’t need me to tell you that.”

“My father made no attempt to return you to the cliff-dwellers when he found you,” Turpi confessed.

That unexpected honesty both reassured and alarmed him. But

before he could explore the ramifications, she continued, “He had gone out in the storm to collect the abandoned, and assumed you were one of them. They are our purpose, you see. We create a loving environment for those cast out by the cliff-dwellers, and we help them to understand and make use of their abilities.”

It was hardly the first time his immediate impression of a new culture had been completely off the mark. Nonetheless, he was still deeply disturbed by what Turpi had told him. Cliff-dwellers that indulged in infanticide and neighbors who blithely rummaged around in the one thing absolutely sacrosanct to him—his mind.

“The cliff-dwellers are not evil,” Turpi continued, trying earnestly to convince him. “They mourn the loss of their children, and they do not wish to continue in this way. But which is the greater cruelty? To raise a child who will one day fall into madness and kill those who have loved her? To lock a child in a dark cell—where, in his madness, he will attempt to end his own life?”

“But don’t the villagers know about you? There has to be a way to make Vené and the Elders understand.”

“They do know of us. Their hatred and fear closes their minds to all our efforts. They will have nothing to do with us.”

At that moment, the vaguely hazy sensation slipped from his mind, and Rodney became aware of the full extent of his physical condition. He was not only blind but almost certainly deaf as well. He cleared his throat. The vibrations were there but the resultant noise was dim. His breathing was easy, so his lungs had been fully restored, and his sense of smell and taste were there, and... Experimentally, he ran his tongue over the tooth he’d chipped earlier, only to find it intact and undamaged, and realization hit him in yet another sledgehammer blow. Surely their medicine wasn’t that advanced, even if their grasp of science was strong. Either Turpi or her father, or possibly both, must possess healing powers to go along with the telepathy.

“It is as you surmise,” she confirmed. “The same powers the Ancestors possessed.”

So he really had been dying, and had been literally brought back

by her touch. "What about my eyes and hands?"

"They are the hardest to heal and take the most time. Do you now believe that I do not deceive you? That I want only to help?"

Rodney was a master at processing a dazzling array of information in short order, and so he instantly comprehended the true situation on Polrusso, Turpi's actions, and her reasoning. And, despite his own natural inclinations, he hadn't failed to notice that her voice was shy and hopeful. Even with the truth laid bare, her love was still there, still offered freely. "You know I do."

"Then sleep, my dearest. The more you rest, the sooner you will be strong enough to return to your people."

His people. They needed him, and he should be crawling to the door—assuming this place had a door—to help them. But then, from extreme clarity, his mind felt blanketed by cotton wool, fogged by a soft, comforting whiteness. He would get back to his team soon, when he was able. Right now, nothing mattered as much as listening to that lyrical voice, singing him to sleep.

Under the hand she'd placed on his chest, Turpi felt his breathing even out, and she began to relax as well. The depth and range of his emotions had been difficult to weather, but she felt sure that he understood and trusted her now. Such an amazing man, with such a great burden. She did not think she could have borne it if he had hated her.

To Polrussons, both defects and defenses were things to be seen on the surface, but this man wore his differently. She felt a kinship with him, seeing that his abilities had set him apart from others of his kind. Physically, he was whole and handsome, but he was damaged all the same. Unlike so many of the children whom she had fostered, whose parents loved them deeply and were emotionally devastated by having to abandon their young, Rodney had simply been neglected by parents who wallowed in their own hurt. Rejected by his childhood peers because of his great mind, desperate for recognition in his world, he had found friendship with his teammates. But not love, for he dared not lay himself open to that

pain. He needed love like no other she had ever encountered, and so she wanted very much to show him that he need not feel alone.

Tenderly, she moved her hand in slow circles over his heart. Her healing abilities were limited to his body, but she would do all she could to heal his soul as well.

John had always had trouble bottling up his anger. Not emotionally; he'd elevated that to an art form. But physically he'd never been all that skilled at keeping his cool. To be able to maintain that perpetually laid-back façade for the world at large, there were times when he needed to fly, to run, to go to the gym and beat the crap out of something. Considering how lousy he felt at the moment, though, none of those things was going to happen in the foreseeable future, despite the way his infirmity stay had magnified his frustration. Instead, he alternated between lying down as instructed and getting up to throw personal items into a pair of standard-issue duffel bags.

Evacuation. After all the sacrifices they'd made for this city, they were going to be forced to run away.

It shouldn't have been necessary. Rodney should have been around to pull a technological rabbit out of his hat like always. Damn it, what would have been so wrong with allowing a rescue attempt? Worst case, John would be lost, too. Given that he couldn't fly and soon might no longer have Atlantis's Ancient tech to light up, would the expedition or the Air Force really suffer without him?

He could deal with Caldwell's distrust. It had been well earned, after all. They'd both taken the same oath to live by a set of principles. One of those principles was meant to be fundamental: those above commanded justly, and those below obeyed. Unfortunately, there were times when that tenet came into direct conflict with another, one he held in even higher regard: reliance on your comrades to do everything possible to bring you home.

And if Elizabeth had been the one on the other side of that blasted time dilation field for six months, slowly losing all sense

of perspective, she would have understood just how important that reliance could be.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. John balled up his favorite sweatshirt and slung it toward the bag sitting on his bed. He'd been here before, figuratively speaking, a few years and a galaxy ago. That time, the life at stake had been a fellow pilot he'd just met at the start of their deployment, a man to whom he'd been bound only by a code of honor. This time he had the name and a face of a friend to put to the principle. In his mind, that made the decision all the more clear.

What the hell—might as well live up to my billing.

Zinging his football into the open bag, John tapped his earpiece. "Ronon, Sheppard."

Since the response was prompt, Caldwell obviously hadn't confiscated Ronon's com. Lucky break. "Here. You okay?"

"More or less. Listen, Beckett sprung me loose, and if I'm already twitchy, I figure you must be halfway to losing it. Want me to come over? We can play cards."

"I won most of your candy stash last time."

Which was true. Ronon's impassable poker face, combined with a rather...aggressive strategy, tended to work only when he got good cards. Unfortunately for everyone else, so far he'd been getting a lot of good cards.

"My pride can handle it."

"If you say so."

Ronon wasn't going to give the soldiers outside his door the satisfaction of getting any reaction at all from him. Although he chafed at being treated like a criminal, he could understand the others' concerns. It was the way Caldwell had shut Sheppard down that left him amazed. What manner of military gave its leaders authority to command but then tied their hands?

The door chime sounded, and he went to open it. In the corridor, Sheppard stood between the two guards, none of them looking at each other. "Hey. Up for some pariah poker?"

Stepping aside, Ronon let him in. His team leader was still wearing his jacket and sidearm, and made no move to sit at the table. When the door closed, Sheppard pushed a hand through his hair, seemingly weighing a choice. "Look," he said finally, "this may or may not come as a surprise, but I didn't really come here to play cards."

He'd thought that might be a surprise? Clamping down on a snort, Ronon gave him a look of mild disdain and produced two rappelling harnesses from under his bed.

Blinking, Sheppard just looked at him for a minute. "Okay. I'm really that predictable?"

"Pretty much." Reaching back under his bed, Ronon began to unwind a length of rope. He hadn't measured it, but seven years without such conveniences gave a person lots of practice at estimation. "Your men always leave stuff lying around."

"Tell me about it. How'd you smuggle that stuff out of the jumper bay?"

"Jacket's big."

"Man, I need a jacket like that," Sheppard commented with a hint of envy.

"Figured you wouldn't want to damage the guards, so that left the window as the only other way out," Ronon explained as the Colonel put on and cinched up his harness. "There's a balcony about five stories down from here. How's your balance?"

"Good enough. Just be quick on the belay if I happen to zone out."

"Okay. Haven't decided how to break the glass without being heard yet."

"No sweat." With a tap on the frame, the window slid open. "You'd be surprised how many things around here respond to the magic gene." Sheppard gave him a sidelong glance as they secured the rope. "You don't have to go with me, you know."

He didn't get it, did he? McKay might be a little hard to get along with, but he was a teammate to both of them. Why should Ronon see the situation any differently than Sheppard did? Besides,

his own military wasn't around anymore to discipline him, and this one didn't exactly have the clout.

Answering with another wordless look—some of the Marines had started naming Ronon's expressions, and this one had been oddly labeled 'duh'—he stepped toward the window. "You going first or second?"

"Right." The flicker of gratitude obligingly vanished from Sheppard's expression, and he gestured. "After you."

This time when he woke, Rodney immediately felt much more alert. Some sensation had returned to his hands, and he was able to sit up without assistance. He could even hear the faint creak of the bed as he shifted. If that was any indication of how his eyes were progressing, he should indeed have the bandages off in a couple of days.

He wondered how much time had passed since he'd been brought to this place, but Turpi was there, sitting beside him on the bed and speaking before he could ask.

"It is good to see you looking so well," she told him, delight in her voice. "And you have woken just in time. I have a surprise for you."

He started to sense another person in the room with them. That notion was soon substantiated when a deep male voice spoke. "How are you feeling?"

The black rider, he was immediately certain. Abruptly, Rodney was struck by a realization. The mental images he had of his rescue couldn't possibly be real memories. He couldn't have seen the rider, because his eyes *had* been eaten away.

So what had really happened? Who had taken him?

He hoped his growing alarm didn't show—but it was a futile wish, since these people could *read minds*. In fact, had any conversation he'd had to date involved actual speech? "How did I get here?" he demanded unsteadily, listening for the words in his ears, trying to ascertain if he was indeed deaf as well as blind.

"I beamed you aboard my ship," Turpi's father answered.

That didn't clear anything up. Just the opposite, in fact. "Your ship?"

"Your kind call them Darts."

On the last word, Rodney's stomach did a back flip that even Turpi's touch could not soothe away. If he'd been able to see, panic would have blinded him when her father added, "My name is Nabu."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the jumper bay, Teyla offered a reassuring smile to the young man who was being wheeled away on a gurney. Dr. Beckett had assessed the Athosian refugees' injuries, and members of his staff had been assigned to tend to each one.

The doctor looked exhausted but straightened up as soon as she approached. "And how about you, lass? Do you hurt anywhere?" His eyes traveled to the gash on her forehead, long since washed clean by the rain.

She shook her head. "Do not trouble yourself. I am only bruised. Has the evacuation begun?"

With a sigh, Beckett stretched obviously stiff muscles and then took a swab from his kit to clean her head wound. "Just a few minutes ago," he said, dabbing gently. "We're sending people to the Alpha site with as much equipment as we can salvage."

"I should speak with Dr. Weir about the role of my people in this." The cut stung briefly.

"Aye, I expect so. She's down in her office, I believe." He applied a small bandage and added, "That should do it. It's quite a clean injury."

On the short walk, Teyla considered the future. Her people would adapt to a new home; they had done so before. She feared, though, that the loss of Atlantis would deal a harsh blow to the struggle against the Wraith for all the peoples of this galaxy.

When Teyla entered, Dr. Weir looked up from an array of paperwork covering her desk. Many more files were packed in cases stacked up on the floor. A weary but sincere smile broke across her face. "Teyla. It's good to have you back."

"Thank you. My people are very grateful for your efforts to help bring us in." She glanced outside when the Stargate opened. Several dozen people crowded nearby, carrying equipment or standing

beside baggage carts. All wore the same exhausted, despondent expressions on their faces.

"We're still a team—a family, even," the city's leader said firmly, standing from her desk and coming to join her. "Even now, or maybe especially now. The Athosians who were injured in the evacuation of the mainland are still in the infirmary. The rest have already gone to the Alpha site with the expedition's first group."

Teyla nodded and walked outside with her to the balcony. "The city evacuation is proceeding as planned?" A deep sadness settled over her heart as she watched the current group make its way through the 'gate. Perhaps she imagined it, but their steps seemed slow and unwilling, and many looked back, taking in one final memory of their adopted home.

"You could say that, except we keep amending the plans as we go." Dr. Weir glanced at her office and her desk. "We'll know whether Dr. Zelenka's mission was successful in a few hours. Until then, the Alpha site is our focus."

"And after that?" Teyla was obliged to ask. "If your people travel back to your home galaxy, will anyone return?"

A mix of emotions flitted across the Earth woman's features. She clasped her hands before her. "I don't—"

Teyla held up a hand. "I understand that such a decision cannot be made here and now. And I understand as well that your world's leaders must act on their people's behalf. Just—please ask them to consider that even if Atlantis is lost, far more will be lost to my people and many others if your expedition ends. All that has been learned, the friends and enemies made..." A sudden feeling of hopelessness swept over her as she considered what it would mean to start over again: the merciless pursuits, the constant fear. Gathering herself, she finished quietly, "It should count for something."

For a moment, Weir looked away, an unusual reaction from her. "I know. All I can promise is that we'll do everything we can to make certain that this galaxy is not left to face the Wraith alone. It would be naïve of my world's leaders to think that the Wraith,

knowing of the existence of Earth and the many other worlds in our galaxy, would abandon their hope of turning their sights on us. It's in all of our interests to support you."

Before Teyla could ask the whereabouts of Colonel Sheppard and Ronon, the control room shuddered and the 'gate shut down. Steadying herself on the railing, she traded a look of alarm with an equally shaken Dr. Weir, who asked loudly, "What's happening?"

"Ma'am, the exogenesis machine has reached the asthenosphere." A tech called up a map on the main screen, which Teyla and Dr. Weir both approached. "It's sending seismic shocks through the planet."

"Did everyone in transit make it to the Alpha site before the 'gate shut down?"

"Yes, ma'am. The shutdown occurred due to an inbuilt safety protocol."

Weir touched her earpiece. "Dr. Beckett to the control room, please." Her request was punctuated by another shock, and she grabbed the closest console to brace herself. "Will the city be able to withstand all this?"

"The seismic activity, yes." A scientist moved to join them. "But the shocks are initiating seismic waves—like tsunamis, but on a much larger and continuous scale. We've got about an hour until the first one hits, so we'll need to increase power to the shields before then."

"Do it," Weir ordered. "Wait as long as possible, but do it. What about our ability to dial out again? Are these shocks going to interfere with our evacuation to the Alpha site?"

"Running a diagnostic now," reported the 'gate tech.

Colonel Caldwell charged into the control room, with Dr. Beckett not far behind. The officer was poised to ask a question, but waited as the scientist continued. "This exacerbates our power problem significantly. We'll have to maintain the shield at full strength indefinitely to protect against the nanites *and* the shock-waves. It's also possible that the system holding Atlantis in a fixed position may not be able to withstand the sustained pressure, in

which case we're going to have to employ the inertial dampeners linked to the city's engines."

"How long do we have at full shield strength before the ZPM is depleted?"

"Assuming the shocks maintain their current magnitude, which we certainly can't guarantee"—the scientist ran a quick calculation, and then looked up, his eyes bright with concern—"just under thirty-five hours."

Caldwell rounded on Beckett. "Doctor, any information to offer?"

Studying the image on the screen, Beckett shook his head. "I'm afraid not," he admitted. When Caldwell continued to stare at him, he added, "Honestly, I'd be more specific if I could. All I get is occasional bits of secondhand memory, and they're limited by my understanding—or lack thereof—of the machine. For all I know, the planet might disintegrate right under us."

By now Teyla was rarely surprised at the capabilities of the Ancestors' technology. Still, the idea that such a small object could wreak so much damage was shocking and humbling.

"How are the *Daedalus* repairs coming?" Dr. Weir asked.

The ship's commander was pensive. "As expected, and not much faster. No one ever considered trying to fabricate these kinds of parts in the field before now. Titanium is notoriously difficult to work with, and my maintenance group wasn't trained in metal-working. Thirty-five hours would be a wildly optimistic goal for completion."

"I was afraid of that."

"If we're very lucky, we might be able to finish machining the necessary parts just under the wire," Caldwell said. "When the crew evacuates with the last of the Atlantis personnel, I'll assemble a volunteer crew and take the ship to the planet at the edge of this star system. We'll install the new parts and get the hyperdrive operational, then meet up with you at the Alpha site."

He didn't voice the alternative. Repairing the *Daedalus*'s interstellar engines would be difficult enough on Atlantis, but Teyla had

journeyed to that nearby planet when then-Major Sheppard's team had come under attack from the 'super-Wraith,' and she knew it to be less than hospitable. She could see in Dr. Weir's expression that the other leader detested the idea of dividing the group, but it was the best choice for them all.

"Off-world activation," the 'gate tech suddenly reported. "The system appears to be stable. I don't think we'll experience another automated shutdown." Teyla turned to see the wormhole engage. "It's Dr. Zelenka."

"Radek, this is Elizabeth. Please give us good news."

"Well...news is not the worst so far," Zelenka offered tentatively. "The Polrussos are leaving the areas that will be impacted by the removal of the ZPMs. However, I discovered new information in the Ancient database here about the nature of the force fields. They do not reinforce a rock face keeping back the water, as we had theorized. Instead, they are like huge cups, holding both water and land in place. Over the years, many faults have developed in the rock. Also, many of the ZPMs are nearing depletion. Once the first of them is removed, the power grid will be insufficient to retain land or water."

Dr. Weir seemed to process the implications quickly. "So it's all or nothing?"

"Yes." Teyla imagined the scientist walking in an absentminded circle as he talked. "The water is held in connecting reservoirs, each roughly the size of a large Earth nation. It is unlikely that we will be able to recover more than the first and last ZPMs in the chain. The others will be rapidly washed away."

"What if we sent more jumpers to collect the other ZPMs simultaneously?" Weir asked, automatically bracing herself when another tremor struck the city.

"Very dangerous," answered Zelenka. "Too dangerous. The ZPMs are deep underground. It would take too long to reach them, and any attempt to remove them even a moment early would disrupt the sequence."

"I see. But we could still get two?"

"If we are fortunate, yes."

Two modules would not save the city, Teyla knew. But the additional power would give them much-needed time to repair the *Daedalus*. Perhaps it would be enough.

Weir nodded, almost to herself, as if trying to restore her own confidence in order to encourage others. "Anything on the second exogenesis device?"

"I have run three different scans, and found no energy or material signature anywhere in the area to match that of the machine. I have checked the database, even though Atlas's device was not a sanctioned part of the project. There are some files about an experiment unique to Polrusso, but I have not been able to study them yet. I will endeavor to bring them back with me."

"Do that, Radek, but we're out of time. The exogenesis machine here appears to be running another program. We need to draw maximum power for the city shield." Weir glanced at Teyla. "I'm sending another jumper through to help you collect the ZPMs."

"I will go," Teyla said immediately, knowing her team would be called upon.

"We will need a third jumper," Zelenka told them. "Jumper Two is connected to a sort of keyhole here at the lab. If it detaches, I will lose access to the complete Ancient database."

"All right. Expect two jumpers within the next ten minutes."

"Five," Caldwell corrected Dr. Weir's statement. Atlantis's leader sent him a look Teyla couldn't decipher, but he was already speaking on his com, ordering two teams to the jumper bay. Neither contained the names she had expected to hear.

"Colonel? I had assumed I would go with Colonel Sheppard and Ronon..." She left the query open.

"Colonel Sheppard is not medically cleared to fly, and Mr. Dex has been confined to quarters." Before she could grasp his words enough to request an explanation, Caldwell's attention was diverted. Raising a hand to his earpiece, he turned to Weir. "I have to get back to the *Daedalus*. Hermiod has a status update, and he needs to know the contingency plans. They all do."

“Go.” Weir nodded as he quickly departed. Interpreting Teyla’s concern, she said, “John’s all right. It’s just—it’s a long story. Teyla, you’re not obligated to join one of the jumper teams.”

Weighing the choice, Teyla decided that the makeup of the team was a lesser issue. “Still, I will do so. The Marines have much left to do here. My presence on the mission will allow one of them to stay and help.”

“Thank you. And good luck.”

Briefly bowing her head in acknowledgement, she left.

The two jumpers descended into the ’gate room from the bay above, one following the other, almost like cars on an assembly line. Elizabeth watched them move into position for their transit through the event horizon. When both had disappeared into the rippling void, she started toward her office.

The expected sound of the wormhole disengaging never reached her ears. After a moment, she heard a timid question from the tech on duty. “Dr. Weir, you said *two* jumpers were going, right?”

She flew back to the railing in half a second, and saw a third craft perform a rather graceless descent from the jumper bay before being steadied by the automatic ’gate sequence. “Who is that?” she demanded, even as she realized what the answer must be.

In two strides she was at the control console and slapping at the com. “Jumper One, what the *hell* are you doing?”

John’s response was brief, earnest, and nowhere close to satisfying. “Sorry, Elizabeth.”

Then the jumper was through the event horizon and gone. When the ’gate shut down, she leaned forward until her forehead nearly touched the rail, getting her frustration under control as quickly as possible. She didn’t need to check with Ronon’s guards to know that he must have gone with John in search of Rodney. The surge of disbelief and anger that resulted from her military advisor’s defiance—*again*—was soon quelled by the fatalistic

realization that their actions would result in little risk at this point, except to themselves. If they stirred the Wraith nest now, it would be too late to make any difference. The water would soon be on top of them all.

