

CHAPTER ONE

LT. COLONEL JOHN SHEPPARD was sure he'd had better days. That he couldn't remember any of them right now was just one disturbing thing. Another one was the great big crack in the puddle jumper's front window. He was pretty sure that shouldn't be there. He was almost sure that the view out the window shouldn't be mostly dirt, with what looked like the trunks of several big trees in it. Also, the board of instruments under his chest shouldn't be sputtering and smoking.

The latter seemed like a really bad thing, so he cautiously pulled himself off the panel and sat back in his seat. Moving hurt, but not as much as it would have if he'd broken ribs, which was something, but there was a long wet smear of blood across the docking indicators and the tactical controls, which couldn't be good. Several droplets splashed against the board as he watched, and he put his hand to his head. It came away drenched in blood. Great. Holding his left hand to the general vicinity as tightly as possible, John looked around the jumper. What was he doing? Who was with him? He remembered the jumper descending into the gate room, the bright blue fire of the gate kindling. And after that... Nothing.

He took a deep breath and made himself let it out slowly. Some short term memory loss was normal with a head wound. He knew who he was and what he was doing, Lt. Colonel John Sheppard, with a gate team mission to M32-3R1 to check out an anomalous energy reading. He had punched the gate and...

John heard a moan behind him and scrambled backward out of the pilot's seat as quickly as possible. "Teyla?"

She seemed to have been thrown clear of the copilot's seat, lying crumpled between the pair of rear seats, her left arm twisted at an odd angle that couldn't possibly be right. He

heard the swift hiss of her breath as she moved, her fingers opening and closing against the floor.

“Hang on,” John said, kneeling beside her. “Careful.” When he bent over, blood ran down into his eyes and he dashed it away.

Teyla pushed herself up with her right arm, half rolling into a sitting position, her left arm clutched tight against her side. When she saw him her eyes widened. “John? You are bleeding badly.”

“I know,” he said. “I think I hit my head on the board.” He took his hand away. Yeah, it was bleeding hard.

Teyla reached up to get a look at it, wincing as she moved. Not good.

“Can you move your fingers?” he asked, reaching across to her left arm. She was wearing a jacket, and he couldn’t tell if the shape of her arm looked right or not.

“Yes,” she said, wiggling them. “But I cannot move my arm as it should or put any weight on it.” She leaned back against one of the rear seats, fumbling in her pants pockets with her right hand and producing a dressing. “But you are bleeding. Here, now.”

“Got it,” John said, unrolling it and putting it to his head, holding it in place as tightly as he could stand. Not good. There was a world of not good here. Teyla’s shoulder was probably broken or at least dislocated, and his head was bleeding hard—in addition to not being able to remember anything since he’d dialed the gate... A thought struck him and he glanced wildly around the jumper. “Where are Rodney and Ronon and Zelenka?”

“What do you mean, where are they?” Teyla looked at him with concern. “We dropped them off. Do you not remember?”

“No, actually.” He’d dialed the gate and watched it open, said something to Rodney, and then... Nothing. Everything after

that was a blank until he'd picked himself up from the board in the crashed jumper.

"We left Rodney at the gate to try to figure out what had been done to the DHD because it was tampered with in a way he had never seen before," Teyla said. "And we dropped off Radek and Ronon on the island with the Ancient ruins to investigate the energy readings because Rodney said it was a waste of time. You do not remember?" Her voice was concerned, and the two small lines between her brows deepened.

John shook his head slowly. Good to know no one else from his team was lying bleeding around here, but... "What happened?"

"We had just lifted off from the island when we spotted a Wraith cruiser. It was at low altitude and we did not see it at first, not before it got off a number of shots that disabled the cloaking mechanism. You ran hard at extremely low altitude, trying to put some distance between us, but without the cloak there wasn't any way to hide, especially over open sea. We took fire and crossed the coast, and you said we were going down." Teyla's eyes were apprehensive. "Do you truly not remember any of this?"

"No." A cruiser. That was very, very bad, much worse than a few Wraith Darts.

Teyla pushed herself up, using the seat to get to her feet. "John, we have to get out of here. The cruiser is still out there, undamaged, and it will be able to find our wreckage. We have to get as far away from it as we can before the Wraith arrive. We are in no shape to face them."

"I have to agree with that," John said, dragging himself upright. There were backpacks in the rear compartment with survival gear, and they needed ammunition and preferably the P90s, not just the sidearms they carried in the field. He tied the dressing on and grabbed for supplies, aware that Teyla was doing the same beside him, stuffing her pockets with various

things as she usually did. He felt like he was missing something, but annoyingly couldn't remember what. Something he'd lost along with what sounded like the better part of a couple of hours.

Dressings. The first aid kit. They were going to need that. Flares? Not so much so. A drill? He hoped not.

"We need to go," he said, reaching for the emergency release for the back hatch. Even if he'd eluded the cruiser in the last moments of their flight, the wreckage of the jumper would be obvious from the air.

"Understood," Teyla said, making a last awkward lunge for something.

The air that poured in the back was hot and dry, bright sunlight dazzling him. John blinked, his eyes watering as he refocused on blindingly blue sky and the tall palm trees that surrounded the jumper. It had come down in a grove of trees, the right drive pod sheared off entirely by the cruiser's fire. Ok. That was pretty impressive looking if he did say so himself. The crippled jumper should have dropped like a rock instead of landing upright and more or less level, a long scar through the trees marking their passage. He must have used the trees to bleed off airspeed and soften the crash. Nice, but even more easily spotted from above. He might as well have drawn a big arrow across the landscape pointing to them.

