PROLOGUE
Halfway Home

AZURE STREAKS FLASHED and danced, blue shifted stars shapeless blurs in the speed of her passage. Atlantis cruised through hyperspace with the majesty of Earth's old ocean liners, her size impossible to guess in the infinity of space. Her towering spires and thousands of rooms were nothing compared to the vast distances around her. Atlantis glided through hyperspace, her massive engines firing white behind her, shields protecting fragile buildings and occupants from the vacuum.

Behind, the Milky Way galaxy spun like a giant pinwheel, millions of brilliant stars stabbing points of light in the darkness. Atlantis traversed the enormous distance between galaxies, hundreds of thousands of light years vanishing swifter than thought. Even with her enormous hyperdrive, the journey was the work of many days.

It was nine days, Dr. McKay had predicted, from Earth to Lantea, Atlantis' original home in the Pegasus Galaxy, deserted these two and a half years since they had fled from the Replicator attack. Of all the places their enemies might seek them, they were least likely to look where they were certain Atlantis wasn't.

Of course, no one person could stay in the command chair that controlled the city's flight for nine days, not even lost in the piloting trance that the Ancient interfaces fostered. Not even John Sheppard could do that. Lt. Colonel Sheppard had come to Atlantis five and a half years ago at the beginning of the expedition, and the city had come to life at his touch. The City of the Ancients awoke, long-dormant systems coming on slowly when someone

with the ATA gene, a descendant of the original builders, came through the Stargate. Atlantis had been left waiting. Though it had waited ten thousand years, humans had returned.

But even Sheppard could not spend nine days in the chair. The Ancients would have designated three pilots, each watching in eight hour shifts, but the humans from Earth did not have that luxury. Sheppard was First Pilot, and Dr. Carson Beckett, a medical doctor originally from Scotland, was Second. Twelve hour shifts were grueling, but at least allowed both men time to eat and sleep.

Five days of the journey gone, 20:00 hours, and Dr. Beckett was in the chair. His eyes were closed, his forehead creased in a faint frown, his arms relaxed on the arms of the chair, his fingers resting lightly on the interfaces. Nearly six years of practice had made him a competent, if reluctant, pilot. And so it was Dr. Beckett who noticed it first.

It was one tiny detail, one anomaly in a datastream of thousands of points, all fed through the chair's controls and interpreted by the neural interfaces that fed data straight into Beckett's body, as though all of Atlantis' enormous bulk was nothing more than the extension of himself.

It felt like…a wobble. Just a very faint wobble, as when driving an auto along the highway you wonder if one of the tires is just a little off. It might be that, or it might be the surface of the road. Nothing is wrong on the dashboard, so you listen but don't hear anything, and just when you've convinced yourself you imagined it entirely, there it is again. A wobble. A very small movement that is wrong.

Perhaps, Beckett thought, if you were borrowing a friend's car you wouldn't notice it at all. You'd just think that was how it was. But when it's your own car, lovingly

cared for and maintained every 5,000 miles, you know something is not quite right. Perhaps one tire is a little low. Perhaps you've dinted the rim just a tad, and the balance is not entirely even. It's probably not important. But if you're the kind of man who keeps your car that way, you know. You notice.

Beneath the blue lights of the control room, Beckett's eyes opened. The young technician monitoring the power output looked around, surprised. It was very quiet, watching someone fly Atlantis.

His tongue flicked over his lips, moistening them, reminding himself of his own physical body, and then he spoke into the headset he wore. "Control, this is Beckett. I've got a wobble."

There was a long moment of silence, then his radio crackled. "Say it again. You've got a what?"

"A wobble," Beckett said. "I don't know a better word for it."

"A wobble." The voice was that of Dr. Radek Zelenka, the Czech scientist who was, with Dr. McKay, one of the foremost experts on Ancient technology. Certainly he was one of the foremost experts on Atlantis, having spent most of the last five and a half years repairing her systems.