Rodney scuttled backward on the bed, pressing himself as far into the corner as possible. When nothing grabbed him, his analytical side started to catch up to his paranoid side. This wasn’t the Wraith’s style. He’d heard his teammates’ descriptions of hive ship décor many times, and they’d all tended towards the same creeped-out slimy places like that hellish supply ship Gall had died in rather than comfortable, clean-sheeted beds.

And no Wraith would have hands as soft and gentle as Turpi’s. Then again, if she could get into his mind, what was to stop her from affecting the way he perceived her touch? Could a Wraith project thoughts that detailed?

His vision would have been singularly useful right about now. Still, for the first time in what seemed like ages, the fog had entirely cleared from his head. All he felt, besides his own wariness, was a sense of overwhelming regret from Turpi.

“So, just for the record,” he said, hoping to convey an air of composure. “Not Wraith, right?”

“No!” She sounded distressed, but Rodney was too emotionally whiplashed to have much sympathy. “I did not mean to frighten you. We use the beam because it is the only way to gather and protect the children. And I... I must also calm their stricken minds. They must be prevented from hurting themselves or others until they learn to control their abilities.”

At her explanation, he began to understand just what it was the villagers saw as madness. These kids weren’t going after their parents with kitchen knives or bringing guns to school. With uncontrolled telepathic and healing powers, they could likely stop a person’s heart just by wishing it.

Damn it, that was going to prompt a whole new phobia—and he still hadn’t gotten over the previous scare. “How do I know you’re

not manipulating me now?" he demanded, unwilling to give up the emotional walls that had been his mainstay since kindergarten.

"I am not."

"Well, forgive me for being a tiny bit cautious, but that's what you said the last time. If you can plant an image in my head, how am I ever supposed to know what's real and what isn't? This is my *mind* we're talking about here! This is the one thing that no one, absolutely no one should ever mess with!"

She gave no answer.

"Hello? Isn't it impolite to give a blind person the silent treatment?"

"She has left," Nabu's resonant voice replied. "Turpi's empathic ability is exceptionally strong. She sees that you do not trust her. It affects her deeply."

Paying attention to nuance in much of anything had never been one of Rodney's priorities. But with at least two of his five senses compromised, he found himself listening more carefully. Nabu's tone was solemn and held no trace of malice. Rodney was also certain—perhaps because Turpi had left the room—that he and he alone was occupying his head. He felt an unfamiliar twinge of guilt for having lashed out at her.

Something soft landed on his legs. "I have brought clothing," said Nabu. "If you will permit me to help you dress, we can walk for a while."

"Uh, thanks." Cautiously, Rodney moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "Where will Turpi go?"

"To the children. They have been asking for her for some time, but she has been devoted to your recovery."

Way to rub it in, thanks. He'd acted like a jerk, and he knew it. Since these people could read minds, they no doubt knew that it was hardly the first time. He felt the soft fabric of a shirt being pulled over his head, and lifted his arms to facilitate the inevitable awkwardness with the sleeves.

"All the children adore Turpi," Nabu continued, a note of paternal pride in his voice. "She senses and soothes their torment from

the moment they arrive. She is the only mother many of them have ever known."

Loose pants were slipped over one foot and then the other. Rodney ignored the flush of embarrassment that resulted from being dressed like a toddler and rose tentatively from the bed. To his relief, his legs supported him without complaint, and his bare feet felt considerably more intact than his hands. For the first time, he was inclined to feel some appreciation for military-issue boots.

Now what? Before he could ask, a large hand closed around his elbow. "I will guide you. Keep your steps small."

The material underfoot was cool, and its texture felt like stonework or perhaps slate tiling. It occurred to Rodney that he ought to be counting steps and memorizing turns, in case an escape became necessary later. He suspected that the half-baked notion stemmed from too many action-movie nights and too many outings with Sheppard and his merry Marines. The whole walking thing wasn't nearly as easy as it looked, and he was ready to give up before they'd gone more than fifty feet.

Then he heard something unexpected, and the numbers he'd so carefully fixed in his mind went up in smoke. "Is that—?"

"The children are playing," Nabu confirmed. Peals of laughter echoed all around what must have been an open expanse of land. It wouldn't have been Rodney's preferred backdrop, but just then it sounded very normal and reassuring. Whatever else he knew about the Wraith, they were not, and could never be, as innocent as those young voices.

A moment passed before he realized that he wasn't walking on sand but a spongy grass-like surface. The sun on his face felt warm, but not in the parched, stifling way he remembered. The air held some moisture here, and he heard the rustle of leaves and—was that a bird? "This can't possibly still be Polrusso," he stated, almost daring Nabu to claim otherwise.

"Your surprise is understandable." Nabu guided his arm to the side until it bumped against something. "That is the arm of a chair. Please, sit."

Rodney did as suggested, and the odd echo of the children's voices gave him his answer. "We're not outside, are we?"

"No, we are not."

The whisper of Nabu's clothes and the soft creak of a chair announced that the other man presumably had sat down. "This is an enclosed habitat," Nabu continued, "protected from the sand. In this place, samples of plants and animals are stored from a biotic bank which will be used when the terraforming of Polrusso is complete."

"So you know about the Ancients' terraforming plans as well." Rodney had a number of questions on that front, but he found himself fascinated by the very idea of the garden. His hearing had definitely improved, because he could clearly distinguish different bird sounds—judging by the flapping of wings they had to be birds—and something that might have been insects or frogs. Frogs? Which meant pools and running water someplace. "This is a sustainable ecosystem, all by itself?"

"We are careful to maintain its balance, and it has benefited us in many ways."

An imperceptible shift in the atmosphere signaled to Rodney that someone else had approached them. Feeling a familiar sense of hesitation, he asked, "Turpi?"

Her hand touched his shoulder, but the ever-soothing sense of her presence was absent from his mind. He found he missed it terribly.

"You no longer fear me?" she asked.

"No. Before, when I, you know—" He was lousy at apologies. Probably due to a distinct lack of practice. "It was just a lot to take in."

Although he couldn't see her, he sensed her shy pleasure, as if he'd presented her with a sonnet. "I am relieved," she said softly. "Are you hungry? I have brought a meal."

As it turned out, the soup he'd eaten before had only hinted at the culinary talents of this community. Turpi lifted each delicate bite to his lips, occasionally offering sips of a sweet wine. She

was easily the most selfless being ever created, and he had trouble believing he'd ever been obtuse enough to doubt her.

"You are recovering well," she said approvingly.

"You insisted on it, daughter," Nabu commented, a mild rebuke in his tone. When Rodney frowned, he explained. "Your healing is due to Turpi alone, for her gift is almost as strong as that of the Ancients. She gave so much of herself—too much, really—to ensure that you would live."

The food was too good to curdle in his stomach, but he felt a momentary spasm. "I take it I had a close call?"

"You were a heartbeat away from death when I beamed you aboard my Dart. The skin had been stripped from your body, your eyes, ears and lips gone. The sand had begun to eat into your brain—"

"I get the idea." Now feeling distinctly ill, he swallowed, but he had to ask the next question. "Will I really be able to see again? Or are we talking about light and dark blurs from now on?"

"The eyes and fingers have the most complex nerve endings. They will take the longest time to heal, but heal they will." Her lips brushed his temple before she raised the wine glass again. "In a few more days, you will be as beautiful as you once were."

Rodney considered himself fortunate to have avoided choking on the wine. Of all the words that had been used to describe him in the past, 'beautiful' had never cracked the list. She'd seen him literally in pieces, and she'd seen inside his mind, and somehow she still was attracted to him. The concept amazed and touched him. He wanted to say something, but demonstrating gratitude wasn't one of his better-honed skills, either.

Thankfully, she didn't need to hear the words. "I was pleased to do it."

Feeling more secure than he had in some time, Rodney figured now was as good a moment as any to get some answers. "Nabu, how is it that you managed to steal and operate a Wraith Dart?"

"The tale is complicated. You must understand our history." The clink of eating implements being placed on a plate told him

that Nabu had finished his own meal and settled back in his chair. "You know that some of us have the ability to see into the minds of others. To varying degrees, this includes the minds of the Wraith. When I was a young man, I was aware of being different, but had no understanding of how. Then, not long before I came of age, my village fell under attack by a group of Darts." His voice changed, taking on a darker tone that Rodney might not have detected if he'd been able to see. "When my family was among those taken, I was filled with an overpowering rage that I focused on the pilot of a Dart. The force of my anger caused the machine to crash. I realized only later that it had also killed my family and several others."

Rodney drew in a sharp breath. There was emotional baggage, and then there was emotional baggage...

"Other villagers witnessed what I had done," Nabu continued. "They saw my body glow with energy, and they were terrified."

Rodney clearly saw the images projected into his mind. He didn't try to fight them; there was nothing invasive about it, more like a movie that he could choose to watch or not. Except this was no movie but a heart-wrenching account of loss and betrayal. The images were shocking. Rejection alone would have been bad enough, but this was a witch-hunt. Dozens, hundreds of villagers screaming at a terrified kid, already distraught beyond measure after having inadvertently killed his family, driving him away from their homes with sticks and fistfuls of sand and fear-torn, ugly faces.

"They fled into their homes ahead of a sand storm. I was little more than a child, but no one would grant me shelter. Only after the sand had caused me disfiguring burns did I harness my ability well enough to force a second Dart to land. I had not intended to kill the pilot, nevertheless he was dead, so I took shelter inside his machine. When the other Darts left and the storm abated, the frightened villagers came out to attack me."

"So you used the Dart to escape," Rodney saw.

"It was not difficult, since the machine responds to mental commands. I fled to a village that had been decimated by a prior Wraith attack, and survived by using the Dart during storms to steal food

and supplies from other villages."

The entire situation now became alarmingly clear. "Which propagated the myth of Wraith raids during storms."

"A misunderstanding I very much regret. At the time, there was little choice. Today we have no need to steal, but the fear persists." Resignation was heavy in Nabu's voice. "During one of my early forays, I heard the mind-cries of five children left to die in the sand and sensed a kinship with them. I beamed them onto the Dart and brought them back with me, but their injuries were too grave. Only one survived the ordeal. In time, though, I was able to save others. Slowly we began to learn and teach each other how to control our abilities. Many died in the process: some because I arrived too late to save them from the sands, others because they could not control their powers. Still more were driven truly mad by the torment of listening to a thousand minds flinging hatred and fear at them. However, over generations—"

"Whoa, back up," Rodney broke in. "Generations? How old are you?"

"I have seen many generations pass. My longevity is my physical abnormality."

Thrown for a loop, Rodney could only gape in the other man's general direction. What he could do with a few extra years... "Are you kidding? If anyone asked—and no one has—I'd take that burden gladly. For one thing, all those experiences must be an incredible weapon against the Wraith."

"We rarely have a need to engage the Wraith," Nabu said, "unless it is to take additional Darts for the purpose of rescuing more abandoned children. Though the cliff-dwellers may believe the Wraith continue to terrorize this world, we have long been able to protect it through deception. Recently, a group of our strongest telepaths convinced a hive ship that Polrusso was a barren wasteland, home to only a few sickly inhabitants unworthy of the hive's attention."

Ideas were coming to Rodney faster than he could process them. Overwhelmed, he stammered, "Do you realize what incred-

ible potential your people have? If it only takes a few minds to create a planet-wide subterfuge, the number of worlds that could be protected—”

“The notion has occurred to us.” And there was the resignation again. “But there are obstacles. Although the toxic sand is a normal byproduct of the terraforming process, on other planets it was only present in the initial stages, and never this destructive. Even so, the Ancestors never lived on worlds still undergoing terraforming. Based on what I have learned, I have come to believe that the Ancestors initiated an experiment on Polrusso.”

Rodney had three multifaceted questions formed before he decided to wait for a change and listen to the full explanation.

Nabu presented his theory as skillfully as any Earthbound academic. “During the terraforming process, Polrusso was seeded with a massive dose of the caustic toxin, ensuring that it penetrated the biosphere on all levels. Then experimental subjects—humans—were introduced. All life forms must adapt to reach a stable relationship with their environment, and so the toxin was incorporated into the human genetic code. After five hundred generations, the effects are now rather apparent.” There was a glimmer of a rueful smile in his voice. “While we may be a bit odd-looking, the abilities we possess must undoubtedly render the experiment a success. And it appears that the situation is stabilizing in newer generations. Not all among us are able to bear children, but the offspring who survive infancy are physically better suited to Polrusso’s harsh environment. They are less deformed, more mentally adept, and able to cope with the sand from a young age. Our people are at last adjusting to this world, but I believe many more generations will pass before the process is complete.”

“I still don’t see why leaving to help other planets should present a problem.” Rodney tried not to sound too eager to return to the topic at hand.

“The genetic alteration is ongoing. There are many thousands of my people now—far more than there are cliff-dwellers—most of whom have profound deformities. Some would call them gro-

tesque. The cliff-dwellers are terrified of us, as others would certainly be.”

To Rodney’s way of thinking, the whole thing smacked of lousy experimental design. Granted, ‘let’s see what happens’ was a fundamental tenet of science, but with human subjects? Any reputable university’s ethics board would have a conniption. “With all their technology and knowledge, the Ancients couldn’t have improved on this evolutionary process? Say, speed it up to something short of ten thousand years?”

“In fact they did. Experiments were conducted on many other planets as well. Some humans have developed an immunity to the Wraith.”

Had he never set foot on Hoff a year ago, Rodney would have been apoplectic with enthusiasm over that possibility. But he’d seen the tradeoff the Hoffans had had to make to achieve their immunity, and he was inclined to believe that there was no such thing as a free lunch.

“Evolution can be guided, just as humans crossbreed plants and animals to create healthier strains,” Nabu continued. “This habitat in which we are seated is one such example: it is filled with many varieties of grass. Some are better suited to light, while others are stunted by the sun and prefer shade. This is the reason Atlas and Ea were forbidden to experiment on Polrusso with their exogenesis machine.”

His mention of the names caused Rodney to sit forward. “You know about *that*, too? How—?”

“Although the cliff-dwellers cannot access the laboratory, I have the required gene,” Nabu replied simply. “One of our people beams me into the lab near the Stargate for a time and then returns to beam me out again. Over the generations I have gathered information from the Ancestors’ records.”

It occurred to Rodney to wonder how Nabu had come by the ATA gene, but any theories he might construct on that front would wait for another time. “I don’t suppose the sight of a Wraith Dart flying around does much to keep the cliff-dwellers calm.”

"I have tried to reason with many of their Elders in the past, to convince them that their deformed offspring are not Wraithspawn. But their prejudices run deep. My cause is not aided by the fact that my white hair and the long scars on my face make me resemble a Wraith."

Rodney was beginning to suspect that seeing Nabu when they first met might have been as frightening as *not* seeing him. "So if the population is stabilizing in a genetic sense, the villages must be finding that more and more of their children are, ah, affected."

"That is true. In this latest generation, fully two thirds of live births in the villages have resulted in deformities or late-onset symptoms of madness. Even as we speak, my people are flying the Darts. They will return with many more children abandoned by the cliff-dweller villages."

It was hard to avoid some contempt for the cliff-dwellers. How could a bunch of otherwise civilized, *cultured* people turn every piece of evidence they'd been shown into some warped horror story? Wraithspawn? A hive ship at the bottom of the oceanic basin?

Abruptly, Rodney was gripped by a sense of panic. He pushed the chair back and rose to begin pacing, vaguely aware that Turpi was still at his side, supporting and guiding him. The cliff-dwellers believed that Nabu's home was a hive ship. He and his team had been all set to flood the place. "Where exactly on the planet are we located right now?" he demanded.

"You need not concern yourself," Nabu told him. "While the program to create and store water is complete, the oceans will not be released until the last of the toxin has broken down. Despite your belief that the machine need only be turned off, safety protocols would have prevented you from shutting down the shields."

Rodney stopped and swung around to face the direction he was relatively certain Nabu was sitting. "Yes, well, I appreciate that reassurance, but unfortunately that's not what I'm worried about. The idea I had pretty much determined to implement was to remove the ZPMs that hold back the water." He went on to describe the

sequencing scheme to distribute the power load until the first shield failed, aware that the other man had become conspicuously silent.

At last, in a voice that held shock and not a little alarm, Nabu said, "I see." By the sound of it, he'd risen from his chair. "A resourceful plan...and quite achievable."

And that was the textbook definition of 'backhanded compliment.' Rodney sensed a flash of worry from Turpi as well, and hoped that she understood his reasons. "We didn't know what was here, obviously, or we never would have..." Tentatively, he asked, "Can you evacuate your people?"

"We have many Darts, but most are a great distance away, patrolling the sand storms on the far side of the planet. Even so, we have several hundred thousand people now living in scattered communities throughout the basins."

Though the sheer numbers staggered Rodney, they made sense. The Wraith were being held at bay, and the percentage of 'deformed' births was rising, so naturally the population would swell. That knowledge did nothing to quell the churning in his stomach at the idea of how many homes would be reduced to rubble at the bottom of a new ocean. The children's voices made their way into his thoughts again, confronting him with a harsh reminder of exactly what was at stake.

Turpi spoke up at last. "We can mentally communicate with enough of our people to advise them to flee. But it will take weeks of difficult travel on foot to reach safe grounds."

"The water itself is not the greatest threat, daughter." Nabu now sounded positively chilled. "The source of the caustic sand, the highest concentration of the toxin, lies in the massive mountain chains that cross the planet, far away from the areas where the water is stored. The sand storms result from the slow erosion by the ceaseless winds. Once exposed to rain, however, the mountains will virtually dissolve within a short space of time. In water, the toxin becomes many times more corrosive—and many times more deadly."

Acid rain to the nth degree, Rodney realized, his throat con-

stricting painfully. All bodies of water, and the precipitation itself, would be infinitely deadlier than the dry sand. *When I set out to do something, I really do it all the way.*

“The water must not be released.” Nabu’s voice took on a note of what Rodney considered to be extremely warranted urgency. “If it is, nothing on this world will survive.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As soon as Jumper One emerged from the event horizon, John figured out why Beckett had warned him against 'gate travel. The wormhole had scrambled his senses but good, and the jumper lurched drunkenly when the transit-sequence autopilot disengaged.

“Pull up!” Ronon yelled, and John obeyed on instinct. After another oscillation or two, the jumper settled onto a stable course, but not before John heard a couple of the more obscure Satedan epithets from the right seat.

Feeling a little more secure, he commented, “You need to teach me those sometime. I’ve already learned all the Earth curse words I can from the rest of the expedition.”

Ronon glared at him, uncurling his hand from around the armrest, which now looked a bit deformed. “You sure you can do this?”

“I’m sure. It was just the 'gate that messed me up.” John didn’t add that he had no idea how long the antihistamines Beckett had given him would last, or that the packet came with a warning about not driving or operating heavy machinery.

A click from the radio interrupted them. “Last jumper, please identify,” said one of the Marines—John’s diminished hearing kept him from recognizing the voice.

“This is Jumper One,” he replied calmly, imagining the surprise and confusion on the other jumpers.

“Sir—sorry, sir,” the Marine said hastily. “We didn’t know you were coming along.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not here to ride herd over you guys. Ronon and I are going after McKay.”

“Colonel Sheppard!” Teyla’s warm voice joined the conversation. “It is good to hear your voice. Dr. Weir—”

"Was misinformed," John finished smoothly. "I'm okay, and we have a job to do. Jumpers Four and Five, take your cues from Dr. Zelenka."

If Teyla thought a two-person rescue team was unusual, she didn't say so. "We will meet you back at the 'gate."

"Negative. Atlantis needs those ZPMs. As soon as you've got 'em, head for home."

Radek broke in next. "Colonel, if the Wraith are alerted to you—"

"Then it'd be too much of a risk for any of you to come help us anyway. I'm not debating this, folks." It was a borderline hypocritical stance, but John didn't particularly care. "Get the ZPMs and get back."

"Yes, sir," responded the well-trained jumper pilots. Teyla and Radek said nothing.

"Hey, Dr. Zelenka," one pilot added—John finally identified the voice as Sergeant Witner's. "If the land's going to collapse when the water pours out, what are the chances that the 'gate will take a tumble, too?"

"Not to worry, Sergeant," answered Radek. "The furthest parts of the village will be destroyed as the cliffs fall, but the lab and the Stargate are located on solid rock. In my many simulations, it has remained perfectly stable."

"Simulations, huh?" Witner sounded less than convinced.

"To be certain," Radek continued, a hint of amusement in his voice, "I am extending the range of the lab's force field."

"That's more like it."

Now that his balance was more or less behaving itself, John broke the focus he'd locked on the horizon and looked down at the clusters of villagers standing near the Stargate. They were staring up at the jumpers and waving. Presumably these were the people who had elected to stay behind to watch what would doubtless be the deluge to end all deluges. The jumper climbed, and across the dune sea towards the mountains he saw a massive caravan trekking inland to the new homesteads. He'd expected the procession of

animal-drawn carts to form a kind of Wild West wagon train, but apparently the creatures were a lot faster than they looked. "Nobody told me we were filming *Ben-Hur* out here," he commented.

Ronon didn't bother asking.

The Polrussons were moving fast, but it still was going to be tight. The longer the jumper teams could wait before removing the ZPMs, the better off the locals would be. But the teams couldn't wait too long, because time was running out back on Atlantis. John told himself that the villagers would reach a safe distance at the very moment Radek had everything ready. Just like clockwork.