Teyla dragged at his arm with her good hand. "Come on, John. We must go."

The trees seemed thicker in one direction, and so they set off toward the heavier cover, though there was very little undergrowth. Taller palm trees shaded shorter, but the sky was always visible, lambent and bright through the trees above. It was also hot. That was going to get old fast. But it wasn't humid. Not a jungle. An oasis. Beyond the edges of the trees were the stark lines of desert, sand and ridges of stone showing gold and white under the glaring sun.

John stopped and swore. That limited their options a lot. He knew all too well that two people trekking across the desert were very, very vulnerable, not to mention that it would be incredibly stupid to set off across it without any idea where they were going. He must have seen from the air. They'd flown this way, dodging the cruiser. He must have seen how the course lay, how far they were from the sea and the island where they'd left Zelenka and Ronon, from more hospitable areas. But he couldn't remember.

"Did we see anything when we came over?" he asked Teyla. "Towns or anything? Any idea how far it is to the coast?"

She shook her head, shading her eyes with her good hand. "I do not know," she said. "It happened very quickly and I do not know how fast we were moving. I am certain there were settlements that we passed over, and some areas that looked farmed, but I do not know how far. Forty miles? Seventy miles?"

John winced. Whether forty or seventy miles of desert, neither was good news in this heat. And in broad daylight they'd be an easy target. "Settlements?"

"Yes," she said. "I am sure we are not far from some. I thought I saw a village not long before we crashed. Though I know nothing of the people of this world."

There were voices behind them, human voices raised in shouts, the sounds of running feet.

Slinging the P90 around, John turned toward the sound. "I think we're about to," he said.

Dr. Radek Zelenka lifted his hand to screen his eyes from the bright sun and looked out over the azure sea. The ruins of what once must have been a citadel perched on the edge of a cliff above the waves, providing a magnificent view of sky and sea and a few distant islands beckoning on the horizon. A steep path led down the cliff to a white sand beach, while behind, on the other side of the broken stone walls of the cit-

adel, lush jungle crowded up to the heights. The island was not uninhabited, as they had first thought. A few tendrils of smoke rose from cooking fires on the other side of the island, marking the location of a little fishing village. The scene was, Zelenka thought, idyllic. It looked like the coast of Dalmatia on the Adriatic. If it weren't in the Pegasus Galaxy the place would be overrun with tourists.

And if the planet weren't protected by an energy field. They'd seen that before, worlds protected by the Ancients for some purpose of their own. There was a Stargate, of course, a ground gate, not a space gate, otherwise they could not have penetrated the shield, its DHD modified in a way that Rodney had huffed over and eyed suspiciously. He had not been much interested in the shield. They had seen them before. He was all too happy to leave the investigation of the Ancient ruins and the shield generator to Radek.

"It's going to be just like the one on M7G-677," Rodney had said. "You know. The planet with all the kids. There's not much point in poking at it." His eyes had lit as he ran his hands over the DHD by the gate. "But this! This is really interesting! It seems like there's some kind of tampering with the control mechanisms..."

And so they had left Rodney to the DHD while he had been detailed to investigate the energy shield, with Ronon to stay with him in case of trouble. Now Ronon came and stood beside him at the edge of the cliff. He thought that Ronon's expression altered just a tad. Surely the man could not be impervious to so much beauty!

"Glorious, isn't it?" Radek said.

Ronon nodded slowly. "Yeah."

Someday, Radek thought, he would hear the Satedan put more than two words together. In the few months since Ronon Dex had joined the expedition in Atlantis he didn't think he'd ever heard the man utter a complete sentence.

"It reminds me of a place I used to know," Radek said. "Near a city named Dubrovnik."

"Home?"

"No," Radek said. "Somewhere I visited once. The Czech Republic has no coast." He put his hands in his pockets, scanning the far horizon. "A beautiful town, and then I had a beautiful person to see it with."

Ronon stiffened, and for a moment Radek wondered what he could have said that gave offense, but then his eye caught what Ronon had already seen.

The shape of one of the clouds was wrong, and it moved wrong, against the flow of wind, against the flow of the other clouds. It was a Wraith cruiser coming in over the sea, flirting with the edges of the soaring clouds, white against the blue sky.

"Get down!" Ronon yelled, grabbing Radek by the back of the shirt and all but flinging him to his knees. "Stay down!"

They huddled in the shelter of the citadel wall, and for once Radek was glad of the grays and tans of the Atlantis uniform. It was hard to spot from above against gray stone and shadow. Ronon's brown blended equally well.

The cruiser swept over at a few thousand feet, and the sound of its passage was a roaring in his ears. He watched, waiting to see if it would come around for another pass, Ronon's hand on his arm to keep him still.

"Wait," Ronon said, every muscle tensed, his other hand on the energy pistol at his belt.

They waited.

The cruiser faded into the distance. When all was once again still, Ronon unfolded and stood up. "Not good."

Radek nodded. "Do you think that the jumper, that Sheppard..."

"If Sheppard ran into that thing he had a problem," Ronon said. "Ten times the firepower."

“What are the Wraith doing here?” Radek said, scrambling to his feet. “The energy shield should prevent them from getting in, and that ship is much too large to go through the Stargate.”

“I don’t know.” Ronon looked after the cruiser, shading his eyes against the bright sun. “But I think we’re in big trouble.”