"It doesn't feel right," Beckett said. "I don't know how to put it better, Radek. It feels like a tire about to go off."

"Atlantis does not have tires, Carson," Zelenka replied.

"I know it doesn't." Beckett looked up toward the ceiling, as though he could see Zelenka in the gateroom many stories above, no doubt bent worriedly over a console, his glasses askew. "That's what it feels like. That's how my mind interprets it."

"He says we have a wobble. Like a flat tire." Zelenka was talking to someone else. "I do not know. That is what Carson says."

"A wobble?" That was McKay, the Canadian Chief of Science. "What's a wobble, Carson?"

"It feels wrong," Beckett said. "I don't know how to explain the bloody thing! It feels like there's something wrong."

"I am seeing nothing with propulsion," Zelenka said. Beckett could see how he would say it, his hands roving over the control board, data reflected in his glasses. "Everything is well within the normal operating parameters."

"I think I would interpret a propulsion problem as an engine light," Beckett said slowly.

"And a tire is what?" McKay would be putting his head to the side impatiently. "Do you think you can give me engineering, not voodoo? Your vague analogy is next to worthless."

Lying back in the chair, Beckett rolled his eyes. Five and a half years he'd put up with Rodney bullying him over this damned interface. "Something to do with the hyperdrive?" he ventured.

"The hyperdrive. That's very informative. The hyperdrive is a major system, Carson. It has literally tens of thousands of components."

"I don't know any more than that, all right?" Beckett snapped. "If you want a second opinion, get Sheppard down here and have him take a go at it."

"He has only been off duty for two hours," Zelenka said, presumably to McKay. "He is probably still in the mess hall. I can call him." McKay must have nodded, because his next words were not addressed to Beckett. "Colonel Sheppard to the command chair room. Sheppard to the command chair room."

He should love being pulled away from his dinner after a twelve hour shift. Beckett felt vaguely guilty about that. He sat up a bare ten minutes later as Sheppard barreled

into the room, an open bottle of soft drink in his hand, his dark hair ruffled.

"What's the problem?" Sheppard said. He couldn't be too worried if he'd brought along his drink. Soft drinks were rare in Atlantis, since they had to be brought from Earth, and though they'd laid in a limited supply it could be expected to run out soon. Sheppard was unwilling to abandon his short of murder and mayhem.

Beckett smiled ruefully. For all their differences of background and skills, he had developed a considerable respect for Sheppard in their years of working together, a respect he thought was mutual. "Sorry to take you from your dinner. I've got an anomaly I can't pin down." He sat up, letting the chair come upright, the sticky interfaces disengaging from his fingertips. "It feels like a wobble. You know. When you've got a tire about to go."

Sheppard frowned and put his drink down on the edge of the platform. "Ok. Let's have a look," he said with the air of a man about to look under a friend's hood.

Beckett stood up, catching himself for a moment on the arm of the chair. It always felt very strange to settle back into his mere physical body after some time in the interface.

Sheppard slid into the chair and leaned back, his eyes closing as the interfaces engaged, the chair lighting around him as power flowed, a profound expression of peace on his face. Beckett knew better than to interrupt. Sheppard's fingers twitched lightly in the interface, then stilled. He would be diving into it now, the pathways of the city's circuits and cables mirroring the neural pathways of his mind. Done right, impulses flowed like thoughts, data streaming effortlessly into easy interpretations. Beckett usually did not find it quite that simple. Practice and diligence had made him a competent pilot for the city, but he had never

quite gotten the knack of thinking in three dimensions, of visualizing so many moving points completely. He wasn't a pilot. He was a medical doctor who through some trick of genetics had the particular piece of code that the city responded to. Sheppard was in his twentieth year in the Air Force, a man whose natural talents ran this way, honed by years of experience in high speed aircraft. He could get a lot more out of the interface than Beckett could.

It was nearly fifteen minutes before Sheppard surfaced, his eyes opening and the chair tilting halfway up. His glance fell on Beckett, but he spoke into his headset. "Control, this is Sheppard. We've got an anomaly in the number four induction array."