"I am sending a set of coordinates to each of you now," Radek announced. "Jumper One, you are receiving the location of the hive ship. It is near to the ZPM Jumper Four will retrieve—only a few dozen kilometers away."

"Then I guess Four's got a wingman for the moment." John watched the coordinates flash across the HUD and input them into the navigation system. "All right, gang. Let's go stealth from here."

The three jumpers activated their cloaking devices at almost the same moment, disappearing from view through the windshield but still visible on the HUD. Jumper Five had already peeled off and was making a vertical descent below the cliff-dwellers' village near the 'gate.

"Jumpers Four and Five, your first task when you arrive will be to locate the structures that house the terraforming equipment," Radek told them as they flew. "The entrances are deep underground at the base of each cliff. While there are access tunnels designed to accept a jumper, each entrance will be buried under ten thousand years of accumulated sand and rocks that have fallen from the cliff. These entrances are protected by force fields that you will be able to detect. Calibrate your own shields to match. You can then use the shield to push the residual sand away and join your rear hatch to the airlock, as we have done here at the lab."

So that was why the so-called back door had been oversized. John felt a flash of aimless irritation, thinking about how handy

that information would have been at the start of this whole mess.

"Cool," one of the Marines said. "Jumper Five is in position. We're locking onto the signature of the force field now. How long do you figure it'll take to dig through the sand?"

"It has been blowing over the cliffs for many millennia. The geology maps indicate that minerals in the red sand have...ah...cemented together in some places," replied the scientist. "I estimate twenty minutes, at least, and then you will need to wait for Jumper Four to catch up, as it has a much longer route to travel."

That longer route would take the other jumpers nearly halfway around the planet. According to the old guy they'd met in the village, the hive ship was in the deepest trench of what would soon become an ocean, a few miles below the location of Teyla and Witner's ZPM. Since John wouldn't have a force field to act as a beacon, he was banking on the life signs detector to pinpoint the ship—and Rodney.

The two jumpers skirted along the cliff faces and up across a continental mass. Cracked, hard ground and windswept sand dominated the entire landscape. It was sobering to realize that soon this barren land would be either underwater or beachfront property.

Keeping Jumper One level was taking far more concentration than usual, thanks to the continual nudges of vertigo, and he couldn't prevent the occasional momentary slip. Every few minutes, he would catch Ronon sneaking a wary glance at him or the controls. When the scrutiny had grated on John's nerves long enough, he finally snapped, "If you think you can do better, be my guest."

"Just making sure you still know which way is up," Ronon replied mildly.

"Give me a break. It's my *fini* flight."

"Your what?"

"It's a military pilot's last—" John cut himself off. He didn't do self-pity. A lot of things were happening, and all of them were more important than his damned wings. "Never mind."

"Colonel, look," Teyla called from Jumper Four.

Below them, several groups of cliff-dwellers were traveling inland at a rapid pace, trails of dust fanning out behind them. The convoy seemed orderly enough, with no panicked animals or overturned carts, and was making awfully good time. Of course, they had been preparing for this event for ten thousand years. Enthusiasm probably played a pretty big role.

"There's another group off to our two o'clock." John watched an enormous train of villagers, spread out across a mile or two, emerge from a minor sand squall.

"Wow. Sir, if it's all right, I'm gonna go in a little lower," Witner requested.

"Go ahead." Knowing better than to trust his own shaky skills with an unnecessary low pass, John maintained his altitude and instead used the HUD to bring up a magnified view of the convoy. Observing its progress, he began to understand just how many lives they were about to change. God, there were tens of thousands of people down there.

Jumper Four decloaked, revealing itself to the villagers in a flyby of sorts. As they caught sight of the craft, people stood up in their carts and waved colorful scarves in the air. Ronon raised an eyebrow, but John shrugged with a smile. "Let Witner have his fun," he said. "I mean, look at them down there."

The villagers' voices were inaudible, but the HUD clearly showed their euphoric faces as they cheered the jumpers on. *We're doing this*, John thought, trying to wrap his head around it all. They were on their way to fulfill the hopes and dreams of countless generations. So often in the past, on Earth, his role in any given mission had felt remote, difficult to put into context. The sight before him now, these thousands of people in a mass exodus to an essentially new world—all of it was because his people were about to employ their knowledge and abilities to accomplish something profound and fundamentally good.

Some days, this job wasn't so bad.

"All right, it's about time for us to split up," he radioed. "Hope you get what you came for, Jumper Four."

"We wish the same to you, Colonel," Teyla responded. "Good luck."

Jumper Four reengaged its cloak and broke off to follow its assigned flight path. Cautiously, John put Jumper One into a shallow dive down the face of the massive three-mile high cliff, and headed out across the pre-oceanic 'basin'—which was a hell of a misnomer, because it wasn't in any way shaped like a basin. More like a course he'd once flown from Jalalabad to Feyzabad, except that these mountains, all of which would soon be under a few miles of water, had never seen a drop of rain.

Even Ronon seemed impressed by the massive outcrops and bizarre shapes sculpted by millennia of wind and caustic sandstorms. They skirted around a particularly striking mesa, and the Satedan let out a grunt of surprise at the series of enormous natural arches lined up along the desert floor. Under any other circumstances, John might have been tempted to fly under a few of them, but right now he was more frustrated by the lack of life signs on his HUD. Maybe Rodney had been right about the stuff in the red sand interfering with signals.

"Hey, guys, we're all set over here, just waiting on you," put in a smug voice from Jumper Five.

"Children, children," Radek chastised. "Is not a race. Except... it is a race. I stand corrected. Continue the taunting."

Ronon squinted at corner of the HUD that normally displayed life signs. "Still not seeing anything."

"Supposedly this is the place." John flew a racetrack pattern around the area, willing the HUD to blink. Nothing—no sign, neither visual nor technological. Just more scoured stone and barren gullies, and literally thousands of rocky mounds that could, with a little imagination and a lot of terror, be mistaken for a half-buried hive ship. "Maybe the old guy's memory was starting to go."

"Or maybe the hive ship already left."

Whatever satisfaction John had felt a few minutes earlier was wiped out in an instant. "All jumpers, be advised," he reported, climbing to start a wide sweep of the other canyons in the vicinity.

Even if the thing had taken off, in a landscape that was **distinctive** for its harsh edges, a rounded, hive-ship shaped crater would **stand** out. "We may have a problem."

"What kind of problem, Colonel?" asked Radek.

He angled Jumper One upward and rapidly climbed to an altitude of one hundred thousand feet, hoping to get an overall picture of the area. "Well, if nothing else, we're proving that irony's alive and well in this galaxy. The one time we actually *want* to find a hive ship, it's being shy." *Blink, damn you*, he ordered the life signs indicator. *Come on, Rodney, where the hell are you?*

"You have scanned the surrounding areas?"

"Completing my sweep now." The corner of the HUD remained obstinately dark. "I've got nothing."

Radek sighed heavily. "This is a big problem."

John didn't need to be told. Their entire strategy had revolved around taking out the hive ship in the first deluge of water. Now they had no idea where the Wraith were hiding, or if they'd been awakened.

Early on in the Atlantis expedition, Rodney had explained to his new teammates that he reacted to certain doom a certain way. Over the course of the past year or so, various classifications of doom had forced him to amend that theory to include corresponding levels of panic. Personal doom was one thing. He was getting used to that kind. Planetary doom, on the other hand, was something else.

Springing to his feet, he demanded, "What the hell kind of lunatic Ancient dreamed up this experiment? Toxic mountains? In what twisted reality did that *ever* look like a good idea?"

Nabu did not respond. Rodney felt Turpi's hand on his arm. "Father has gone to warn everyone and to call the Darts back."

"I have to get to the Ancient lab," he told her. "I need to talk to my friends before they do something very, very ill-advised."

"The first Dart to return will carry you there. But all the Darts are on the far side of the planet. It will take time—"

"Tell them to return by low orbit! We need every second." Even

as he spoke, Rodney began running through other possibilities. If he didn't make it back before Radek and Sheppard started yanking ZPMs, could anything be done to minimize the water release? Not likely, even if they replaced the ZPMs immediately and attempted to reconfigure the force fields...

Slowly, the sensation of panic began to ease, as if a knot was loosening, and he recognized Turpi's soothing influence. He jerked back, tearing his arm out of her grip. No matter how pure her intentions, he couldn't deal with this manipulation. "Don't do that! Don't get into my mind. I don't want you to dull this. I need this. This is what's going to help me come up with a plan!"

No sooner had he finished the thought than her presence vanished. "Turpi?" Suddenly on his own, he heard the growing cries of the children as the news and the terror spread with equal speed. "Turpi? Someone!"

Where *was* she? His own terror escalated. Dozens of rapid footsteps dashed past him, around him, but no one answered his shouts. Blind and alone he'd never make it ten meters. In desperation, he shoved at the bandages over his eyes, trying to work his wrapped fingers underneath.

"No!" Turpi grabbed his hands and pulled them down, at the same time flooding him with relief. "You must leave the bandages in place. The light will destroy the fragile cells before they can heal. We must wait for the Darts to return."

Gulping back his fear, Rodney grasped her arms as best he could, anchoring himself on her in more ways than one. "I thought you'd left me... alone, I mean. Left me alone." He'd thought that he depended on her for sight, but that wasn't the half of it. Never before had he felt so strongly about another human being. "I'm—Before, what I said about my mind—"

"I have no choice. To talk to you I must speak into your mind."

In an instant he realized that he hadn't heard a single word or note actually pass from her lips to his ears. He couldn't be deaf, or he wouldn't be hearing the background noises the way he did. But there hadn't been any background noises when he first awoke, had

there? No creak from the bed, no shifting of fabric, not even his own choked gasps in the throes of the nightmare. Just her.

"Your ears and the organs for hearing were destroyed, but they are now healed," she reassured him.

"Would you speak to me aloud? Could I hear your voice now?"

"You have been hearing the only voice I possess. This is my deformity. I cannot speak or hear as you do—only with my mind." She lifted his hand in both of hers. He could not discern what his bandaged fingers rested against, but his suspicions were confirmed when she instead pressed her lips softly to his. He felt no movement, yet heard her speak. "I will protect you, come what may. I will not have you die. You are too special."

Rodney had often thought himself too important to die. He might have even said as much on occasion. It was a wholly different sentiment coming from Turpi, because he could keep nothing from her. This time he knew—for the first time in his life, really *knew*—that she loved him. Not because he was brilliant; just because he was *him*.

It was overwhelming, and as tempted as he was to give in to the unfamiliar emotion, it still scared the hell out of him. "Do we know how far out the Darts are now?"

"They will be here soon," Turpi replied, drawing back but remaining close.

Which only served to remind him that he was about to be beamed up into a Wraith Dart. Rodney tried not to wince. It wasn't the beaming that bothered him so much as the dumping out on the other end. And there was also the small matter of not getting shot out of the sky by his friends. Normally he appreciated Sheppard's quick reflexes, but this was anything but a normal day.

So many variables, so many ifs. So many people here, all of them depending on him. He had to save them.

He had to save this incredible woman who had saved him.

The latest wave, definitely seismically generated, as Elizabeth now knew, was the strongest yet. Her fingers were beginning to

ache from clutching the rail. Of course, every wave had been the strongest yet. The scientists who'd stayed behind to compose the last group of evacuees had gauged the forces to be significantly higher than those of Atlantis's rising nearly two years ago. The portion of the city that remained underwater was being constantly pummeled by the surges from beneath, so they'd had to extend the force field. As feared, the system that anchored Atlantis in a fixed position was also being taxed to its limits. Any minute now, she expected the entire apparatus on the seabed—indeed, the entire seabed—to collapse, setting Atlantis adrift. Even with the force field extended, it would be like sitting in a huge glass bowl, protected from the elements but tossed into a raging sea. The structural integrity of the city might survive, but its inhabitants would be thrown around mercilessly.

For a brief, bizarre moment, she imagined her people as tiny fragments of glitter in a snow globe, ruthlessly shaken by an ancient god whose wrath they had incurred by daring to claim the city for themselves.

Angry with herself for thinking of Ea as anything other than a grieving, embittered, very mortal being, Elizabeth turned toward her office and spoke over her shoulder to the last remaining 'gate tech. "Get the final group ready to go."

"Ma'am, we can't."

She whirled. "What do you mean, we can't?"

Trembling fingers belied the young man's calm voice. "The city's moorings have been diverting more and more power to hold us in position. That system's begun to fail, so the inertial dampeners have also been employed. We've drained too much power to dial the Alpha site."

"Not even for a few seconds?"

"No, ma'am. The city shield will fail."

And if the shield failed, the 'gate room would fill with water—and possibly gray goo—before the vortex even stabilized. Elizabeth pressed her fingers to her temples, only to scramble for a handhold when the city shook again. There wasn't much more to

be done now, was there? "Control room to *Daedalus*."

"Caldwell here." In the background, she could hear the sound of cutting tools. "We've just about finished fabricating the components we need."

"Thank God for that, at least." "That's good to hear, Colonel, because the last group of city personnel is coming your way. We don't have enough power left to dial the Alpha site, so we're going to have to shut down everything other than the shield, moorings, and stabilizers to conserve power."

"Understood. We've got plenty of room for a few more people."

"Thank you. Hopefully the teams on Polrusso will be back any moment with a ZPM or two. We just need a little more power to give us time to evacuate."

"Hermiod's made some updated calculations. He thinks two ZPMs might give us enough time to finish the hyperdrive repairs," Caldwell said. "Are we really down to minimums already?"

This last question was more a statement of disbelief, but Elizabeth answered anyway. "I'm afraid so."

"All right. Send all remaining personnel in the city to the *Daedalus*. When the control room crew is done powering everything down, we'll beam the last of you here."

"Then I'll see you in a few minutes." Elizabeth slowly edged over to the communications console, finding it difficult to keep her balance as the floor tilted under her feet. She reached out to toggle the citywide channel. "All personnel, report to the *Daedalus* immediately. Due to our worsening situation, nonessential city power will be terminated in five minutes. That will include the transport systems, so drop whatever it is you're doing and"—she swallowed hard, determined to inject a sense of absolute control into her voice in spite of what she was saying—"abandon the city. I repeat, abandon everything *now* and report to the *Daedalus*. There will be no further announcements."

Closing the channel, she felt bleak helplessness settle into her bones. They'd lasted as long as they could. It was up to Radek and

his group now.

I'm sorry, she silently told the city and its long-departed people. I know this wasn't what you intended, certainly not what you had hoped. We did our best.

With an expression far too grave for his young face, the tech started to run down a checklist. All over the city, the last remaining lights began to wink out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I would like to renew my statement that this is an absolutely insane research method.” The endless wait was getting on his last nerve. Rodney badly wanted to pace, but knew he’d end up on his ass if he tried. “This experiment was destined to be a colossal screw-up from the beginning.”

“I understand why you think so. But it is proving to be successful.” Turpi’s fingers traced patterns on his arm. “The terraforming machine is dormant, but the shield remains in order to hold back the water until the toxic mountains have completely eroded. If the Wraith had not forced the Ancestors to abandon Polrusso, the people of this world would not have forgotten their destiny: that their children’s children would one day develop abilities equal to those of the Ancestors—superior, even, for we will be able to defend against the Wraith.”

Making the impending loss of this civilization even more tragic. Anger worked its way into Rodney’s mind, jockeying for position alongside helplessness and frustration. Just for a moment, he wished for Turpi’s calming influence.

Sensing the change and the invitation, she slipped into his mind, but only hovered on the periphery, smoothing the edges of his emotions without altering them.

“That really is a gift,” he said quietly, leaning into her touch, both physical and mental. “You’d put psychiatrists all over my planet out of business inside a week.”

Her laugh existed only in his mind, and was all the more beautiful for it.

“Think you could just keep doing that until the end of the world—you know, considering that might not be too far away?” he said.

“If you wish it, I will be here.” Something shifted, and

he felt her anticipation. "I see something approaching in the sky."

Grasping at any last possibility he could find, John set a different inbound course to the lab than the one they'd taken outbound. Maybe they'd just gotten the location wrong. Maybe they still had a shot at stumbling on that damned hive ship out here somewhere. He knew, though, that time was working against him. Jumper Four had nearly reached its destination, and Jumper Five was already docked at the Ancient structure, its crew standing by to remove the ZPM.

"Incoming!" came a sudden yell from Lorne over the radio. "We've got Wraith Darts buzzing the lab."

How the hell had *that* happened? John swore under his breath. His headache had just been looking for an excuse to make a repeat appearance. "Tell me what you see, Major."

"Six of 'em, three pairs coming in from different directions. They're on converging flight paths, but it looks like they're not heading for us."

Had they spotted one of the cliff-dweller convoys? *Crap*. He set the jumper's nose at a high angle of attack, acute enough that Ronon looked at him askance. "Use the HUD to triangulate their convergence point and send it to me. We're taking the low-orbital route back. Hopefully it'll shave a few minutes off the commute. Everybody else, stay put and keep doing what you're doing."

Lorne worked fast. The coordinates appeared within a minute, and John adjusted his flight path accordingly. Before long, the radio signaled again. "Alpha site calling Polrusso. Can anyone hear me?"

Even with John's diminished hearing, the accent and the odd radio etiquette made the caller's voice readily identifiable. Why was the Alpha site dialing in to talk to them? "We hear you, Doc. Is the evacuation complete?"

"Ah, Colonel," Beckett greeted archly. "So you haven't fallen on your face yet?"

John winced. When adding up the number of people irritated at him, he'd forgotten to include Beckett. "Sorry about skipping town. Is the evacuation complete?"

"I wish I could say so." Annoyance quickly gave way to anxiety. "We were expecting another group of evacuees a few minutes ago. When it didn't happen, we called Atlantis. The city's ZPM is too drained to risk dialing out again. They estimate that two hours remain until the shield fails."

"That should not be!" Radek broke in. "Unless conditions on Atlantis have worsened since our departure."

"Much worse," acknowledged the doctor. "The waves just keep coming. The last group through said that even the seabed is beginning to break up. They've had to divert a lot of power just to hold the city in something approximating a stable position, and that's requiring the use of the inertial dampeners. The plan right now is to take cover on the *Daedalus* and power the city down as much as possible. I've been asked to pass along a rather urgent request for at least one ZPM at your earliest opportunity. One would bring the last group safely here, but two might just give the *Daedalus* enough time to finish its repairs."

"Copy that," Lorne said. "We'll do our best to hustle."

"Dr. Weir sends her thanks in advance. Alpha site out."

Of course Elizabeth was still in the city. John imagined that she probably felt like the captain of the *Titanic* just then.

"Sir, we're already in place," reported Jumper Five's pilot—and damn, being unable to identify the kid's voice pissed John off. "The ZPM's right in front of us. We could grab it and be back to Atlantis in no time."

"If you remove it out of sequence, you may initiate a chain of events that will prevent Jumper Four from recovering its ZPM," Radek warned.

"Jumper Four is now in position at the base of the cliff," said Teyla. "We are beginning to tunnel through the sand."

That meant at least twenty minutes of waiting, twenty minutes that Atlantis might not have if things continued to deteriorate. It

was a hell of a choice. Take one ZPM now and save the rest of the expedition, or wait for two and possibly save the *Daedalus*, their best chance of ever getting back to Earth.

"Listen, Vené was just here," Lorne put in. "He says some of his people are lagging behind and need more time. If we start pulling the ZPMs now, he's afraid they'll lose a couple hundred, maybe more." John could hear the Polrusson's desperate voice in the background. "He says thirty minutes would make a big difference to them. Sir, it's your call."

One of the many reasons why, on occasion, command really sucked. John had seen those villagers' faces, seen their joy and hope. There was no way he could trade so many of their lives for the few souls remaining on Atlantis. Elizabeth would agree wholeheartedly, he knew, though that didn't make him feel the least bit better about it.

"Stand by, Jumper Five. Teyla, holler the second you find that ZPM, then both of you grab your ZPMs and make for the 'gate. Jumper Five, don't wait for Four—they'll be behind you. With any luck, we might be able to give our friends on the *Daedalus* time to get that hyperdrive back up and running. Lorne, pack up everything there and prepare to leave the moment the sequence begins. Take Radek in Jumper Two to the Alpha site."

"Wait!" Zelenka's voice cut through. "I should return to Atlantis to assist with the *Daedalus*."

"*Daedalus* has Hermiod. If they run out of time, the Alpha site is going to need both of you."

There was a momentary silence, until Lorne responded in a voice deliberately stripped of emotion. "What about you, sir?"

John glanced over at Ronon, who looked as determined as ever. "We have a date with some Darts. We'll catch up."

Tunneling through the sand, Teyla decided, was not unlike moving through the formless gray goo, except that the grains at least offered some hint as to forward motion. The map illuminated on the HUD gave a clearer indication of their progress.

"Let's hope it doesn't take this long getting out," said Witner.

While the force field was proving to be an effective tool to clear the passage, the loose sand and rubble simply closed in behind them as they dug.

