

Global disaster threatens the Atlantis homeworld

STARGATE ATLANTIS



EXOGENESIS

Sonny Whitelaw & Elizabeth Christensen

**Based on the hit television series created by
Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper**

STARGATE
ATLANTIS™

Exogenesis

Sonny Whitelaw & Elizabeth Christensen

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STARGATE ATLANTIS™

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER Presents
STARGATE ATLANTIS

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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:

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—SW

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—EC

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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 the 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 panel, 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 her 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 seesaw 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 the 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' 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 you 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 Coho 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 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 through the 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 analysis 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 the 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 an additional 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 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 a thin layer of 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 corals and 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 not 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, 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 shattered.”

“What the hell are those things crawling around inside?” came a voice that Carson recognized

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, monstrously 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 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 intelligence 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 they 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. 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 clambered around the mass of wrecks, coral, and mooring block.

The groaning of stressed rocks and metal sounded again. Radek cleared his throat and sent Carson 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 undersea 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 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 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 and 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 you, 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. 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 in 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, or 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 reassurance, 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 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 transparent 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 through a 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 stay 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 more 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 inhabitants 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 drainpipe. 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, 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 engine 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, 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 other 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 the men 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 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's blood everywhere."

John winced. It didn't take any imagination to guess why. The pod had been encrusted with

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