"The east pier," Zelenka said. "*Zatracený hajzl*! Will we ever get that piece of trash fixed?"

"Carson's the one who tore it up fighting with the hive ship," McKay said. "And I thought we had it. I ran a stress test on it the night before we left."

"Well, you must have missed something," Zelenka said. "Because here we go with it again."

"It doesn't look like it's that bad," Sheppard said, cupping the headset and straightening up completely in the chair. "It's a wobble, like Carson said. It's not a flat. It's just a variance in output."

"A crashingly small one," McKay said. "I've got the power log in front of me now. Five one hundredths of one percent."

"After running at full power for five days?" Zelenka was probably leaning over McKay's shoulder, looking at the numbers. "No wonder you didn't catch it. That is nothing. We cannot expect every system to run at optimal for days on end. It would not show up in a stress test."

"Give me the summary." That was a new voice, Richard Woolsey, Atlantis' commander. "Should we drop out of

hyperspace?" He was probably hovering over the two scientists by now.

It was McKay who spoke, of course. "And do what? We're between the Milky Way and the Pegasus Galaxy, right in the middle of a whole lot of nothing. I'm not seeing any kind of damaged component that we can repair, or quite frankly anything that amounts to a problem. Carson, it's nice of you to tell us about every little wobble, but this is just that. A little, tiny wobble."

Sheppard looked at Beckett and shrugged. "That now we know about. So we can keep an eye on it. It's just exactly like a tire. You may not need to run and do something about a little dent in the rim, but you keep an eye on it."

Beckett unhunched his shoulders, putting his hands in his pockets.

"Yes, well. We will keep an eye on it," McKay said. "But I think we can all take a deep breath and put this away."

Sheppard stood up, flexing his hands as he withdrew them from the interface.

"I'm sorry to put you to trouble," Beckett said. "I hope your dinner's not cold."

"It's ok." Sheppard picked his drink up off the floor. "Better safe than sorry. And we should keep an eye on that. You have a little wobble in your tire one minute, and the next thing you know you have a blowout doing eighty."

"And that would be bad," Beckett said, imagining what the analogy to a high speed blowout might be piloting a giant Ancient city through hyperspace between galaxies. It would put a pileup on the M25 to shame.

"Damn straight," Sheppard said, taking a drink of his soda. "See you at 06:00, Carson."

"This turn and turn again is getting old," Beckett said. "What I'd give for another pilot!"

"We couldn't exactly bring O'Neill with us under the circumstances," Sheppard said.

"Four more days," Beckett said. "Over the hump." He slid back into the chair, feeling the interfaces clinging to his fingertips in preparation. "See you in the morning." He closed his eyes, sinking into Atlantis' embrace.

Nearly seven days of the journey gone, 02:47 hours. The control room was quiet, only the gentle counterpoint of machine noises breaking the silence. By their purely arbitrary designation, it was the middle of the night. Airman First Class Salawi, a new third shift controller, put her coffee carefully on the rubberized mat that Dr. McKay had specially constructed for Atlantis' sloping control boards. At the station above on the upper tier, Dr. Zelenka had the watch, his glasses on the end of his nose as he scrolled through something on his laptop.

Salawi sighed. Three hours and a bit more of her shift. Somehow, she had thought keeping watch on a massive alien city on its way to another planet would be a little more exciting. She had been doing it for a week now, and nothing interesting had happened yet. She glanced down at her screen again, the data streaming almost too fast to make sense of it.

And then her board went crazy.

"Dr. Zelenka!"

He careened around the corner at an alarming rate, nearly throwing himself into her lap in his haste to get to the board, all the while letting forth a stream of invective in a language she didn't understand. "Move, now. There." She slipped out of her seat, catching her coffee before it landed on him as he ran his hands over the unfamiliar alien keys.

"I don't know what happened," Salawi said. "I didn't do anything!"