"There will be time," Teyla assured him. She had long since schooled herself in the art of patience, and this delay, while imperiling Dr. Weir and those who remained on Atlantis, at least would give the people of Polrusso more time. The outcome would be whatever was best for both worlds.

Still, she found herself staring at the HUD, urging the small light that indicated their location to move faster.

"We've reached the force field." Witner's hands moved across the controls, and the sand outside rapidly fell away to reveal the same style of airlock found on the Ancestors' laboratory.

While Witner rotated the jumper within the force field, Teyla stood and went to the rear of the craft, her hand close to the hatch release. The moment she felt the jumper lock into position against the structure, she activated the mechanism. A blast of rank air gave her momentary pause, but then she hurried outside before the hatch was fully lowered.

"We're in," Witner announced.

"Good, very good," replied Dr. Zelenka.

The room, if it could be called that, was large, and looked very much like the lab near the 'gate. It appeared to have been abandoned in a great hurry, for shelves and equipment were scattered everywhere. Although the facility had been woken by the arrival of the jumper, it was difficult to ascertain where the power module was located. "Dr. Zelenka, we appear to be in a laboratory. Could you please direct me to where I might find the ZPM?"

"It's in the middle of that glowing panel near the terminal," replied the pilot of Jumper Five. "You can't miss it."

It was an expression that Teyla had frequently heard Rodney use, a statement of fact that almost always indicated the opposite—which was the situation now facing her.

"Which terminal?" Witner queried from behind her. "There's

about twenty of them, and all of the walls are covered in screens.”

“What?” Dr. Zelenka asked quickly. Teyla could almost picture him sitting forward and pushing his eyeglasses back on his nose. “It must be a complete second laboratory. In this case, the ZPM is likely to be located in an adjoining room, perhaps to the rear.”

Picking his way across upturned chairs and broken shelves, Witner said, “This is not looking good, Dr. Z.”

Teyla walked around the far side of the lab, and noticed the rungs of a ladder. She looked up to see them end at the ceiling.

“Five more minutes,” Colonel Sheppard announced over her com. “Then you’ll have abandon your search and get out of there. Wild geese are not on the day’s menu.”

Familiar with the colloquialism, Teyla replied, “I have not found any birds, Colonel, but I believe I have discovered the adjoining room.” She climbed the rungs and pushed open a section of the ceiling. Lifting her head, she saw a pedestal at the center of a darkened rotunda, the walls of which were adorned with unfamiliar symbols and lights. She climbed up into the room and gazed around in satisfaction. “Sergeant!”

Witner was already on his way up the ladder. “Yup. That’s it.” The Marine came and stood beside her, then placed his hand on a nearby panel, much as Teyla had seen Dr. McKay do on Atlantis. The ZPM rose halfway out of its compartment.

“We are ready,” Teyla announced, feeling a surge of relief. They still had time, and so did the Polrussons.

“Be prepared to take off as soon as you have the ZPMs,” cautioned Dr. Zelenka. “Remember, these units form part of a power grid that was never intended to be accessed in this manner. The removal of two ZPMs will instantly impact the force fields all around the planet. We cannot be sure what will happen, nor how quickly.”

“We’re ready to get the hell out of Dodge.” Witner stood with his hands poised on either side of the power module, shifting his weight from foot to foot in anticipation.

“When I count to three, pull them at the same time. All right?”

Teyla heard Radek draw a deep breath. “One—two—three!”

Witner pulled. The ZPM remained solidly fixed. Amid whoops of triumph from the crew of Jumper Five, a flash of despair struck Teyla. “It does not respond,” she shouted to Dr. Zelenka.

“Rotate it,” he replied, his voice calming.

“That’s not the problem,” Witner told them.

It was then that Teyla saw that the ZPM had not fully risen from its compartment. Having already tried to rotate it in both directions, Witner’s gentle movements to tug it free became increasingly forceful. It refused to budge. Looking closely, he observed, “There’s grit in the rings.”

“Leave the ZPM. Go—*now!*” Through the cracking noises around her, Teyla could not discern whether it was Colonel Sheppard or Dr. Zelenka yelling through her com. Clutching the ZPM to maintain his balance, Witner glanced at Teyla. The fear and determination in his eyes swiftly transformed into relief when a tremor allowed the ZPM to fully rise. He snatched it from the pedestal as a second, even greater rumble shifted the entire room to one side. This time, deep fractures appeared in the wall and sand immediately began to pour in.

“Teyla, Witner! Get out of there!”

There was no mistaking Sheppard’s voice, but his order was no longer necessary. Teyla reached the ladder and, glancing back to ensure that Witner was with her, all but flung herself down into the room below.

“We got it!” Witner announced.

The next shudder twisted the entire framework of the laboratory, tearing the walls apart and allowing huge quantities of sand to pour in. The sergeant maintained his grip on the ladder even as it fell from the wall. Teyla attempted to move clear, but the tremendous cascade of sand and clutter of furniture in the lab hindered her movements, and she was struck heavily on the shoulder. Instantly her mouth began to fill with sand.

“Teyla!”

Finding purchase on an upturned bench, she hauled herself to

her feet, spitting out grit. "Go!" she yelled at the Marine, motioning towards the exit—which was already shrouded by a curtain of falling sediment, fine as dust, swirling around the room and reducing visibility even further.

Tucking the ZPM under his arm as if it were Colonel Sheppard's prized football, Witner made for the jumper. His legs were longer than Teyla's, and the sand was piling up along her path, hindering her further. Surely the walls would collapse before she reached the ship. "Do not wait for me!"

Witner might have heard her as he staggered into the jumper, but he gave no acknowledgement. The rumbling around her grew so loud that the noise became almost a force unto itself, crashing down on her head along with the now-shattered remnants of the ceiling. The sand sucked at her feet, then her knees. She tried to claw her way out, but her arms became embedded.

I am not yet ready to die! With a monumental effort, she heaved herself free, took a few more steps and hurled herself into the back of the jumper, activating the hatch as she fell hard against the bulkhead.

With the closure of the hatch, the noise abated, but not the terrible shaking. Teyla made her way to the cockpit as Witner detached them from the laboratory. Ahead, just beyond their force field, the loosely packed sand and gravel began to move sideways. The immense rush of water that followed slammed the jumper to the side, tossing it beneath a furious maelstrom.

"Son of a bitch," John cursed. He should have done a recon orbit right at the beginning of all this, no matter how impatient Rodney had been. The coordinates of the Darts had led them to what had to be the deepest trench on the planet, only ten minutes from the 'gate and well out of sight. When the life signs indicator finally lit up, it did so with style.

"Huh," said Ronon, looking about as surprised as he ever got.

"No kidding." Approaching, John got a bigger shock when the canyon widened. There were tens, probably hundreds of thousands

of life signs down there—more than the HUD could differentiate, stretching out as far down the canyon as he could see. They lit up the display like the Las Vegas Strip.

And not a single one of them was Wraith.

He fell back in his seat, and the dizziness that swamped him had nothing to do with the vertigo creeping back into his senses. "Oh, God," he whispered.

This wasn't a hive ship. It was a thriving human civilization—one that would soon be underwater.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The information was coming at him almost faster than he could take it in. John choked back his initial shock and forced himself to analyze the situation. Darts were skimming back and forth across the canyon, scooping up dozens of people at a time. As the jumper neared, he brought up a magnified view. None of these people appeared to be fleeing the Darts. Just the opposite, in fact; they were waving frantically, trying to draw attention to themselves.

The Darts moved methodically, steady beams of Wraithlight playing across the ground in deliberate patterns. Their strategy couldn't have been more different from the hit-and-run tactics employed by the Wraith. Somehow, there had been a terrible mistake.

"Shoot them!" Ronon yelled, his features instantly darkening at the sight of the Darts.

"No!" John broke off his course, causing the jumper to veer awkwardly. "Can't you see? They're trying to save those people."

Ronon's answering look made it clear he thought his team leader was unbalanced in more ways than one. John ignored him. "Jumpers Four and Five, what's your status?" *Dammit, dammit, dammit!* "Teyla! Witner—respond!"

"Jumper Five here, sir," came the reply. "We had a close call—everything collapsed on us as soon as we pulled the ZPM. But we're headed for the 'gate now."

Nothing from Jumper Four. "Four, respond," John tried again, with growing dread. If the structure had collapsed on Teyla and Witner as well... "Five, is there any way you can put the ZPM back where you found it?"

It was official now: everybody thought he was losing it.

"Due respect, sir, are you nuts? The whole thing's washed away. About half a mile of the cliff has already disintegrated. There's

water gushing out everywhere. We're dialing the 'gate now."

John had no sightline to the lab from his current position, but he had a suspicion about where the Darts were headed. What the hell could they do now? "Radek, what's going on with the area where Teyla's ZPM was?"

A response came, but not from Radek. "Jumper Four is here," Teyla announced belatedly, sounding winded. "We were caught in the structure's collapse and barely escaped. The water has broken through the rock face, but only in a limited area, taking the structure with it. We have the ZPM and are returning to the 'gate."

"It may take a while for the fractured rocks to give way," Radek said. "Still, Colonel, you have very little time to look for Rodney."

John ached, from the fading painkillers and from the knowledge of what they'd just set in motion. If Rodney was in fact dead, at least he wouldn't have to live with the consequences of their actions. "The situation," he replied dully, "just got a little more complicated."

"Sir, Jumper Five has gone through the 'gate," Lorne reported. "There are now multiple Darts inbound to the lab from your direction. Permission to detach Jumper Two in order to engage them."

"It is not necessary," said Radek. "They cannot breach the lab's force field."

"I'm aware of that, Doc. I asked because I think Jumper One could use some backup."

"Negative," John said sharply. "Radek, disengage the force field."

About four different voices exclaimed, "*What?*"

"Sir, please repeat that order," Lorne said, his voice taut.

"You heard me. What are the Darts doing?" John aimed for the nearest group of people on the ground, made up mostly of children by the size of them, and set Jumper One down on the floor of the gorge with a jarring *thud*.

After a pause, the Major answered, "That's weird. A bunch of people just appeared outside the lab, looking kind of dazed. All but one of the Darts have taken off and are headed back in your direc-

tion. Why would the Wraith dump people—?”

“They’re not Wraith! Lower the damn force field and let them in before the ground collapses out from under them!”

Comprehending that they had to evacuate as many as possible to high ground, Ronon made for the rear of the jumper and opened the hatch. The ambient noise in the jumper rose as a dozen voices expressed their gratitude. Having trouble hearing his com, John leaned forward and cupped a hand around his good ear.

Radek’s voice was immediately audible. “Rodney!”

With a surge of hope, John jerked upright. “Where?”

“Here, in the lab—with...*Pro boha*.” Radek sounded stunned and possibly a little repulsed.

Other voices soon overlapped the scientist’s on the frequency. Above the commotion, John could clearly hear Vené’s shouts. “Kill them! Kill the Wraith! Force them outside for the water to carry them away!”

Ronon’s surprised grunt from the rear of Jumper One prompted John to turn in his seat, and suddenly all the reactions made sense. Sort of.

The kids clambering aboard the jumper were...different. Deformed, if he was being brutally honest. Many of them wore hooded robes, but those only partially masked their distorted features. Eyes and ears askew, misshapen limbs—it was like a lineup for Ripley’s Believe It or Not.

“Lorne,” John commanded with all the authority he’d ever possessed. “Stop Vené. Those people are *not* Wraith!”

When the jumper was filled to capacity, Ronon closed the hatch. John lifted off, trying to compensate for the craft’s additional weight, and headed for the lab. “Everybody hold onto something if you can,” he called over his shoulder. “This isn’t one of my better days.”

Flying around a bend in the gorge, he was struck speechless by what lay beyond the windshield. Several miles of the canyon wall had collapsed, and water was pouring out at an unimaginable rate. The flood was almost an entity of its own, primal in its wildness

and astounding in its sheer force. The sight was beautiful, and terrifying.

Behind him, his passengers gasped in horror. John wanted to apologize, to explain somehow, but any attempt would have been pathetically inadequate. Instead, he turned his attention to the emerging scuffle on the radio.

“All of you, back off!” Lorne was yelling over a crowd. “Just calm down!”

From the jumble of sounds, John guessed that the panicky cliff-dwellers who had remained behind to witness the spectacle were now mobbing whomever the Darts were depositing on the lab’s doorstep. Probably people much like his passengers. Radek was still babbling something about Rodney, who’d apparently been beamed in along with the first group of people. And they *were* people. The life signs indicator verified that fact, although some of the signatures were closer to Ancient than human. He blinked at the HUD in confusion. What in God’s name was going *on* with this planet?

The sharp report of a P-90 told him that Lorne was out of options and about to enforce martial law. Coming up over the cliff, John cringed at the repeated abuse of his favorite ride and all but slammed Jumper One into the sand beside the lab. He stood, waited for his balance to catch up, and lunged for the hatch. As badly as he wanted to get back to the trench and save more people, he had to put a stop to the massacre about to happen.

In theory, transit by Wraith beam should have felt as instantaneous as transit by Stargate. It didn’t. There was a significant period of disorientation involved. When Rodney found himself whole again, he swayed on his feet and instinctively reached out. Turpi’s hand steadied him.

Slowly, he became aware of the sounds of fighting and shouting that surrounded him. This was the Ancient lab, he was sure. He recognized the smooth metal floor under his feet. What was—?

A deafening clamor tore away the last tatters of his stupor. These

days, he'd be able to identify a P-90 anywhere, even one foolishly fired in an enclosed space. The weapon presumably achieved its intended effect: everyone fell silent, except for a voice that he was certain belonged to Major Lorne.

"Rodney!" Radek was suddenly inches from his ear, pulling him away from Turpi's hands, and shouting excitedly in a mixture of English and Czech.

Rodney grasped blindly at his colleague, his bandaged hands bouncing off the other man's shoulders. "Tell me you haven't removed any of the ZPMs. Tell me!"

The ensuing pause trampled on his remaining hope. "It is too late."

"Oh, God! Do you have any idea what you've done?"

The syncopated rhythm of two pairs of boots joined the cacophony. "You used us!" Sheppard was fuming at someone—Vené, most likely. "You set this up to slaughter thousands of innocent people!"

"They did not know," Nabu declared from somewhere nearby. Rodney hadn't realized he'd beamed in with them.

Vené apparently hadn't caught on to the real issue at hand yet. "The Wraith are a scourge upon us. Why would we not rid ourselves of their evil?"

"Your people have not seen a Wraith in generations," Nabu responded scornfully. "You would not know how to recognize one unless it fed upon you."

"I recognize you and your minions well enough!"

And that tore it for Rodney. "All of you just shut up! Unless someone is about to reveal the existence of a time machine or any other such saving grace, be quiet and let me figure out what we can do."

"There is nothing," Radek said somberly. "The power matrix cannot support the load with two ZPMs removed."

Another set of running footsteps approached, lighter and faster. "Colonel," Teyla asked, "should we return home with the second ZPM?"

"Might as well." Sheppard's voice sounded agonized but resigned, with a tinge of disgust that surely was directed at the culpable bigot, Vené. "There's nothing we can do with it here."

"No!" Rodney countered, grabbing at Radek's arm. "Have you tried to reconfigure the matrix?"

"I ran several calculations before the ZPMs were removed. There is no way to stop what is happening."

"Wrong answer." Rodney wasn't about to accept that their actions would end so many lives. "Get back on that computer. We can..." His rapidly evolving plan hit a roadblock. There was no way they'd be able to do anything fast enough unless he could use his own eyes and hands. He began pawing at his face. "Somebody get these bandages off."

"Rodney, no," Turpi cried. "You must not." Her hands cupped his face, her mind imploring him.

"I can't save your people if I can't see," he protested. "Even if it does damage my eyes, you can heal them—can't you?"

She did not answer, and somewhere, in a fleeting instant of perception amid his desperate need to put things right, he got the sense that he hadn't asked the right question.

An odd silence filled his mind. It lasted for only a second, but it seemed to stretch endlessly, as if his life had paused just long enough to let him glimpse what might have been. The silence stretched until another second passed. How many millions of liters of water had tumbled out during that pause? And yet he felt that something far greater was also on the verge of plunging to destruction.

Nabu's voice finally broke through the silent void. "You must let him go, daughter." It was filled with overwhelming regret, and a sadness that Rodney might never have intuited had he not been blind.

Let him go? Turpi's voiceless sobs echoed in Rodney's mind, and he struggled to comprehend her anguish. But there was no time. Each second that passed reduced his chances of saving her extraordinary people, her children. He felt her knowledge of that,

and then, as her hands fell from his face, he was alone once more.

Other hands carefully removed his bandages. He knew it was not Turpi, because she had backed away, already distancing herself from him. He swallowed back the sense of abandonment. *Let him go?* He wasn't about to go anywhere without her. He couldn't. When his fingers were free, he pushed the remainder of the gauze away.

Brilliant whiteness overwhelmed his newly grown eyes. He flinched and brought up his arm to shield them. "Lights," Nabu ordered quickly, and the flare dimmed to reveal two of his teammates holding the discarded bandages. Teyla had a nasty cut on her forehead, and Sheppard looked washed-out, but they were there—not blurry or dark, but clear and whole.

As his gaze swept over them and found Radek and Ronon nearby, he fought to rein in his overpowering relief. "It's, ah, good to see you guys," he said weakly. Whatever odd thoughts he'd been having a moment ago were overrun by the return of his normal senses.

Sheppard gripped his shoulder. "It's good to be seen."

Rodney next observed that the lab was now fully operational. Good. He hurried over to the main computer to analyze the power matrix, ignoring the fact that the place was filled wall to wall with people. There had to be some way to reconfigure the distribution in such a way that at least part of the system could be maintained long enough to...

After a few hastily assembled simulations, he was forced to bow to reality. "Congratulations," he told Radek bleakly, feeling sick. "You've done a flawless job of condemning to death hundreds of thousands of people who might have been this galaxy's single greatest defense against the Wraith."

"Don't blame him," Sheppard broke in, his cold fury focused on Vené. "These people have done nothing but screw with us from the moment we got here."

"We will not apologize for defending ourselves against the Wraith," Vené retorted, pulling himself up to his full height and

glaring at Sheppard in return.

"For the last damned time, they're *not* Wraith!"

Anarchy threatened to erupt again, but Turpi's silent voice cut through all the accusations. "Father, I have never thanked you well enough for all you have done—for loving me, and for giving all of us hope for the future. I must now repay you in full measure."

The finality of her words chilled Rodney, enough to make him abandon his frantic attempts to coax a nonexistent solution from the computer. Spinning around in his chair, he searched the room. On one side stood Vené and a number of cliff-dwellers. Through the windows, now clear of sand, he could see that there were dozens more outside. He turned further until he caught sight of tall, distinguished-looking Nabu. Certainly at first glance the man could be mistaken for a Wraith, but the intelligence and wisdom in his eyes belied that thought instantly. There was also something more in his eyes, something Rodney had difficulty comprehending: tears.

And then Rodney understood why, when his gaze came to rest, for the first time, on Turpi, standing alone between the cliff-dwellers and the gifted children they had abandoned to the sands.

The hunchbacked creature was only identifiable as a woman because of her disproportionate breasts. Stick-legged, she had two uneven slits in place of a nose. One eye was missing, the other white and clearly blind. A few tufts of yellow hair stuck out pitifully from odd places around her head, and her ears...as far as Rodney could see, she had no ears.

Under his aghast stare she recoiled, and he instantly knew why the recovery of his sight had pained her so deeply. Turpi was not only a deaf mute, she was also functionally blind—and yet she could see with greater clarity than all of them.

It had taken only a split second between her words and Rodney's comprehension. Nabu reacted faster, crying "No!" as he rushed to her, his black coat billowing behind him. But it was too late. Turpi's body began to glow.

The crowd in the lab backed away, leaving Nabu beside her. "What's she doing?" Rodney demanded, leaping off his chair and

reaching for her, terrified that he might already know. *"What are you doing?"*

The light grew outward from her body, filling the room and turning her translucent until she appeared ephemeral. Helpless, terrified in a way he could not yet define, Rodney looked around the lab. The villagers were cowering fearfully. Nabu's people, however, began to follow Turpi's lead. Those who had hands joined them, while others found different ways to establish some of kind of contact with each other. Remembering how Nabu had described their method of deterring the Wraith, Rodney understood that Turpi was linking many of her people's minds together, in order to...what? He knew, or at least, a part of him knew, but refused to accept.

Radek's stunned voice reached him. "I do not believe it."

It felt like a betrayal to turn away from Turpi. Still, he had to know. "What?" He studied the computer screen, but what he saw didn't fit within any logical rules. Somehow, the power level in the ZPM matrix had been sufficiently augmented to reestablish the force fields and stop the flow of water.

The rest of his team stood near the window, staring out at the landscape, astonished and disbelieving in equal parts. He rushed over to see for himself, pushing Vené aside, and was floored by the scene. An invisible wall had replaced the section of the cliff that had washed away. There was no telltale shimmer from a force field. As insane as the notion seemed, these people, these extraordinary, gifted children, were holding back an entire ocean with the power of their minds.

"Unbelievable," Sheppard said in a low voice, awed.

Barely hearing him, Rodney tried to put what he was seeing into context. How was she doing this? It couldn't possibly be sustainable. How would they—

Turpi's voice floated clearly through his cluttered thoughts. "You must choose, my dearest."

He swung around again. "Choose what?" Desperate to understand, he searched the light for some sign of her face.

Tears barely contained, Nabu nodded once, as if in reply to

something Turpi was saying to him, and withdrew a long object from inside his robes. With a jolt, Rodney realized why they'd been unable to find Atlas's exogenesis machine in the lab. It had been somewhere else all along.

"With Turpi to lead them, my people's minds will be able to hold back the water, but only for a short time," said Nabu, firmly in control of his emotions once more. "I can use Atlas's machine to reverse what has been done, and allow Polrusso to continue on as it once was, without need of the ZPMs. You will have time to collect all of these ZPMs and take them back to Atlantis, so that the great city of the Ancients will become a starship once more."

Gasps could be heard from many of the villagers as the truth was laid bare. Vené's shock was evident, and he turned an angry gaze on an unrepentant Sheppard. Rodney hadn't even formed the next question in his head before Ronon beat him to it. "Or what?"

"Or you must leave the ZPM that you have now so that I can install it here." Nabu pointed outside, in the direction of the jumpers. "I can adjust the matrix to function without the ZPM that has already been taken, and we will have no need of the exogenesis machine. The little water that has escaped will soon evaporate and become stored as ice in our poles."

"What of Atlantis?" Teyla asked. "As we stand here, our world is being destroyed from within."

"I am aware." Nabu held up the machine, small and seemingly innocuous, in his large hand. "I can program this to restore Lantea in a very short time."

"And we're supposed to believe it's that easy?" Ronon demanded.

Rodney fixed him with an irritated look. What did the Satedan know about it? What did any of them know? "Trust me. He can do it."

"Amazing," Radek said quietly. When Rodney turned toward him, the other scientist was focused on his life signs detector. "This man is as much Ancient as he is human."

Turpi's statement rang in Rodney's mind. *Choose...*

"Twelve ZPMs," he murmured. A vision of Atlantis rising into the sky beckoned like a siren's call.

"The city is not ready, Rodney," Radek warned. "We have tried. There are too many problems, too much damage. Atlantis cannot become a starship, not for quite some time—if ever."

Radek had to be wrong. He might have attempted to prepare the city for flight, but he'd had to do it without Rodney's expertise. No one knew the systems the way Rodney did. Wouldn't it be far better to have Atlantis as a ship rather than sitting, crippled, out in the open like a target?

All of Rodney's innate self-confidence was telling him that he could make the city fly. It occurred to him that some assistance might be useful, but before he could swallow his pride enough to ask, Nabu spoke again. "This is something I cannot help you do. My understanding of the exogenesis machine comes from many generations of research with Atlas's own records to assist. Atlantis is beyond my knowledge."

Turpi's voice brushed through Rodney's mind with the gentleness of a wind chime. "Choose wisely."

In that moment, he recognized that his arrogance could destroy everything.

With all the possibilities of what Atlantis could be still fresh in his mind's eye, he relented. "Teyla, go get the ZPM."

"Hold on a second." The objection came from Sheppard. "Are you sure about that? I know the first ZPM should have bought us some time, but—"

"Of course I'm not sure," Rodney snapped at him. "I mean, I'm not sure about what's best for Atlantis. But overall, for everyone, this is the best we can do."

Without a word, Teyla started toward the door.

"Stop!" At some point, Vené had recovered from his paralyzed shock, and his voice was commanding. "These Wraithspawn want to keep Polrusso from becoming the world it was meant to be," he claimed, trying to rally his villagers. "Stop the off-worlder!"

The cliff-dwellers traded uncertain glances, plainly over-

whelmed by what they'd seen and heard. No one moved to stop Teyla, who soon disappeared through the door.

From within Nabu's group, a little girl stepped forward. Her features angelic and unscarred, she searched the throng of villagers for a familiar face.

Rodney heard a cry from within the crowd, and recognized the grieving mother they'd seen shortly after their first arrival. The woman rushed forward to take the girl into her arms, touching the child's cheek while wonder and guilt warred on her own face.

While the strange glow still surrounded them, others from Nabu's group, children and adults alike, began to pull back the hoods they wore. Some were deformed, others normal—whatever that word meant anymore—but all of them drew gasps from the villagers, who slowly started to recognize the children they had abandoned to the storms.

In the few seconds that passed before Teyla reappeared with the ZPM cradled in her arms, the terrible truth of their misconceptions froze the cliff-dwellers into inaction. Nabu took the ZPM from Teyla and moved to a grid on the wall, which Rodney had seen during his first visit but hadn't been able to identify while the lab was unpowered. Having placed the ZPM into the grid, Nabu went to the computer and entered a series of commands.

"Power to the matrix is increasing." Radek immediately glanced up from another terminal he had been monitoring.

The bright aura surrounding Turpi and the others began to fade and shrink, until it was once again focused on her alone. As they were released from the light, her people staggered a little, recovering from the strain. When the light at last had gone completely, Turpi crumpled to the floor.

Running to her, Rodney pulled up short, hesitating. Turpi gathered her robes with feeble hands, attempting to cover herself. "Don't see me this way," she begged, her voice sounding weak even inside his mind. "Remember me as you first saw me, in your dreams."

The memory of Nabu's words struck him. Turpi had already

given too much of herself to heal him. In a terrible flash of understanding, he knew that channeling her people's powers had quenched her life. Turpi was dying.

"No!" Clinging to hope, he spun around to Nabu but found only a wrenching sorrow in the other man's eyes. Behind him, Ronon wore an expression of disgust. Jarred, Rodney looked around at his teammates, and then the villagers. Each concealed his or her reaction to varying degrees, but all of their gazes held some combination of pity and revulsion.

Somehow that sealed it. Rodney fell to his knees and gathered Turpi in his arms. "Don't you dare look at her like that!" he shouted at the others. "What gives you the right? You have no idea... God, can't you see her mind? Can't you see how beautiful she is?"

Even as he sensed her joy at his declaration, he also felt her trying to make him understand. She *was* dying, and nothing either of them might do would change that.

His eyes burned with tears as he lifted his head to glare at Vené. "You have *no* idea," he repeated fiercely, accusing all of them, even his friends. "She's a better person than any of us. Even after everything you've seen these people do, you still think of them as rejects. How cold-blooded *are* you?"

Teyla opened her mouth to speak, but Rodney turned away to look down at Turpi, hearing only her faltering voice. "Please... remember what you feel, not what you see."

He closed his eyes, both because she wished it and because the tears were threatening to overtake him. "This is what I'll remember," he vowed, pressing her soft, misshapen fingers to his cheek.

"I love you." Her words faded, and her body went limp in his arms.

Holding her close, Rodney was paralyzed by loss and shame. In spite of his tirade, he couldn't fault his teammates or even Vené for their reactions when he'd held those same preconceptions himself. Actually, that wasn't true. He did blame them, and he blamed himself right along with them. Knowing as he did what it felt like to be rejected, how could he have judged her, even for a second?

Throughout the room, many of the cliff-dwellers were discovering their lost children. Seeing families reunite all around him, Vené still looked fearful and, to Rodney's way of thinking, sickeningly ignorant. "These wretched creatures should not hold such power," he protested, turning to accuse Nabu. "It was *you* who denied us the Ancestors' plans for this world. *You stole our birthright!*"

Nabu rounded on him, tears streaming down his scarred face. "And you have blinded yourself so completely that you no longer recognize the child of your loins!" His hand shook as he pointed at Turpi. "You cast her out into the desert when she was but a baby. Born already understanding who and what she was, she begged you to keep her, promising never to harm you. But your closed mind would not hear her! And yet she loved you to this day. Turpi, and many of our people, would have survived the poison that the waters would have released. Still, she chose to sacrifice herself to save *you* and the future of this world." He stabbed a finger at the other man's chest.

Vené inhaled sharply, comprehension dawning at last.

His gaze moving from Nabu to Vené to Rodney, Sheppard finally found his voice. "I, uh, think maybe we'd better leave these people to their reunions and get that machine back to Atlantis."

Rodney couldn't find the energy to care about any of it. He eased Turpi's body to the floor with exquisite care. Kneeling on the ground with his arms wrapped around her, he let his head sink to her chest, utterly lost inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ronon kept a close eye on both Vené and Nabu, not fully trusting either of them just yet. He could see that the villagers were beginning to recognize and welcome the others into their midst, but he didn't understand how they'd been driven apart in the first place. Cast out into the sandstorms? Were they serious?

Regardless of McKay's tirade, Ronon had not looked on Turpi in revulsion but with compassion. Like Teyla, the more he'd learned about the Ancestors, the more he came to believe that they hadn't been the benefactors that most people thought them to be.

Half expecting one of the cliff-dwellers to make a move, Ronon was caught off-guard when a bright light once more flooded the room. He squinted against the glare and found the source: the woman in McKay's arms. This time, however, the light was different, concentrating solely around her. As he watched, Turpi's body faded from existence, leaving nothing but clothes behind. The light glided upwards, disembodied, but with solid looking filaments reaching out and gently touching McKay's face.

Ronon had seen that light before. When Sheppard had been stuck in the time dilation field months earlier, the people who'd taken him in had vanished the same way, transformed into energy. Ascension, his teammates had called it. He'd heard accounts of it from a dozen worlds; even his own planet had tales about a state of existence that the Ancestors had striven for above all else. As a soldier, he hadn't paid much heed to spiritual matters, but by all accounts, it was quite a feat to achieve. Good for her.

The villagers appeared to recognize what was happening as well, watching with expressions of wonder, even awe. Some fell to their knees in supplication, while others staggered back. Whatever indignation Vené had possessed was gone in an instant, and he now gaped openly. The sadness on Nabu's face eased with a small

smile, one that Ronon read as an acknowledgement of something richly deserved. Sometimes, it seemed, the universe played fair.

The coil of light hovered in front of McKay for a moment and then rose slowly. Its tendrils reached out to embrace Nabu and Vené, and everyone present, before vanishing from sight. Ronon figured that meant the show was over. These people were safe, so now it was Atlantis's turn.

He checked on Sheppard and found that his team leader had surreptitiously braced himself against the wall, his features taut. "Beckett's drugs wore off, huh?" Ronon asked.

"Pretty much." Collecting himself, the Colonel spent a moment focusing on the act of standing upright. Then, concentrating on each step, he went to McKay and dropped a hand onto the man's shoulder. "C'mon, Rodney. Time to save the day back home."

Turpi's robe still lay in McKay's loose grasp. He stared straight ahead, dazed and unresponsive.

Zelenka tried next. "Rodney, we must go now. Atlantis needs our help."

Something in that statement must have gotten through, because McKay nodded dumbly.

Offering him a hand up from the floor, Nabu said, "I will accompany you to Atlantis."

"Please." Vené took a step forward, his voice subdued. "I... I don't understand. We did not know. How could we have known? The records of the Ancestors were clear!"

There were a lot of things that Ronon might have said to that, but he'd long since learned that saying much of anything was a waste of time once people had set their minds in a certain direction. Nabu looked like he wanted to snap back the obvious reply, but instead said, "This world was but one more in many experiments that the Ancestors undertook."

Vené looked like a man whose faith had been severely shaken. Not unexpectedly, he still clung to past truths. "What poison do you speak of? Can we not continue Polrusso's transformation once all... considerations have been addressed?"

"No." McKay shook his head, raw grief unashamedly written across his features. "You're going to...have to wait." His voice broke, and he cleared his throat before continuing in a shaky tone. "The terraforming program here was set up exactly as your records show, but with a compound that was deliberately introduced in order to imbue you with immunity against the Wraith. Ancient-like abilities are a bonus side effect. You'll need to let the program run until—" He rubbed a sleeved arm across his eyes, clearing away the tears but not the anguish, and glanced at Nabu. "Until Nabu shuts it down."

Sounds of dismay erupted from the cliff-dwellers. "But how long must we wait?" asked one of the other Elders.

"Several more generations," replied Nabu.

Ronon stared at him. Generations, huh? Zelenka had said something about Nabu being part Ancient.

Cutting off Vené's disenchanted protest with a sharp swipe of his hand, McKay continued. "And you need to understand that it's these people, your children, who will inherit the new world you've been waiting for. The abilities they're developing are the future of this planet, possibly even this galaxy. If you want your civilization to survive, you'd better stop rejecting every child that looks different or acts outside the socially accepted norm." The normal bite in his tone was subdued, but emphatic nonetheless.

"And what are we to do when their madness endangers us all?" Vené's question was honest, the earlier condemnation gone.

"That won't be a problem." Rodney took a deep, steadying breath, clearly battling to recover his composure. "Nabu's people know how to control their abilities. They've been teaching each other for generations, and it'll be a lot easier for them to keep doing so if they don't have to hide from you or run around saving the kids you toss out like damaged goods." Despite the waver in his voice, there was also a clear challenge. Ronon could see that the emotional shutters were already slamming

into place. An understandable tactic.

Teyla spoke up. "I do not believe anyone will be forced to hide any longer, Rodney." She inclined her head toward the villagers, many of them embracing their estranged children. "No one who saw what has happened this day will be able to return to the old ways."

"No," Lorne called, her face damp with tears. She was clinging to a young man who, if appearances were anything to go by, was her son. "Never again shall we be forced to tear out our hearts." Her determined look was directed at Vené.

"Colonel." Lorne was standing near Jumper Two's rear hatch. "Are we good to go?"

"Yeah, I'd say so. We're running against the clock here." Taking a step toward the door, Sheppard staggered. Ronon watched him struggle to regain his balance and decided right then that they would ride back with Lorne, even if he had to drag Sheppard by his boots. If Atlantis survived, somebody could come pick up Jumper One later, but he'd rather crawl through the 'gate than allow the injured pilot to attempt to fly again.

Apparently he wasn't the only one who'd noticed. Nabu stepped forward, studying the Colonel. "You are hurt."

Sheppard blinked at him, clearly primed to deny it. "I—"

Nabu reached out and grasped his arms. The effect was immediate. Sheppard's body tensed, his eyes sliding shut. Reflexively, Ronon started forward, reaching for his weapon, but then he stopped himself. Every gut instinct he'd ever depended on told him that Nabu wasn't going to hurt the Colonel.

Sheppard's knees buckled, but the larger man's grip held him upright. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and straightened. "What...What did you do?"

Releasing him, Nabu was dismissive. "It was a small thing."

"Not to me, it wasn't." The pinched, pained look had disappeared, replaced by one of shock and wonder. "You— Do you

have any idea what you've just given back to me?"

"Your hearing, and your equilibrium."

Sheppard shook his head, searching for the right words. "My life," he corrected quietly.

While Zelenka joined Lorne in Jumper Two, Ronon and the rest of the group made their way to the other jumpers parked haphazardly outside. Sergeant Witner immediately moved up the ramp into Jumper Four to begin the dialing sequence.

Starting to follow him, Teyla seemed to reconsider. "I will travel with Jumper One, Sergeant." She rejoined the team and turned to Nabu with knowing eyes. "You healed Colonel Sheppard easily," she said. "Why is it that you do not heal the others, or repair your own scars?"

Ronon glanced back at the people who had followed them out of the lab, so many of them physically disabled or deformed in some way. Nabu shook his head. "My abilities are limited. Turpi was the greatest healer among us. But the cost to her was....great." He cast a shadowed smile in McKay's direction, but the scientist appeared too wrapped up in his sorrow to take notice. "She could restore any living thing that had been damaged by injury or disease, by directing the cellular structure to return to the pattern that was set at birth. But she could not change a pre-existent structure. Hence, she could not amend a physical deformity—except her own. Turpi held the power to transform herself into the most beautiful creature of your dreams. Yet she would not."

"Why not?" said Sheppard, walking up the hatch of Jumper One.

Entering the jumper alongside Nabu, Ronon watched through the windshield as the vortex of the 'gate shot out, then stabilized. The Polrusson's gaze moved across the interior of the unfamiliar machine, but he did not reply.

Surprisingly, McKay was the one to respond. He sat down heavily, not looking at any of them as he answered. "Because she loved the children too much to set herself apart from them."

Teyla's expression was uncertain. "I do not understand."

Ronon silently agreed.

Nabu looked down at McKay. "Perhaps not. But he does."

Jumper Five's return with the first ZPM had obviously extended Atlantis's lifeline. When Jumpers One, Two and Four emerged from the 'gate, it was to a deserted control room. Still, some minimal equipment was operating, and the ceiling retracted as usual to allow them into the jumper bay.

John put Jumper One in its customary parking place and shut it down, then ushered his group out into the bay. His foot had just hit the deck when the entire room rolled. Narrowly avoiding a face-plant, he glanced around at the others to make sure he hadn't been the only one to feel it. *Figures. I get my balance back and the city starts wobbling for real.*

Teyla's brow furrowed and she shared a look with Ronon. "I hope there is still time."

Only seconds passed before the doors opened to admit Elizabeth. Her gaze took in the group as a whole, quickly coming to rest on their chief scientist. "Rodney, thank God," she said, relief written openly on her face. "Are you all right?" She grasped the edge of a jumper to maintain her balance when the floor beneath them pitched again, this time in the opposite direction. Definitely not a good sign.

Rodney's mumbled "Debatably" was almost inaudible under the noise from the storm outside.

When Elizabeth's focus shifted to John, something hardened. Inwardly wincing, he prepared himself for the fallout that was sure to come as soon as all this was over. He'd taken a risk, and he'd known from the start that he'd have to live with the consequences.

"And you?" she asked neutrally.

"I'm fine. Thanks to our visitor here." John gestured. "Doctor Elizabeth Weir, meet Nabu."

Her eyebrows shot up at the name, and she examined his face closely. "Not a Wraith, then?"

"Not so much."

"I have knowledge of the exogenesis machine that Ea used here." Nabu held out the second machine. "I can program this to counteract its effects."

The mention of Ea's name told John that Nabu had been fully briefed by Rodney. When the tall Polrusson had produced the machine back inside the lab, John had assumed that either his vertigo or Beckett's drugs had been messing with his vision. But now he was sure that there was something weird about the silvery-gray cylinder. The surface was textured like a knobby piece of wood, the knots of which held recessed pieces of... luminous amber, maybe? Whatever the stuff was, it seemed to slip in and out of focus.

When Rodney, who was still clearly not firing on all cylinders, reached out to touch it, Nabu held up a cautioning hand. "The device has been shielded. However, it does not draw its temporal energy from this dimension, and so it is not entirely set within our time frame. You may experience extreme disorientation when handling it."

That declaration seemed to jolt Rodney out of his reverie. His head snapped up. "It employs a temporal field? Of course! Janus helped Atlas develop it—which would explain how it effects change at such a vastly accelerated rate."

Elizabeth's smile was as close to impatient as John had ever seen. "This all sounds fascinating, gentlemen, but we're under something of a time limit here. Perhaps you'd care to discuss it after the current situation has been rectified?"

Her statement hauled Rodney entirely back into scientist mode. He led them out of the bay with a brisk stride, babbling about temporal distortion fields and quantum states, or maybe it was strings. If his rapid-fire delivery was even more manic than usual, well, John could deal with whatever coping strategy Rodney employed to keep himself going. It didn't take a genius to recognize that anything capable of cracking Rodney McKay's shell must have been a profound experience.

Nabu nodded politely, his eyes taking in everything as he fol-

lowed close behind. John understood how he felt. Even rocking back and forth like a rowboat, Atlantis far exceeded the lab on Polrusso in terms of sheer scale and sophistication.

On the way downstairs, Elizabeth said to John, "Except for the volunteer crew working to get *Daedalus* ready, we've evacuated everyone to the Alpha site." The city lunged again, and she fell heavily against him. "Sorry," she muttered, then sent him an odd look when he steadied her. "Carson said... Never mind. Your inner ear really is all right?"

He tossed her a humorless grin. "Let's just say that, if I lose my flight status, it won't be due to a medical condition."

As soon as they reached the control room, Rodney and Radek went to side-by-side computer terminals, periodically grabbing hold of the edges of the table to maintain their balance. After watching for a moment, Nabu rested the exogenesis machine on a chair and stepped in. Without a word, Rodney moved aside to allow him access, a fact that John found telling. Whatever had happened between them back on Polrusso had triggered something in Rodney that John hadn't fully believed existed: humility, or at least a recognition that someone in the galaxy actually knew more than Rodney did.

"This preliminary data suggests that the machine was not properly programmed. As yet I can find no real plan, only a series of discrete, open-ended events," Nabu determined.

"That fits with what Carson said." At the Polrusson's questioning look, Elizabeth explained about the pods. "Ea was driven by grief," she concluded, "and convinced that our presence in Atlantis was inviting a Wraith incursion. Destroying the city seemed to be her only goal."

"Ea and Atlas. Their story is more complicated than you know..." Nabu's voice trailed off, and a strange expression crossed his face. "To have come so far." Shaking his head in regret, he turned back to the computer. "Ea knew full well the potential of the exogenesis device, but perhaps you are correct in saying that grief clouded her mind. That haphazardness may be to our advantage. Once I deter-

mine her exact sequence, I can program a reversal and shutdown.” He pulled up additional data, which began to flow down the screen in a familiar if still incomprehensible Ancient pattern.