"I know you did not," he gave her a swift sideways look, a half nod that was reassurance. "This is something in the hyperdrive induction array."

"What the hell just happened?" His radio squawked, Scots accent obvious even over Zelenka's headset.

"I do not know, Carson." Zelenka's hands were flying, pulling up one incomprehensible menu after another. "I am trying to find that out." He spared a glance for the Airman at the gate board. "Get Dr. McKay up here. And Colonel Sheppard too." He leaned back, looking along the board to Dr. Kusanagi at the far end as the overhead lights flickered. Another incomprehensible expletive. "Miko, get the power variance under control! We are having a serious problem."

"I'm losing systems," Beckett said over the radio from the chair room stories below. "I've just lost the lateral sublight thrusters. The sublight engines have lost power."

"What does that mean?" Salawi asked.

"It means Dr. Kusanagi had better stop the power fluctuations," Zelenka said grimly.

"I have not got it!" Kusanagi called from the other end. "I have rerouted the priority to the shield, but I cannot stop the power drain. We are using power too fast!"

"If the shield goes…" Nobody answered her. Salawi could guess what that meant. The fragile glass windows of the control room were not meant to take hard vacuum. If the shield failed they would blow out in an explosive decompression that would fling them into space. The question would be whether they would be torn apart before or after they asphyxiated.

"It is the hyperspace corridor," Zelenka said. "Why are you doing this!"

"The power usage is increasing exponentially," Kusanagi called. "It's pulling from all available systems."

Zelenka cupped the mouthpiece of the headset. "Carson, shut it down! Bring us out of hyperspace now!"

"We're not…"

"Bring us out now!" Zelenka shouted. "I do not have time to argue with you!"

The city shook. No, shuddered was more the word. Salawi had felt something like this before, in an earthquake, the terrifying bone-deep movement at the core. The lights flickered and died, the screens of the laptops blanking though the Ancient displays were steady. The city heaved, throwing her to one knee beside the board, lukewarm coffee splashing over her hands.

Outside, the blue of hyperspace faded, blue to black, the pinprick lights of a million wheeling stars.

"Jesus Christ," Beckett said over the radio. "What the bloody hell was that?"

Zelenka held on to the edge of the board and shoved his glasses back up his nose with one finger. "We are spinning. Carson, can you level us out?"

"Not without the lateral thrusters!" Beckett said indignantly. "I've got no power to any propulsion systems. Get me some power and I'll see what I can do."

Zelenka's hands skimmed the board. "I am doing. I am doing."

Colonel Sheppard came charging up the steps from the lower doors, in uniform pants over a faded t shirt that proclaimed him a patron of Johnson's Garage, his hair askew. "What happened?" he demanded.

"We have a problem in the hyperdrive induction array," Zelenka said, not even looking up from his screen. "It started pulling power from other systems. Kusanagi rerouted priority emergency power to the shield so we did not lose that. I had Carson drop us out of hyperspace."

"Where are we?" Sheppard asked.

"That is the least of our troubles at the moment." Zelenka spared him a sideways glance, and Sheppard swallowed.

Dr. McKay bounded up the stairs two at a time in what appeared to be flannel pyjama pants with a uniform jacket over them. "What did you do?"

"The number four induction array went crazy," Zelenka said. "Carson's little wobble, remember?" He looked at McKay over the top of his glasses. "As much as I can tell, it started opening a wider and wider hyperspace corridor, and drawing sufficient power to do so from all available systems."

"Did you…" McKay began.

"I had Carson drop us out of hyperspace. All the propulsion systems are offline."

Salawi moved out of the way so that McKay could crowd into the board. "Did you…"

"Yes, of course I did."

"Would somebody like to tell me what that means?" Sheppard asked, scrubbing his hand over his unshaven chin.

McKay shoved Zelenka over, his hands on the Ancient keys.