“To effect an immediate response,” Nabu added, “it will be best to insert the second machine into the planet’s crust at its thinnest point, so that it will quickly burrow through to the mantle and draw the required energy.”

John glanced at Rodney, but the anticipated info dump wasn’t forthcoming. Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed in concern. “Rodney? Any thoughts on that?”

“Uh...yes.” More evidence as to their chief scientist’s state of mind. The man looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer to his life and then handed him the pieces. “Yes, of course. That would generally be the deepest part of the ocean, where two tectonic plates are converging. Radek?”

“There is a trench.” Already typing at a near-inhuman rate, Radek brought up a bathymetric chart on the main screen and pointed. “Depth is comparable to the Mariana Trench on Earth. The lithosphere is very thin, and there are also several hydrothermal vents here.”

Rodney was nodding his approval, which John took as a good sign. “If we release the machine into a vent, it’ll have a head start.”

“Oh... No, that is not good.” Radek sat back in his chair and brought a hand to his mouth, then abruptly sat forward and began typing again. A new stream of data flowed across the screen.

Looking over his shoulder, Rodney paled. “That’s bad. Exceedingly bad.”

“Yes.” Radek’s voice held the sort of hushed awe that John had learned to really, really hate. Before anyone could ask for clarification, he pointed. “The ocean is rapidly transforming, but instead of remaining inert, the nanites have become... activated.”

If the expression on Rodney’s face was worrying, Nabu looked positively ill. “The program is neither random nor open-ended. It was not designed to destroy Atlantis. On the contrary... *Ea*.” The

name was almost a sigh, but it held an edge of pure terror. The Polrusson pushed his chair back and stood. “This is no longer a matter of saving one world. We must leave. *Now*. I will program Atlas’s machine on the journey.”

Confused, Elizabeth began to speak, but Nabu wasn’t finished. “You have the means to return to your own galaxy through the Stargate?”

“The necessary crystal is at the Alpha site, but we need a ZPM.” The words tumbled over each other. This was definitely panic-Rodney, not excitement-Rodney.

“We can’t remove the ZPM from here, of course,” interjected Radek, “because we need it to power the ’gate to get there—not to mention maintain the shield.”

Nabu’s gaze bored into Elizabeth. “Take all who remain in the city to this Alpha site.” To Lorne and Witner, hovering in the background, he said, “You must return to Polrusso and tell my people that in her grief, *Ea* unleashed the final program. If we fail to contact you within three hours, go to the laboratory and remove the ZPM from the matrix.” At the shock on everyone’s faces, he added, “My people will not stop you. I would ask you to allow as many as are willing to come with you to your Alpha site.” He turned again to Elizabeth. “From there, use the ZPM to leave this galaxy. And never, under any circumstance, should you return.” He snatched up the exogenesis machine and raced up the steps to the jumper bay, his coat flapping behind him like a dark wing.

John looked to Rodney for an explanation and found his teammate sharing a moment of silent panic with Radek.

“Rodney?” Elizabeth asked, but she was talking to Rodney’s back because he was already on Nabu’s heels.

Radek grabbed his and Rodney’s respective packs and sped after him, leaving the rest of them no choice but to follow. Fortunately, Rodney had perfected the art of delivering a succinct commentary on the run. Distraught as he was, his focus grew, as always, proportionally to the magnitude of the crisis. “*Ea* knew everything that Carson knew. She knew how we’d respond—how *I* would

respond. The storm, the nanites and seismic waves; all of it was aimed at getting us to abandon Atlantis.”

“She did not wish to destroy it?” Teyla asked.

“No,” Radek replied simply, struggling with the packs until John relieved him of the larger one. “Ea wanted to give the nanites access to the Stargate.” He almost fell when the city heaved hard to one side.

“Oh, God,” Elizabeth breathed.

In a cold burst of comprehension, John got the picture.

Teyla, however, was apparently still confused. “I do not understand.”

“Me neither,” Ronon put in for good measure, his boots clomping heavily on the steps.

Without pausing, Elizabeth answered, “Ea said that our presence in Atlantis exposed ‘entire galaxies’ to the Wraith. She also said that ‘Everything that should have been destroyed remains.’ She wasn’t talking about Atlantis; otherwise she wouldn’t have entered a stasis pod with the expectation of surviving. She was talking about *everything else*—the entire Pegasus Galaxy!”

Stunned, Teyla halted, only to be nearly run over by Ronon. “That’s what your people call overkill, isn’t it?” the Satedan said.

“Not for an Ancient,” Elizabeth countered. “They created all life in our galaxy with a machine.”

“And last year, the almighty Ascended weren’t averse to letting Anubis use that same machine to wipe out all life and recreate the galaxy to his taste.” Rodney called over his shoulder, his voice projected so that he could be heard over the noise of the storm.

“As with replicators,” Radek explained when they reached the jumper bay, “activated nanites can take on whatever form they’ve been programmed to adopt. Instead of breaking down everything, they can go into stealth mode and, once inside the city, infest the dialing computer.”

“Like Beckett’s stealth virus,” John said, recalling the doctor’s description.

“Yes, I believe so. His knowledge undoubtedly gave her the

idea.” Radek’s face was pinched as he caught his breath.

John fished the jumper’s remote out of his pocket and opened the hatch. “Maybe we should conveniently forget to mention that detail to Beckett.” One hyper-traumatized teammate at a time was enough.

“At that point, the nanites could easily dial out to every Stargate in this galaxy—probably simultaneously—allowing them to destroy everything before beginning a new ‘life’ program,” Rodney added.

“Similar to initializing a hard drive before re-booting a computer.” Radek dropped his pack and pulled out his datapad.

“This is an entire galaxy!” Lorne sounded justifiably affronted. “It’s a little more than a computer.”

Radek shrugged. “Perhaps a very large Petri dish?”

“Grab every power cell you can lay your hands on,” Rodney barked at Lorne and the other Marines who had followed them into the bay. “Load them all into Jumper One. We’re going to need all the juice we can get.”

John lowered Rodney’s pack, strode inside and up to the cockpit, and initiated startup procedures without even sitting down. “So we need to fly Atlas’s exogenesis machine into the trench and plant it inside one of those vents in the planet’s crust?” he asked, making sure he had the big picture. The details he could pick up on the way.

“Preferably without boiling whoever does the inserting,” replied Rodney. John glanced back to see him standing outside the hatch, staring at Radek. “Those vents are putting out a lot more heat than your average Jacuzzi.”

Radek looked up. “Then, of course, there are the activated nanites—”

“And the possible consequences of interacting with a time differential.”

Right, couldn’t forget that. Because he’d had so much *fun* during their last adventure with time dilation.

“Somebody’s going to have to lean out the hatch to drop the

machine," Rodney continued. "It's going to be a bit of a high-wire act."

"I will do it," Teyla said without a moment's hesitation, earning John's respect once again. She was the most agile of them all and would have the best chance of getting it right.

"We'll put you in a HAZMAT suit and have someone anchor you—"

"Me," Ronon put in, his tone allowing no discussion. In spite of the situation, John had to smile. For better or worse, his team stuck together.

Elizabeth stepped back to allow Lorne, arms loaded with power cells, into the jumper. Turning to Rodney and Radek, she said, "As soon as you're through the 'gate, I'll have everyone from the *Daedalus* leave for the Alpha site. Lorne and Witner, you'll be on standby on Polrusso. When you get there, shut down the 'gate and redial Atlantis so that we can keep in contact and transfer the ZPM quickly if necessary." She met John's gaze. "I'll need you to leave me your access code. It won't be necessary, of course, but if you don't succeed, I'll need two codes to set the city to self-destruct."

Radek gave her a somber look. "That will not be sufficient."

Once again, comprehension hit them all like a slap in the face. Despite the swaying motion of the city, Elizabeth stood straighter, and nodded. "I'll remain behind at the Alpha site."

John had always admired Elizabeth for reasons that went beyond leadership skills, because not all leaders, no matter how great, were prepared to go down with the ship. The city's self-destruct wouldn't damage the 'gate, and the crystal necessary to dial Earth would be left behind at the Alpha site after the expedition had departed. If Ea's intent had been to 'reset' the Pegasus galaxy to zero, there would be nothing to prevent the active nanites from accessing Earth and who knew how many other galaxies whose addresses were secreted away in the bowels of some Ancient database.

After a pause, during which Rodney must have racked his brain for another solution, he finally said, "To destroy the crystal, open a wormhole to anywhere and toss it into the vortex."

There were a lot of things John wanted to say to Elizabeth in that moment—about what they were about to do, and about everything they'd done over the past two years. All the words that came to mind seemed inadequate, and so he took the coward's way out. "Saddle up, everyone. Time to leave."

"I will come." Radek immediately stepped inside the jumper, surprising the hell out of John. "I have had less...excitement these last days."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rodney shook his head. "You hate playing submariner. Don't be ridiculous. I'll do it."

"But I in fact want to go," the Czech persisted. "True, I have not yet learned to swim, but I realize that I must face my fears."

"Oh, as opposed to me, because I obviously can't handle it?"

"That is not what I said."

Radek's calm tone must have tipped the balance, because Rodney snarled, "You're coddling me! I don't need to be coddled!"

"Guys!" John was ready to put floaties on both of them. "That ZPM's not going to hold back the nanites forever. Flip a damn coin and let's get this over with." It was a gamble, he knew, but he needed Rodney to snap out of it. He turned back to the control panel.

"I'm not flipping a coin, and I'm not arguing. I'm leaving." Rodney stepped inside and took his place in the cockpit beside John, Nabu following behind.

"Then I will wait here with Dr. Weir," Radek called after him. "Perhaps I can improve the self-destruct."

"Oh, so now he thinks he can blow things up better than me," Rodney sniffed.

A little of his usual swagger had returned with that comment. It would have to do. John tossed a last look over his shoulder at Elizabeth, Radek, and Lorne, as Ronon closed the hatch. "Don't start the apocalypse without us."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Looking at our choices, I think we’ll take the low road,” Colonel Sheppard suggested when Jumper One emerged through the bay doors.

Teyla had sensed only disorder, not malice, from the nanites when she and Lieutenant Corletti had taken Jumper Three into the gray goo. If her understanding was correct, that situation was now changing. The storm outside Atlantis’s force field made the one that had threatened the mainland seem feeble by comparison. Black and gray fluid swirled across the energy bubble with an almost tangible intent to burst in. Bright flashes periodically erupted against the shield; lightning bolts of a sort, perhaps, arcing across the surface in spidery veins of green and purple.

Seated beside her, Nabu was looking down at the city below, his eyes shining with appreciation. Despite the tempest beyond and the absence of illumination now that the city had been powered down, it was an impressive sight, one that Teyla had never failed to admire. Its loss would indeed be tragic, for so many reasons.

“The ocean directly beneath the city shield is still unaffected,” Rodney announced from the front right seat. His eyes darted between the datapad in his hand and the electric display outside. “The nanites are beginning to absorb energy from the shield, which means even with the replacement ZPM we may run out of time.”

“How long?” Sheppard asked, angling Jumper One down toward a relatively calm patch of water between the south and west piers of the city.

“The nanites are now operating within their own temporal field, so time isn’t easily quantifiable. From our perspective, I’d say three hours is radically optimistic.”

“To drain an entire ZPM?” Sheppard didn’t hide his disbelief.

“It would not be hours from the point of view of the nanites,

Colonel Sheppard,” Nabu explained. “For them it would be thousands of years.” He barely flinched when the jumper plunged beneath the surface of the ocean.

“Okay, explain that,” Ronon declared, voicing Teyla’s thoughts as well. “How does a bunch of gray stuff have a point of view?”

“Because each and every nanite is encased in its own individual, micro-thin temporal distortion field.” Rodney’s clipped explanation provided no enlightenment, but before Ronon could question further, their attention was diverted to the HUD. “We may have an even bigger problem.”

“Problems don’t *get* bigger than this, Rodney,” Sheppard said under his breath, his gaze apprehensive as he studied the display. The depth of the ocean beneath Atlantis had been reduced by some fifty meters and was becoming shallower with every moment that passed.

“The goo in the atmosphere is converting the water from the surface down.” Rodney adjusted the display to show their projected path to the submarine trench. It was not, as Teyla had hoped, simply a matter of going deeper. Instead, they would be required to negotiate a passage across hundreds of miles, traversing several shallow areas—some of which would soon be engulfed by the rapidly spreading grayness. “Don’t use the external lights,” Rodney warned. “We’re going to need every one of those power cells and then some. At the rate the nanites are converting the ocean, our chances of getting back are looking slim.”

Sheppard continued to guide the jumper down through a darkness made absolute by the storm over Atlantis. “Well, I think all of us understood going in that this might be a one-way trip.”

Teyla had already prepared herself for that. It pained her to be separated from her people, to risk leaving them to fend for themselves in a new galaxy if this mission failed. But she was doing this in the hope of preventing just such a possibility. She could not have lived comfortably with her people in a new land, knowing that her absence from this mission might have doomed it to failure. Nor could she have lived comfortably with the loss of the thousands

of other people in this galaxy—many of whom she had come to know as friends—because she had chosen to desert them.

She glanced around at the others in the jumper. Ronon, who carried deeper wounds than perhaps any of them truly understood, had refused to remain hunted and instead became the hunter. Colonel Sheppard, for whom the term loyalty was not a word, but an etching on his soul. And Rodney, whose loss of Turpi had revealed a lonely spirit that craved acceptance. These men were also her family, and there could be no greater honor than to die in their company. “Do you believe the nanites will attempt to stop our passage?” she asked.

“They are not conscious in that sense.” Nabu had lifted the exogenesis machine in his hands and was manipulating one end, as if he were fashioning a piece of clay. “But the time differential they are now employing will impact this ship’s shield in the same way that it will Atlantis’s.” Under his fingers, the strange material moved across the surface, as if imbued with a life of its own. The other colors within changed hue, becoming yellow, then shifting to turquoise.

“Coming up on the city shield,” Sheppard stated.

“Setting our shield to match...now.” Rodney’s eyes narrowed in concentration, and he stared intently at the HUD.

The transition was uneventful, the oceanic world outside the jumper’s force field remaining dark and without apparent form. The only indication of their movement was the route track displayed on the HUD. “So if we come into contact with nanites,” Sheppard asked, “that means our power will be drained faster than normal?”

“On the order of several hundred thousand times faster, yes,” McKay answered, swiveling around in his seat to watch Nabu. “Which is why I wanted so many power cells.”

“Is anyone going to explain exactly what’s going on?” Ronon demanded.

Rodney’s incipient reply was cut short when Nabu informed them, “Ea and Atlas were my grandparents.”

Having been caught in the storm on the mainland, Teyla was not fully conversant with everything that had come to pass on Polrusso, and while she had some understanding of the situation, this was a most unexpected development. Apparently Rodney and Colonel Sheppard were of the same mind, for now they both stared at the Polrusson.

Nabu’s fingers continued to gently work the surface of the exogenesis machine, as if he were tuning a delicate musical instrument. “I have had many lifetimes in which to understand the truth.” He glanced at Teyla, his gaze suggesting that full honesty was wise. “One I suspect that you may not take comfort in hearing.”

If he believed that his words might erode her faith in the virtue of the Ancestors, he had crossed her path far too late. Meeting his eyes, Teyla said, “I am not averse to the truth.”

He held her gaze for a moment, and, apparently satisfied, put the exogenesis machine aside. “Then perhaps much of what I can tell you is already known to you.”

“That’s okay,” the Colonel said, peering out into the featureless abyss. “We’ve got a little time, and it’d make for a better diversion than playing ‘I Spy.’”

“As you wish.” Nabu’s glance skimmed over the HUD. “Atlas believed that the Wraith were an experiment gone wrong. It angered him that the Atlantean Council was quick to sanction genetic experiments in humans to foil the Wraith, and experiments on themselves to expedite Ascension, while denying his and Janus’s request to test the exogenesis machine. Worse, Moros ordered Atlas and Janus to destroy their work in preparation for the return to Earth.

“Such hypocrisy greatly angered Atlas, for temporal distortion fields had been employed elsewhere in this galaxy in order for people to be given time to Ascend.”

Sheppard winced. “Been there, done that, lost the six months to prove it.”

After a moment’s close scrutiny of him, Nabu observed, “You were given the opportunity to Ascend, yet you chose not to take it.”

The pilot's expression tensed almost imperceptibly, and Teyla did not require Nabu's telepathy to discern that this was uncomfortable territory. "Yeah, well, I don't think it would have lasted long. Unlike the Ancients, I tend to err on the side of action rather than inaction. Probably would have ended up banished some place—not that that would be anything new."

Ronon brought the conversation back. "So what exactly happened on Polrusso?"

"Atlas's machine terraformed worlds by installing the same program as is currently used; except to power the process it employed the planet's internal heat rather than ZPMs. More innovative was its use of a temporal field. While a planet still required approximately ten thousand years to be terraformed, by using the machine, from an outside observer's point of view only a week would have elapsed. Those living on the planet during terraforming would also be subject to the passage of ten thousand years."

"So let me get this straight," said the Colonel. "If Atlas had used the machine on Polrusso, people there could have evolved over the required millennia, while the rest of the galaxy aged only a week or so." His look turned thoughtful. "Cool. Instant Wraith repellent—just add water. Except, you know, don't add it right away."

Nabu picked up the exogenesis machine and examined the lights within, which had now turned a brilliant aquamarine. "While the experiment to breed a group of humans with special abilities might succeed, Atlas believed that this in no way mitigated the Wraith threat. For just as humans would evolve to accommodate the toxin, so too would the Wraith ultimately evolve to accommodate these changes in their food source. Consequently, he developed the program that Ea implemented here on Atlantis. Their intent, you see, was to prove to the Council that another galaxy could be prepared for settlement within a very short space of relative time, while this galaxy could be cleansed of the threat posed by the Wraith. In Ea's words, the Wraith were a mess of their own making, one they should clean up."

"How charitable," Rodney muttered. "Let's not worry about

everyone else living in the galaxy at the time."

"Do not judge Ea too harshly. Both she and Atlas believed that it was better to sever a diseased limb rather than allow it to infect the entire universe. Before they could implement this plan on Polrusso, however, the Wraith arrived through the Stargate in great numbers, cutting off their access to the laboratory. During the many days the attack lasted, hundreds were killed, including Atlas and Ea's son. Those who survived had been badly injured, but they were able to heal themselves and each other. Eventually, they fought their way back into the laboratory and fled by jumpers to an orbiting ship. Ea left with the first group, while Atlas, determined to initiate the exogenesis machine, remained. The hologram records do not show what happened next, but it is not difficult to guess. The final image shows a technician helping Atlas, barely alive, staggering into the last jumper, with only one exogenesis machine in hand. After viewing the records, I searched for the second machine, the one you see here, and located it a short distance away."

"Atlas was unable to trigger the device," Teyla deduced, "but he allowed Ea to believe otherwise."

Nabu smiled sadly. "Perhaps to give her hope."

Sheppard's expression was marked by puzzlement. "Hold on. If their son was your father, and was killed by the Wraith—"

"Unknown to either Atlas or Ea, their son had fallen in love with a human of Polrusso, who was carrying his unborn child."

Slack-jawed, Rodney stared at him. "You're ten *thousand* years old?"

A look of sorrow crossed the Polrusson's face. "It is, as I said, my deformity. Do not feel so encumbered by your mortality," he added, meeting Rodney's look. "It is not such a blessing to watch each generation come and go."

Jaw snapping shut, Rodney nodded once and looked away, the pain of his loss etched deeply on his features. Teyla was left to wonder what had transpired in the short time he had known Turpi.

Through the windshield, distant lights began to coalesce, drawing their attention from Nabu. "We've got company," Sheppard said.

The lights resolved themselves into a huge school of fish. Along each animal's body were glowing patches. They flashed in an organized pattern that seemed to transform the entire school into a single organism. More odd-looking creatures appeared, many shimmering in different colors, and all lighting the ocean in a way that Teyla had never dreamed possible. A bulbous translucent shape sped past, long filaments streaking out behind. More such creatures followed, and Teyla noticed that the tendrils entrapped smaller animals—or perhaps they had found refuge there from the many fanged predators. Each new denizen they encountered proved even more bizarre than the ones that had gone before, and combined they unquestionably were the strangest collection of creatures that Teyla had ever seen.

"Check out the angler fish," Sheppard observed of one small monster whose mouth was disproportionately larger than its body.

"You have such animals on Earth?" Teyla studied the collection of teeth and transparent flesh. Behind them was a school that seemed more like a herd of beasts, their massive fins flapping back and forth in a manner that resembled the ears of an Earth animal she'd seen in one of the team's DVDs—something called an elephant.

Rodney looked up and nodded absently. In what appeared to be a deliberate effort to join the conversation, he said, "Considerably stranger than that. Once we go deeper, we're likely to encounter some really unpleasant sights. When...when this is over, remind me to show you photographs of viperfish."

"Viperfish?"

"*Chauliodus sloania*. I'm not really a fish person, but these things look like escapees from gothic horror nightmare. They're only about half a meter long, but they have these teeth"—he raised his hands and spread his fingers to imitate snapping jaws—"and a glowing lure on top of their heads."

"How big did you say they grew?" Ronon asked.

"About as long as my arm."

"Not on this planet," Sheppard commented, pointing to a creature that fit Rodney's description in all ways—except that its jaws were easily twice the length of the jumper, and it was headed straight for them.

Elizabeth adjusted her earpiece, not sure she'd heard correctly. Hermiod had a reputation for being obstinate, but this was bordering on ridiculous. "Excuse me?"

"I do not believe a total evacuation to the Alpha site to be the best course of action." The Asgard sounded as infuriatingly composed as ever, even over the radio. "You stated a time limit of approximately three hours. If I continue to work, the hyperdrive will be functional within that time."

"*Daedalus* will not be able to escape the atmosphere before its shields are depleted by the gray goo," Radek pointed out, typing on his laptop with one hand while steadying himself on a nearby console with the other.

"That will not be necessary. We can engage the hyperdrive within the atmosphere—or rather what remains of the atmosphere." From Hermiod's tone, he could have been discussing the lunch menu. "The resulting reaction may be enough to destroy Atlantis and the 'gate far more effectively than the self-destruct sequence."

If so, they could confine the nanites to this one planet, denying them access to the rest of the Stargate network. Elizabeth looked to Radek. "Is he right?"

"In the sense that it is plausible, yes." The scientist glanced up, obviously unconvinced. "It is also possible that the nanites will reach the *Daedalus*, and then be able to access the ship's systems, as well as information on other planets—including Earth."

"Unlikely." The first hint of emotion shone through Hermiod's voice, manifested as irritation at Radek's challenge. "Ea would have had no knowledge of the ship's systems. These nanites are not replicators. They do not have an adaptive agenda that can

be amended in response to changing circumstances. They have been programmed only to enter Atlantis's main dialing computer. Nothing more."

"You hope," Elizabeth couldn't help adding.

She could almost hear him blink. "I *theorize*."

Radek met her inquiring look with a half-shrug and a nod of acquiescence. At this point, there were no clear-cut choices. They'd have to do the best they could with the information they had.

"All right. Colonel Caldwell?"

"Here," Caldwell responded. "We'll keep a skeleton crew on board to help Hermiod finish his work. A squad of Marines will be setting out soon to place C-4 charges in the critical record-keeping areas of the city, just to be on the safe side. I'll send the rest to the 'gate room for evacuation."

His phrasing didn't escape her notice, and it came as no surprise to her that he planned to stay with his ship, come what may. Still...no easy choices.

Within minutes, the remaining crewmembers from the *Daedalus* were beamed into the 'gate room and quickly dispatched to the Alpha site. No sooner had the event horizon winked out than Lorne and Witner set off for Polrusso in Jumper Two. After the 'gate had shut down, it promptly engaged a third time.

"Atlantis, Polrusso here, with you on redial," Lorne reported. "I'll keep my foot in the door, so to speak."

A few mumbled words of Czech brought Elizabeth's attention back to Radek. "The temporal fields are coalescing," he announced. "Instead of millions of individual fields enclosing individual nanites, they are becoming one solid mass. When it comes into contact with the city shield, the outside of the shield will be exposed to a broad, uniform temporal field."

"Meaning what?" Caldwell's voice came over the radio.

"The passage of time on that side of the shield will be approximately half a million times faster than on our side. The shield is already performing at its limits, and we have, of course, had to use the Stargate several times. This is why we will only have"—his

gaze shifted briefly to the screen—"less than three hours of ZPM power."

The city gave a slow roll, a motion that might have turned Elizabeth's stomach if she'd actually eaten anything in recent memory. She watched Radek work, aware that he was tackling several problems simultaneously and trying to divide his attention accordingly.

"Colonel Caldwell, I am sending a file to the *Daedalus*'s main computer," the scientist called. "In it you will find the most critical records interfaces throughout the city. If you would please direct your Marines to the top priority locations first and work down the list, they will be able to set the charges so that the entire database is destroyed."

"Will do. Receiving the file now," Caldwell said. "There seem to be a lot of redundancies in here, Doctor."

Radek sighed. "Unfortunately, yes. This is not a trivial task. Your men will need to work quickly." He ducked when a particularly bright lightning strike impacted the city shield. After a moment, he glanced up, and his expression turned thoughtful.

Me and my big mouth. Fortunately, this world's King Kong of viperfish turned its interest elsewhere.

Rodney had bullied his way onto this hellish ride, sure his talents would be needed throughout, and unwilling to stay behind where he could wallow in his pain. But Nabu was handling the programming of the exogenesis machine just fine by himself, leaving Rodney with nothing to distract him from his bleak thoughts.

He was certain that no one else could truly comprehend what losing Turpi meant, because no one had ever known the likes of such a...God, what could he call her? Beyond human? Even so, it tore at his soul to realize that he still could not shake his memory of her physical deformities. The cruelest trick of...not nature, but the Ancients' self-centered game of genetic Scrabble.

If, as he suspected, some of the gods of the ancient world were not all Goa'uld but had in fact been the Ancients who had fled to

Earth from Atlantis, it was little wonder that mankind had assigned them such cruel traits. Squabbling with one another, perched in their lofty abodes tossing metaphorical thunderbolts...

Of course! How had *that* not occurred to him before?

Rodney scrambled for his radio, nearly knocking his datapad off his lap. "Atlantis, Jumper One," he called.

Throwing him a startled look, Sheppard's tone was cautious as he asked, "Rodney, you okay?"

"I'm fine, dammit!" he snapped. "Radek, take the grounding stations offline. Use the lightning to power the shield!"

The response was garbled and choppy. "Rodn—" It sounded like Radek, but that was about all he could make out. "—power—"

"Yes, lots of power. There's an enormous charge differential out there, ready and waiting. I hope to hell you read my report from the last storm to end all—" All strategies vanished from his mind when he found himself staring down the throat of something surrounded by *lots* of teeth the length of power poles. The viperfish had returned, abruptly latching onto the shield in front of the jumper. His well-built emotional shields long since shredded, Rodney let out a scream.

Sheppard reacted intuitively, spinning the jumper in a tight circle and flinging the creature off. "Ugh."

Once the monster was gone, Rodney recovered his poise, refusing to acknowledge Ronon's soft huff of amusement behind him. "Radek, are you still there?"

This time, there was nothing, not even crackling air. "Nanites have probably penetrated deep enough to interfere with the transmission," Sheppard guessed.

Radek had said 'power'. If he'd heard enough to carry out the process Rodney had outlined, Atlantis could be shielded for as long as the storm raged. Certainly long enough to finish the *Daedalus* repairs. But if the message hadn't gotten through... The jumper had to return to Atlantis and ensure that the shield was powered, which would allow all of them to get the hell out of this remake of Abyss.

Turning partway in his seat, Rodney eyed the exogenesis machine, the possibilities coming into focus. They could take the *Daedalus* back to Earth, and the machine could be studied for so many other applications.

And leave this galaxy to its fate, the way Atlas planned, the way Ea tried to do.

He started. Turpi was not really dead, but Ascended. And her wish was that he take care of those who remained behind. It wasn't just about his own life or death. He would not—he *could* not—let Ea win.

Would his conscience be speaking with Turpi's voice from here on out?

Every day of her life, she'd had the chance to transform herself, to make her appearance reflect her true beauty, and every day she'd refused because it would have separated her from the people—the children—that she loved. She'd given up everything because she cared so much for others.

For the second time that day—a new record, and one he had no desire to repeat—Rodney overrode his instincts. They had to plant the exogenesis machine and simply hope that Radek had heard him.

Glancing up from the machine, he found Nabu watching him. Unnoticed by the others, the Polrusson gave a silent nod of approval, the side of his mouth drawn upward in a small smile.

The static was every bit as chilling as the scream it had so abruptly replaced. Elizabeth sucked in a startled breath so fast her chest hurt.

"Déjà vu," murmured Radek, going pale under the blue glow of the computer screen.

"Jumper One, come in." *Not now, damn it, not when we've come this far.* Her call was greeted by silence. "It could just be the radio," she maintained.

"Indeed." Radek's voice held a note of relief. They would reinforce each other's stubborn optimism as long as they could. "I

believe I know what Rodney was trying to suggest.”

“From that mess of a transmission?” Elizabeth’s already lofty opinion of her scientists climbed another notch. “The only word I understood was ‘light’.”

“I heard the same. However, I had already begun to form a similar idea before the call.” Radek moved, hand over hand to maintain his balance, toward a console that monitored power levels. “During last year’s great storm, Rodney was able to power the city shield using—”

“Lightning!” The memory leaped into her mind, bringing with it a few choice recollections that she could have done without.

The Czech tipped his head toward the windows, indicating the furious flashes outside. “It should be enough to give the *Daedalus* the time she needs. With your permission, I will divert the Marines from their task with the explosives and send them to disable the grounding stations around the city.”

“Can they get it done before we drain the ZPM?”

In any other situation, Radek’s expression would have been comical. “As much as it pains me to sound like Rodney, it will be very, very close.”

“As always. Do it.”

While Radek spoke to Sergeant Stackhouse’s squad over the radio, outlining their new duties, Elizabeth retreated to her office, helpless once again. Infinitely more so this time. Of course there was a chance that John and the others might still succeed in placing the exogenesis machine. But that hideous scream still echoed in her mind, forcing her to accept the possibility that the team—no, not the team, but individuals: John and Rodney, Teyla and Ronon, people who had come to mean more to her than she had ever thought possible—were dead.

There had been days in the past when her confidence had faltered, but she’d never lacked for hope, believing that the latter often led to the former. Hope had kept her going for so long now, almost since the moment she’d first heard Ea speak with Carson’s voice. But that hope had been frayed under the growing weight

of imminent catastrophe, and now it felt threadbare and fragile. She’d been brought to the Stargate program to be a negotiator, and with Ea, obsessed or not, she’d failed in spectacular fashion. Her shortcomings would doom not only Atlantis but also possibly the entire Pegasus Galaxy.

Elizabeth thought back to a five-minute conversation in the Oval Office seemingly a lifetime ago. She’d told the President then that she had never trained to negotiate with aliens. At the time, even though she’d known his offer to be serious, it had felt a bit surreal. She’d had no idea her decision would lead her here—and she had to wonder now, as it all came crashing down, what might have happened if she’d said no.

“Atlantis, this is Polrusso.” Lorne’s voice swiftly brought her back to the present, and she touched her earpiece. There was still work to be done. And still hope.

“Go ahead, Major.”

“Ma’am, we’ve explained the situation to Nabu’s people, and they’ve started collecting as many as they can with the Darts. They all want to come with us.”

“All of them?” Elizabeth could only imagine General Landry’s reaction to an influx of thousands of Pegasus refugees in need of a new planet to call home.

“As many as we can manage, yes, ma’am.” Lorne paused. “I’m prepared to pull the ZPM from the lab on your order.”

Gripping the edge of her desk with a force that made her fingers ache, she weighed the awful choice. As soon as they took the ZPM for the trip to Earth, the remaining hundreds of thousands of people on Polrusso, conceivably the galaxy’s best long term hope for a future defense against the Wraith, would be lost under the planet’s new oceans. But if they waited too long and the nanites spread beyond Atlantis, the Polrussons were dead anyway, along with the Wraith and everything else in the galaxy.

She could hope that the Stargate would be destroyed along with the rest of the city, but hope had limits, and this was a risk they couldn’t take. If Radek’s plan worked...

In an instant, a realization washed her despair away. She knew exactly how to save the expedition, confine the nanites to this planet, *and* leave the people of Polrusso unharmed. They just needed one small bit of luck.

"All set," came Stackhouse's voice through her earpiece. "This is really going to power the city?"

"It will," assured Radek. "This is the rare instance where we have previous experience to draw upon. All of you must now take shelter on the *Daedalus*. It and the control room are shielded against the electrical surge."

"We're on our way."

The exhilaration Elizabeth felt must have showed on her face when she rushed out of her office, because Radek looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. Not bothered, she skidded to a stop in front of him. "I have an idea."

A squid thing that bore an uncanny resemblance to Cthulhu had also tried to ingest the jumper, freaking Rodney out a second time, but that was only a hint of the weird encounters to come. Thousands of sea creatures flashed as dots on the HUD and in the flesh beyond the jumper's shield, lighting up the ocean like a star-filled sky. John was intrigued by the sight and more than a little alarmed. All of them were heading *away* from the direction in which the jumper was traveling.

"They are fleeing the gray goo," Teyla observed. "The animals on the mainland did likewise, although then we were all traveling in the same direction."

"It makes sense that we're swimming upstream, so to speak." Rodney gestured toward the route map on the HUD, clearly doing his best to pretend the creatures weren't flying past the windshield behind it. "We're coming up on the shallow section—and what a surprise, it's already gone gooey."

Meaning they'd have to go through that muck. John knew Teyla had done it before, but he still didn't like it. "How are we doing on shield power?"

Before he'd finished asking the question, Rodney had already moved to the rear of the jumper. "There'll be some needle-threading involved. I'll hook up each power cell as the prior one falls below the ten-percent level. The water pressure on the hull is no longer a factor, so I'll reduce power to a minimum. But if the shield is compromised at any point, the temporal field that breaks through will age us so fast the Wraith would weep with envy."

"Then let's get this over with." John twisted around to face the rear compartment. "Are we ready?"

Rodney didn't look ready, but he gave a jerky nod. "Go for it."

Expecting to have to rise into the goo, John was surprised to see the gray shroud descending with such speed. He needed only to wait a few seconds before the jumper was enveloped. The points of light provided by the last of the sea creatures winked out, leaving them in darkness.

A few more seconds passed before Rodney's voice broke the tense silence. "Power consumption is steady. Fast, but steady."

When the thick curtain of nanites caused the HUD to stutter and eventually stop updating entirely, John started to get the now-familiar sensation of losing his bearings. On Earth, flying on instruments, he'd always had gravity and a seat-of-the-pants sense to help tell him which way was up, but the jumper's inertial dampeners had shot those instincts to hell. All he could do was stay on the course the HUD had marked before it fritzed out, keeping a mental image of where he wanted to go. *Come on, you sweet little mind-reading ride, don't let me down.*

From the back, Rodney cursed. "Down to fifteen percent on the second cell."

"Already?" John didn't like the sound of that. "I thought you said—"

"Given my complete lack of experience with this situation, it's possible my estimate was only marginally accurate." Rodney connected the third power cell.

"So we're down to how many spares?"

"One."

That *had* to be a joke. Except Rodney was obviously not in a joking mood. “*One?*” John pressed.

“Look, don’t shoot the messenger, all right?”

They’d have to head down sooner than the original route suggested, just to escape the goo. Not too soon, of course, or they could pop out of the goo only to run smack into a not-yet-converted underwater mountain. It wasn’t the kind of thing John liked to guess at, but, given no other choice, he checked their last known speed and position, did a quick-and-dirty rate-of-descent calculation in his head, and aimed the jumper’s nose downward.

Before long, he could hear Rodney starting to connect the last power cell. Fabric rustled, repeatedly, and John suspected that the scientist was wiping sweaty palms on his pant legs.

Abruptly, they broke out from the goo, and darkness gave way to an ocean jam-packed with marine life. Every living thing that had managed to outrun the goo had been pushed down to the remaining water at depth. Some of the fish-type things were huge, snapping at each other, adding to the chaos. Not all of the critters had survived the rapid pressure change, either—and the victims were quickly being devoured by the survivors.

The frenzy quickly encompassed the jumper. “Holy—” Returning to the front seat, Rodney flinched as a school of massive barracuda-like animals swarmed over the shield, bumping and jostling the craft. The space that Jumper One pushed through seemed to be filled with more fish than water. Fortunately, the HUD came back to life once the nanites’ interference was gone, and John could see the trench that was their objective not far away. “Teyla, you’re on deck.”

Encased in the HAZMAT suit, Teyla pulled her hood on and, nodding, held her hand out to Nabu to take the machine. “I am prepared.”

Just as John aimed them into the trench, Rodney cursed. “Power level’s dropping. The goo’s coming down on top of us!”

“How does it keep getting faster like that?” Ronon wanted to know.

“It is an exponential expansion,” Nabu explained from the rear of the jumper. He was still holding the exogenesis machine. “The more of the gray substance that exists, the faster it can spread.”

“Well, I can’t make *us* go any faster, so pick a vent, quick.” John flung a hand toward the windshield, where streams of thin bubbles and roiling yellowish clouds of what the HUD described as sulfur trailed from a series of chimney-stack pipes on the ocean floor, and up into the goo above. He had no idea what was lighting the trench, but right about now he didn’t much care.

“Just a second.” Studying the sensor readout, Rodney showed an uncharacteristic level of anger by pounding a fist into the armrest. “None of the vents are big enough to drop the machine into!”

At last, something he could solve. “Then we’ll *make* one big enough,” John growled, reaching for the weapons panel.

“Okay, good. For once, your propensity for shooting things is in no way misguided.”

On command, the weapon bay door opened on the side of the jumper, deploying a drone into the water. The projectile found its mark—and then some.

Huge bubbles of superheated gas erupted from the point of impact, roiling upward. The force of the rupture caught the jumper and lifted it, thrusting it into the goo above.

A bleak sense of failure descended over John as swiftly as the darkness fell. They were out of time, water, ideas, and about to be out of power. There was nothing left.

He wasn’t normally the praying type, but he offered a silent, fervent wish to anyone who might listen that Elizabeth and the others had made it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Wait!” Inspiration struck, and Rodney leaped to his feet and snatched up the exogenesis machine. Stumbling as the jumper tilted, he was steadied by Nabu. “We don’t need the planet’s heat to drive the machine,” he asserted. “That was necessary at the beginning, but the spread of the nanites has demonstrated that the reaction is self-sustaining. We just have to get the machine into the gray goo.”

“Of course!” Nabu latched onto the idea immediately. “I have set the machine to reprogram the nanites, which have an elastic memory, to return everything to its original state.”

“And because the event will occur in a temporal field half a million times faster than the field in here, the effect will be virtually instantaneous. Could take a few hours to spread around the planet, but it’ll be much faster than dropping it in a vent.”

“I did not consider that.” Nabu looked at him with admiration. “Your intellect—”

“No feeding the ego, please.” Sheppard quickly worked to expand the shield around the jumper. “Should be able to open the hatch now.”

Ronon took that task, and the large plate swung downward to reveal the goo rolling and oozing all around. It would have been mildly nauseating even if the stuff wasn’t threatening to wipe out all life in the galaxy. Rodney watched Nabu heave the machine out into the nanites—and felt his stomach sink as the device came to rest inside the jumper’s shield.

Well, *that* was infuriatingly predictable.

“Crap.” Sheppard summed it up from the pilot’s seat. “Can we close the hatch and try to move away?”

Rodney shook his head. “Won’t matter. The machine will still get pulled along within the shield, no matter what we do—and we

have about two minutes of power left.”

“Change the shield settings to allow the machine to pass through,” Teyla suggested, “as we did to keep the goo out in the first place.”

“As soon as we do that, the goo will get in here!” Even as he said it, Rodney realized that they were heading inevitably in that direction, no matter what. Their power level was dropping like a stone. The shield was about to fail—and although the machine would then be able to do its work, everyone inside the jumper would be long dead.

Trying desperately to think of something, he almost didn’t notice the determination written on Nabu’s face. “Weaken the shield in a localized area,” the Polrusson said, stepping to the edge of the hatch and indicating a place about the size of his hand. “Here.”

Rodney processed the man’s intent and stared at him. “Are you—?”

“Yes. Do it quickly.” Nabu reached outside, seized the machine and tweaked some settings.

This wasn’t going to be pretty, and Rodney badly wanted to devise another solution, but they had run out of options. At the exact moment he adjusted the shield, the Polrusson plunged the machine, and his arm up to his elbow, into the gray goo.

Instantly, the goo vanished, leaving clear ocean all around them. “Oh, *hell*, yeah!” Sheppard yelled, sounding about twenty years too young for his rank. “It’s moving like crazy. The HUD says we’ve got nothing but water for ten miles already!”

Relief draining his earlier adrenaline, Rodney sank down into his seat, readjusted the shield one final time, and connected the all but depleted power cells in series. That would get them back to Atlantis, at least. Ronon helped Nabu back into the jumper and closed the hatch. The Polrusson’s hand showed more wrinkles than it had only moments before, but otherwise appeared unharmed.

Nabu caught Rodney staring at him and smiled. “It is a comfort, in a way,” he said, examining the back of his hand. “It has not always been clear to me that my body is aging.”

"Atlantis, this is Jumper One," the Colonel said into his radio. "You guys still there?" Silence answered him. "Atlantis, come in, please."

Rodney checked the time, and the sick feeling returned in a jolt of agonized realization. "It's been over three hours." Why couldn't he have come up with that most straightforward of solutions even ten minutes sooner? It wasn't just Atlantis, but Polrusso. He risked a glance at Nabu and saw that he also had understood.

"We do not know," the Polrusson said. "There is no point wondering until we return and see for ourselves."

Radek would have figured it out. Really, it was simple enough.

Sheppard's expression was guarded as he set a course for the city—or at least where the city had been when they left it—and voiced the inevitable. "I wouldn't blame Elizabeth if she'd set the self-destruct."