Zelenka looked round at Sheppard. "When a ship opens a hyperspace window, the window occupies real space. It has a location and a size. The larger the ship, the larger the window it needs to open. This is intuitive, yes? The *Daedalus* does not require as large a window as a hive ship, nor a hive ship as this city. And the size of the window determines the power requirements. A big window requires exponentially more power than a small window. *Daedalus* could not open a window for Atlantis. She would not have enough power to do so." He spread his hands. "It looks like the induction array malfunctioned and began expanding our hyperspace window as though the city

were much larger than it is. To do so, it pulled power out of all other major systems to sustain an enormous hyperspace envelope."

"That's not the only thing it pulled power out of," McKay said grimly. "The ZPMs are at 20 per cent. It's eaten our power."

Teyla Emmagan folded her hands on the conference table in front of her, tilting her head toward Rodney as he spoke.

"We've restored power to all vital systems, but that's not going to do it for us. The shield draws massive amounts of power, and it's not optional. So rather than have the kind of involuntary rolling shutdown we had before, we're shutting down systems manually."

"Water filtration, for example," Radek said from the other end of Woolsey's conference table. "We have ten days supply already clean. We can resume filtration when it's necessary."

"And of course power to unoccupied parts of the city," Rodney said. "But I cannot stress enough that this is not going to help much."

"So we're all going to die." John leaned back in his chair. "What's the bad news?"

"No," Rodney said shortly. "We are not all going to die. At least I hope not."

At the head of the table, Richard Woolsey looked as though his head were hurting. "Is there enough power for the hyperdrive?"

"Yes," Rodney said.

"No," Radek said.

They exchanged a glance. "There is technically enough power," Rodney said. "But it doesn't matter. The overload has destroyed the induction array command crystal, one

of those beautiful Ancient parts that we have no idea how to make. We've learned how to repattern some of the less complex crystals, the ordinary ones used in many systems, but the command crystal for the hyperdrive is much more complicated. We would need to pull it and replace it, and as we have no idea how to synthesize even an ordinary one…"

"The answer is no," Radek said.

"I was coming to that," Rodney said.

Teyla thought Woolsey looked as though he wished to kill them both. It seemed like time to sum up. "So the hyperdrive is inoperable, and will be for the forseeable future?"

Rodney pointed a forefinger at her and gave her a smile. "Got it in one."

"No rolling shutdowns?" John asked, letting his chair spring forward again and resting his elbows on the table. Teyla remembered all too clearly the last time Atlantis had been lost in space, power depleted by the Replicator weapon that had nearly killed Elizabeth Weir. She was quite certain that he remembered far too clearly as well.

"Not at this point," Radek assured him.

"So where are we?" Woolsey asked, a question directed to John rather than the scientists. Atlantis' command chair gave a far clearer picture of their navigational situation than any other.

"Just inside the Pegasus Galaxy," John said, tilting his head to the side. "A couple of hours earlier and we'd be in real trouble. As it is, there are three systems in reasonable sublight range, none of them with Stargates and only one of them in Atlantis' database. It's a binary system."

"No inhabitable planets," Rodney said. "They're all too close to one or another primary."

Woolsey twitched. "And the other two?"

"We are analyzing data now," Radek said. "The odds are reasonable that one of them will have a suitable planet."

"And if they don't?" Woolsey asked.

Rodney's face was eloquent. "They'd better. We can't get anywhere else. May I stress that we are right on the fringe of the Pegasus Galaxy? The stars are not exactly thick out here."

"If they do have an inhabitable planet, why did the Ancients not build a Stargate there?" Teyla asked.

"Perhaps they did and it was lost," Radek said.

"And the *Daedalus* is thirteen days out," John said. "Minimum."

"We can last that long," Rodney said. "Assuming we can communicate our position."

"Then let's get to it," Woolsey said, rising to his feet.

Teyla lagged behind, falling into step with him as the conference room emptied. "We were in far worse condition last time," she said reassuringly.

Woolsey gave her a grim look. "You aren't wishing you'd stayed on Earth?"

"That was not an option under the circumstances," Teyla said.