"Assuming she got to do it before the nanites." In either scenario, given the little remaining power available to them, they would be permanently marooned on this planet. He'd live out a short and meaningless existence with nothing to contemplate but his own failure and the void that Turpi's absence had created. Death by gray goo might just have been preferable.

"They got your message about the lightning," Sheppard said firmly. "We'll be there in a few minutes, and you'll see how well Radek works under pressure."

"Of course." Rodney was certain the Colonel was right, and, though he would never admit it, he was reasonably confident in Radek's abilities. As long as the message had gotten through, life would go on.

No problem.

Right?

Jumper One skimmed low over the surface of the water, glittering under the golden light of dawn. The sea at last was quiet again, and John could just see Atlantis sitting on the horizon, stable and serene and still in one piece. After the anarchy that had ruled over

the past few days, the tranquility of it all was an incredible relief.

Teyla leaned on the back of John's seat and pointed to a school of flying fish skipping across the low waves. Not far away, the tail fins of a few whale-like creatures broke the surface. "How did they survive the nanites?"

"Hey, Rodney, your whale buddy might have made it after all."

"Not if there's any justice," Rodney grouched. "One of those damned things led us to the stasis pods that started all this." To Teyla, he replied, "Either they outran the goo long enough to outlast it, or Nabu's accelerated temporal field gave them a shot at being re-created. Either way, it implies that the mainland may still have animal life as well." If the hint of optimism in Rodney's voice was distinctly artificial, John chose to let it slide.

"My people will be gratified."

"There were settlements on land?" Nabu asked.

John glanced over his shoulder at Teyla. The Athosian nodded, her features solemn but her eyes clear. "There will be much rebuilding to be done. But we have overcome far greater obstacles in the past."

Keying his radio, John called again, "Atlantis, Jumper One." Again, no response was heard. "Atlantis, how do you read?"

On approach, Atlantis looked every bit as elegant and powerful as it had before the activation of the exogenesis machine. The city shield and stabilizers had obviously been strong enough to prevent any major structural damage. Now if only someone would answer them.

"Maybe they used up all the power and can't operate the radios," Ronon guessed.

"Not if Radek managed to disable the grounding stations and feed the shield using the charge differential, like I told him. More likely they were able to get away in the *Daedalus*." Rodney gestured downward as they flew over the empty pier that was the ship's usual parking place. "Everyone's probably at the Alpha site."

Another possibility existed; one that had occurred to John only after the goo had begun to recede. It would have been pointless

to mention it at the time, so he'd kept his fingers metaphorically crossed in the hope that someone in the city had thought of it as well.

The jumper bay doors opened for them, ruling out the no-power theory. "Atlantis, anybody home?" John tried one more time, just in case. Nothing. "All right, here comes the part where we check the control room and hope we don't find the self-destruct counting down from ten."

"Then we'd better move fast and have our override codes ready, wouldn't you say?" Rodney had the hatch open in seconds and didn't wait for the rest of the group before heading for the control room.

Everything pointed to a total evacuation. The stillness of the city was bizarre. John had been one of only a handful of people around in the aftermath of the Genii incursion, but then the slowly receding storm and the resulting damage had kept them all on edge. Now, Atlantis was clean, bright, and utterly silent.

First to reach the bottom of the stairs, Rodney visually scanned the control room. "I suppose it would be too much to ask for them to have left a note." When he looked out at the 'gate room, his eyes rounded and his jaw sagged open. "What the *hell*?"

The empty expanse drew Ronon and Teyla to the railing. John hung back, watching their shock with a grin so wide it hurt.

Vainly attempting to keep his voice in something resembling a masculine range, Rodney demanded, "Was there or was there not a *Stargate* in here when we left?"

John couldn't help chuckling. "Hot damn, they did it." He shook his head. "That's what I call airlift."

Comprehension, unsurprisingly, hit Rodney before the others, and he swung around to face John. "The *Daedalus* beamed the 'gate into their cargo hold?"

"They must've gotten the hyperdrive up and running in time to pull it off." At Ronon's expression of complete astonishment, John kept right on smirking. "No 'gate, no way for the nanites to get off-world, no galactic annihilation."

"No reason to set the self-destruct," Rodney finished. "And presumably no reason to take the ZPM from Polrusso. Impressive. I'm sure I would have thought of it had I not had the additional burden of dealing with the exogenesis machine."

Letting the familiar sound of his teammate's vastly relieved rambling fade into the background, John went out onto the nearby balcony and turned his face to the sun. Within moments, he heard only the waves and a few squabbling birds, and he felt as though he were taking his first real breath in over a week.

"My people will be safe now," Nabu said from behind him. "As will yours."

John didn't turn, enjoying the feel of the wind. "Until we find another hornet's nest to stir up."

"That may be," the Polrusson allowed. "But I have come to believe that we are all born for discovery, whatever form it may take. For my people, it may be the development of our abilities. For yours, exploration."

"Yeah, there's a quote like that from my world that I've always liked." John leaned forward on the railing. "'A ship in port is safe, but that's not what ships are built for.'"

Nabu moved to stand next to him, gazing out over the calm waters painted by sunlight. "My world will look like this one day, and for the first time in many years, I count myself fortunate that I will live to see it. But for you, in more ways than one, this is also the dawning of a new world."

"We won't waste it," John felt the need to say.

Eyes that had seen ten thousand years sized him up, before returning to the sea. "In that I have great faith."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Walking along a hallway of the city, Elizabeth was struck by how wonderfully, blissfully normal everything felt. She'd been back for most of a day already, but the feeling had yet to dissipate. Its hyperdrive at last operational, the *Daedalus* had started hailing Atlantis as soon as it reached a safe distance from the planet. After a long period of excruciating silence, the desolate vision of a flat gray world was pushed aside by a tiny pinprick of blue—which expanded at a speed she'd found difficult to believe, dissipating the nanite horror. It took some time to get a radio signal through the interference, but then came the welcome voices of John and Rodney, inviting the ship to return home. Yes indeed, it was home.

They'd made good on her vow to Ea, defending Atlantis with everything that they had. It *was* their home, a birthright bequeathed upon them by the Ancients who had fled to Earth so very long ago. She needed only to look around at the people eagerly returning to their duties to confirm that fact.

Reinstalling the Stargate proved almost as simple as removing it, in spite of Rodney's distrustful micromanaging. Before long, the displaced expedition members were flowing back through the 'gate from the Alpha site. Their expressions of elated relief surely mirrored the one she'd worn when the *Daedalus* had settled onto its customary pier.

Now they had to deal with the fallout. The sand-blasted control room equipment had turned out to be the worst casualty, but she'd been assured that it would be functional again within the week. The city had sustained remarkably little structural damage, thanks to the shield and stabilizers, so the majority of the expedition personnel were currently engaged in reorganizing their hastily evacuated equipment. A large contingent had already traveled to the mainland

with the Athosians to assess their rebuilding needs.

The Polrusso machine had reversed the effects of the nanites, leaving the Athosian settlement in its post-storm state. Teyla had been in regular contact from the mainland and believed that some of her people's possessions could be salvaged from the mudslide. Meeting the half-Ancient Nabu, who had stayed in the city through the return of the evacuees, had given many of the Athosians some reassurance that the Ancestors had not condemned them for settling on Atlantis. There was a lot of work ahead, but it was in no way an insurmountable task.

Then there was the other, more personal fallout. Elizabeth could no longer push aside the rift between her and her military commander. Yes, he'd done his part, and more, in saving the world once again. That changed nothing about his defiance of her authority in returning to Polrusso to search for Rodney. She couldn't ignore that, and she suspected he couldn't, either.

Might as well get this over with. She passed her hand over the sensor that would signal her presence outside the door to his quarters. "Colonel, can I have a word?"

There was no acknowledgment from within, but the door slid open. Past the bare walls and the packed bags sitting patiently by the desk, she could see him standing at the window.

"You can unpack now, you know," she began tentatively. "We lifted the evacuation order—did you miss the memo?"

Turning partially toward her, John raised an eyebrow, apparently not buying her weak attempt at humor. "Figured it'd be more efficient to leave 'em packed if I'm headed back to Earth on the *Daedalus*."

A cold sensation prickled at the back of her neck. She wasn't sure how she'd expected this conversation to go, but it was already threatening to run off the rails. "Are you resigning?"

He offered a smirk and a minute shake of his head. "That would deprive the Air Force of the pleasure of firing my ass, which is tempting, but no. I made my choice, and I'll accept the consequences. I'm just assuming the consequences are likely to involve

a disciplinary hearing.”

“I’m not familiar with—”

“Don’t worry. I’m familiar enough with it for the both of us.” John’s expression was carefully controlled, but she knew him too well to let the years-old ache escape her notice. “Based on previous experience, things tend to end badly when you disobey a direct order from a superior officer.”

Taking a steady breath, Elizabeth reasserted herself. “True, but that isn’t what you did, is it?” At his blink of confusion, she elaborated. “The order not to go after Rodney was mine, not Caldwell’s. One could claim that he’d implied such an order by confining you to the infirmary, but as I understand the Uniform Code of Military Justice, an order must be clearly communicated to be considered lawful. His wasn’t, and under military regulations, mine can’t officially be an order.”

Some tiny part of her took pride in catching him off-guard. John’s features seemed to transition rapidly from bewilderment through relief to reluctant appreciation. “You were feeding me a line a minute ago, weren’t you? That whole ‘I’m not familiar’ thing—that was a line.”

“I’m a quick study.” She took another step forward. “There won’t be a hearing. Colonel Caldwell and I have agreed to jointly submit a formal reprimand to your file, and I expect General Landry to accept it as written.” A formal reprimand carried a surprising amount of weight, but she suspected that his career after Atlantis hardly figured into his thinking these days.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, confirming her assessment.

She acknowledged him with a nod. “That takes care of the red tape. I’m more concerned about addressing the conflict between the two of us. If this had been the first time...” But it wasn’t, and they couldn’t very well pretend that he hadn’t defied her during the nanovirus outbreak.

As if remembering, John flinched. “As clichéd as it sounds, this really wasn’t personal. I do trust you, and I understood your position. I just couldn’t live with it.”

“And you can live with your subordinates seeing whatever chain of command we’ve cobbled together break down? What happens if one of the Marines someday decides that he can’t live with an order of yours?”

“Never happen. They’re better officers than I am.”

“That’s not funny, John.”

“Funny is the *last* thing I’d call it, Elizabeth.” His eyes seemed to absorb the dim light, reflecting none back. “Do you think I want to be like this? I wouldn’t have stayed in the military if I thought all rank and authority was crap. I believe in my oath and in our mission. I swear I do. But occasionally there are times when I can’t ignore my conscience and still be the person I want to be. And it leads to days like this. I hate that, but there it is.”

And the hell of it was that if he *had* obeyed, he wouldn’t have been the person she wanted him to be, either. “So where does that leave us?” she finally asked.

“Same as before, I guess. I’ll keep doing my job as long as you’re willing to put up with me.”

“I think I can handle that. But understand, John, that this cannot keep happening.”

He sighed. “I know. And I’m sorry. I don’t regret doing it, but I am sorry for doing this to you.”

“I appreciate that.” Elizabeth took a step toward the door.

“Listen, Elizabeth—”

Her motion halted, she looked at him expectantly.

“What you almost had to do, at the Alpha site...” John raised his gaze to meet hers. “I just want you to know that I respect the hell out of you for it.”

Surprised, Elizabeth tried to demur. “It wasn’t as if we had very many choices.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you were prepared to stay behind in order to see everyone else safely through to Earth. That kind of thing isn’t what you signed up for.”

“Nothing about this expedition is exactly what any of us signed up for. We all do what we have to in order to protect Atlantis and

each other. I'm no different from anyone else."

He watched her carefully for a moment. "Yeah," he said finally. "I think that's what I respect most."

It was as personal a statement as she'd ever heard him make, and it warmed her. "Thank you," she said quietly. "Does Rodney know what you risked to go after him?"

"Not unless Beckett told him about me leapfrogging him on the list of most annoying infirmary patients."

"He should know."

"He's got enough to deal with right now." The pilot gave a small shrug, the motion deceptively casual. "Like you said. We do what we have to."

And when it came down to it that was all she could ask of him, of anyone. Of herself, even. "I'm glad you're all right."

She meant it sincerely, and the way his eyes softened ever so slightly told her that he believed her. "Thanks."

Repairs to the city kept Rodney sufficiently distracted from thoughts of his experience on Polrusso for some time. Or so he'd thought. When a technician mistakenly rerouted power away from the main lab for the third time, sending the science staff into darkness and data loss yet again, he only shook his head and switched over to his battery-boosted laptop.

The lights were soon restored, and the grumbling from the rest of the group faded away after only a few seconds. Belatedly, Rodney glanced up to find all eyes on him. "What?" he asked. "We don't exactly have fuse boxes here, people."

Radek sighed. "That is it. Everyone out." When a few people hesitated, he snapped his fingers. "*Ted!* Now! All of you have projects elsewhere. Go!"

Obligingly, the scientists cleared out. Rodney was too busy trying to figure out when they'd started listening to Radek to get up from his stool. Apparently that had been part of the mad Czech's master plan.

Plunking himself down on the stool opposite, Radek pushed his

glasses up over the bridge of his nose and considered him with an earnest gaze. "Rodney, this cannot go on. Your treatment of the staff is beginning to cause concern."

"Excuse me? I've been perfectly civil."

"That is my point," Radek replied evenly. "Two weeks ago you would have torn someone's head off after the second power interruption. Now you accept a third without comment? It is unusual, and usual is what people want most at times such as these."

A burst of irritation flared in Rodney's chest. "Well, gosh, I'm sorry to bother anyone else with my trauma. I'll do my best to snap back to my normal unbearable self for the good of the expedition."

"Rodney, you are still missing my point. You are not bothering anyone. You are not talking, and I think perhaps that is the problem."

That was unexpected. "Are you offering to be my Dear Abby, Radek? Listen to my tale of woe? Sorry to disillusion you, but there's not much to tell. Boy meets girl, boy somehow fails to lose girl despite acting like a paranoid jackass, girl saves entire planet and takes off for a higher plane of existence. Pretty common tale."

Radek, damn him, wasn't taking the hint. "You are happy that she was able to Ascend, are you not?"

Good question. Painfully perceptive. It was an incredibly complex proposition to mourn someone who wasn't technically dead. Certainly Turpi must be content with her new status, so when it came down to it, was he depressed on her behalf or only his own? "Of course I am. How self-absorbed do I look? *Do not* answer that," Rodney snapped preemptively, annoyed at himself for all but inviting the predictable retort. More evidence that he was off his stride. "It's not like I was expecting some kind of storybook ending out of the whole thing, so let's not make it out to be more than it was." He'd learned long ago that 'happily ever after' was every bit the myth it seemed. What *had* he expected, then?

"She cared very much for you," said Radek. "This was obvious."

And that was the heart of the issue, wasn't it? She'd seen into him, seen everything that made him who he was, and she'd still cared. Try as he might, he couldn't fit that into his established view of the universe.

His colleague angled his head and posed a question. "Why did you come to Atlantis?"

Thrown, Rodney just looked at Radek for a moment. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Humor me, for once in your life. Why did you join the expedition?"

"For the same reasons as anyone else. Because they needed brains. Because I'd have been a fool to pass up the chance. Because I'm not worth anything if I'm not learning, and the magnitude of what we could learn from this place is essentially limitless. And oh, let's not forget the fact that there are a hell of a lot of threats out there, some of which we're in a unique position to do something about. Is that enough?"

In the ensuing pause, he realized that most of that little diatribe *did* sound fairly redeeming. Thankfully, Radek didn't do anything awkward or patronizing like pat him on the shoulder. He simply stood up and gathered the equipment he'd been using. "Brood longer if you like. But finish up by meal time. It is 'Hurray, We Cheated Death Again' Night in the mess."

That generally meant one thing. "Ice cream?"

"I am told there may be hot fudge."

Precisely where had they been hoarding *that*? "In that case, go throw yourself in front of the teeming masses to ensure that they don't finish it all before I get there. It's the least you can do after I handed you the solution to the shield power problem."

Halfway to the door, Radek stopped. "Handed? Hardly."

"I laid out every detail over the radio!" Not strictly true, but Rodney figured it was close enough for government work.

"Which would have been helpful if transmission had not been garbled to the point of being unrecognizable. As it was, I developed the solution independently."

"Oh, that's a likely story. One giant step backward for intellectual property rights. Did you forget who developed the original theory last year?"

"It was a most productive collaboration." Ignoring Rodney's indignant protest, Radek continued walking, soon disappearing into the corridor. "I believe each of us is man enough to acknowledge assistance—and get his own ice cream."

When the Czech had gone, Rodney leaned forward and rested his chin on folded arms. He was better for having known Turpi, for every minute he'd spent with her. He was certain of that. If there was a distinct hole in his consciousness now that her presence was gone, he'd figure out how to live with it. There wasn't anyone else, anywhere, who had the capacity to fill it, so he wouldn't bother looking. Those memories, those ghost sensations would inevitably fade as the days passed.

He needed that distance and dreaded it at the same time.

He suddenly found himself wishing for a piano. No sense of the art, his teacher had said so long ago. He could still see the first page of Beethoven's "Pathétique" as if it were right in front of him. Technically gifted, but emotionless. Somehow he felt sure that the emotion wouldn't escape him now.

The ceremony was small. Dr. Weir and Colonel Sheppard had put the word out that all personnel were welcome but by no means required to attend. It didn't surprise Carson that, apart from senior staff, few people had shown up. For the majority of the expedition, who had spent the past few days essentially running for their lives, it would no doubt be difficult to honor the memory of those who'd planned to wipe out the inhabitants of an entire galaxy.

Some of the expedition members felt the bonds more strongly, of course. Carson wondered if today's event was partially for his benefit. Either way, he appreciated it. Once the crisis had passed, with the help of Radek's transcription of the voice recordings in Ea and Atlas's jumper, he'd been able to better organize and interpret the memories he still retained from Ea.

She'd harbored immense guilt: on behalf of Atlas, for his defiant experiment; her people as a whole, for their disregard of the humans on Polrusso; and even herself, for being willing to sacrifice an entire galaxy to what she perceived as the greater good. In many ways Ea had been unlike any Ancient they'd yet encountered. She'd had the supposed flaw of deep compassion, the supposed weakness of fearing death, and intense emotions that she either could not or would not conceal. All of these were attributes Carson understood well. In spite of her last desperate act, he couldn't vilify her.

Out on the pier, Nabu stood with Elizabeth and Rodney. The Polrusson had decided to attend the ceremony before returning home, and Carson realized that this was for him as much as anyone. As Atlas and Ea's grandson, Nabu bore their tragically conflicted legacy.

Ronon had gone to the mainland to assist Teyla and her people, so the only person missing from their eclectic group was—

—not in fact missing at all. Colonel Sheppard approached from another entrance, his polished shoes clicking on the pier. Rodney eyed him as if he were wearing a Hawaiian shirt. "I thought you didn't like that outfit."

Only Rodney McKay could refer to a military dress uniform as an 'outfit.'

"I don't like it because the brass, in their infinite wisdom, sent us Class As specifically for funerals and promotions, and we have more of one than the other. This is a funeral." Sheppard's sidelong glance at Elizabeth suggested that there was something more to it than that. A subtle sign, perhaps, that he was rededicated to his duties after their earlier clash. Carson further suspected that the man was at least a little relieved to still have those silver oak leaves and, more to the point, those silver wings.

"Well, I suppose we should get started." Elizabeth moved closer to the stasis pod that still held Atlas's body. Eulogizing these Ancients seemed a complicated task, and Carson didn't envy her. Before long, however, his mind strayed back to Nabu's people. As much as the scientist in him wanted to collect DNA from as many

of them as he could, the genetic variations that accounted for their wide-ranging abilities were almost certainly far too complex for him to isolate. The experiment encompassed an entire planet and thousands of years. He couldn't hope to find all the answers in a day.

Nabu had provided a blood sample himself, along with some of his impressions of the Ancient research, but had suggested kindly that Polrusso be left alone for a time, to facilitate the reintegration of his people with the cliff-dwellers. No one had tried to convince him otherwise, because no one believed he was wrong.

As with anything, in medicine or elsewhere, there was no instant solution to be had. Polrusson genetics were an area worthy of study, but one that was to be handled with care, like so much of what they'd discovered out here.

"We have a common goal with Atlas and Ea," Elizabeth was saying. "To see the end of the Wraith threat in this galaxy and others. Our methods may differ, but as humans and descendants of the Ancients we are committed to that aim, and we pledge to them that we will not fail."

Carson thought about the retrovirus research that had monopolized so much of his time in recent weeks. Another area of study that held promise as well as uncertainty. Leaving this galaxy to the Wraith was not an option. He hadn't come here to fight, but if it meant saving lives, then fight he would, in whatever way he could.

The stasis pod was lowered into the water, returning Atlas's body to the deep to rest forever with his beloved wife. While his colleagues stood by respectfully, Carson wondered if the departed Ancients knew—or cared—about the events that had transpired over the past few days. Ea deserved to know that the people she'd felt such remorse at abandoning had begun to discover the birth-right left to them. If she could somehow see that, he believed that she might, at last, be at peace.