



Taking Things Further

By Alobear

illustrated by unbelievable2

Jack and Daniel joined Jim and Blair at the foot of the ramp leading up to the Stargate. Daniel was still reeling from the implications of the invitation Jack had just proffered – dinner at his place after they got back from the impending mission. It wasn't that having dinner at Jack's house was an unheard-of event; it was more that such a formal invitation in advance was not the usual way of things. Daniel was hoping it was an indication that Jack wanted to talk about the status of their relationship – or rather lack of one – and that he might want that status to change. Daniel had been intending to broach that very subject with Jack himself at some point, but hadn't yet found the opportunity – or the courage, if he was honest – to do so.

In the meantime, though, they were about to embark upon a mission, and he figured it would be best for him to keep his attention on that for now. It wasn't likely to be hazardous, since it was just designed to take Jim and Blair on their first trip through the Stargate, but it always paid to be alert, so Daniel put the situation with Jack from his mind.

The mission was to make secondary contact with a planet that had previously been explored by SG-15 earlier in the week. It was home to a village of humans who had originally been enslaved by a Goa'uld, in the usual way of things, but had been left to their own devices for some time. SG-15 had reported understandable suspicion on the part of the villagers at first contact, but had managed to establish warily cordial relations by the end of their visit. The villagers were interested in learning more about the state of the wider universe, as well as what advantages might be available to them from an alliance with the SGC.

It had seemed like a good opportunity to introduce Jim and Blair to how things worked. They would get a trip through the gate, some light diplomatic duty, and the inevitable collection of soil and mineral samples, in case the planet had more to offer than it at first appeared. In other words, a milk run.

Daniel was looking forward to it; he always enjoyed encountering new groups of humans and fitting them into the map of the societal structure of the universe he was building in his head. Plus, it would be good to walk into a known and relatively safe situation, rather than the uncertainty and frequent danger of his usual missions with SG-1.

The seventh chevron locked into place and the wormhole whooshed out before falling back into its familiar rippling surface. Blair caught Daniel's eye, his expression glowing with wonder and anticipation, giving Daniel a hint of the thrill he himself used to feel in his first days at the SGC. Time, repetition and tragedy had all but drained him of that excitement, and it was good to feel it again, even if it was only vicariously through his friend.

Daniel smiled at Blair, then gestured for Jack to precede him up the ramp. Jack gave a casual salute in mock deference, and led his temporary team through the gate.

Blair stepped up to the rippling blue surface of the wormhole that had just taken form within the ring of the Stargate. He had very little understanding of the physics behind it, but it still fascinated him. Over the last few weeks, whenever he was on base, he had tried to be in the control room every time the gate was being activated. He loved the ritual of the dialling process; the technician calling out the chevrons as they were locked in; the metallic noise of the gate itself spinning round within its moorings; the spectacular outward whoosh of the wormhole energies; and the way it settled back into a smooth, shimmering wall of potential.

Now, finally, he was getting the opportunity to go through the gate himself, and step out on an entirely different planet. He bounced on the balls of his feet slightly, grinning widely. A hand landed lightly on his shoulder and he looked up into Jim's face, which was suffused with a similar excitement, overlaid with amusement.

"Are you just going to stand there looking at it, or are you going to go through?" Jim asked.

"I've been dying to do this for weeks," Blair replied, "but now that I'm here, it's a bit daunting, isn't it?"

Jim chuckled. "I know what you mean. Daniel and Jack just stroll through like there's nothing to it, but I can't help thinking about what words like disintegration and reintegration really mean."

"I don't want to think about that!" Blair squeaked. "But look at it this way – it's just a case of what you're used to, right? I mean, there are plenty of things we do like there's nothing to it, that Daniel and Jack would find pretty daunting right now." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, to put his meaning across, and Jim laughed again.

"They'll get there," he said. "Just like we'll get used to going through the gate – as long as we don't stand here so long that the general kicks us out of the program for wasting taxpayers' money! Come on."

Blair resisted the urge to take a deep breath and hold it – Daniel had said that wasn't the best way to undergo gate travel. He did close his eyes, though, and then took two steps forwards.

Afterwards, he would find he couldn't really put the sensation of going through the Stargate into words. It was... literally unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life, and he had no frame of reference for it. Apart from the cold – though even that word was wholly inadequate to describe the chill that instantly penetrated his entire body, right down to the bone marrow.

And then it was over, and he was stumbling out onto a platform in a field, and Daniel was grabbing hold of him to steady him. He gulped air as if he'd been underwater, and marvelled at how completely unaffected Daniel seemed. He didn't see how even a hundred trips through the gate could acclimatise him to it.

"Quite a ride, isn't it?" Daniel asked with a grin.

Blair nodded, not trusting himself to be able to make comprehensible noises. Then he spun round, staggering against Daniel as he found his balance was way off. "J-Jim?"

They had talked about how gate travel might affect Jim's senses, but of course hadn't been able to test it out until now. Blair had been worried that it might overwhelm him completely and send him into a zone. But Jim was walking towards him with a satisfied smile on his face, as if he had just stepped through a door.

"I'm fine, Chief," Jim reassured him. "Better than you, it looks like. Your idea of dialling down all the senses just before stepping through the event horizon worked like a charm. I hardly felt a thing, and I could bring them straight back up again with no problem as soon as I came through."

Blair looked round at his team mates – all three men were entirely unruffled, and he still felt like a half-thawed popsicle that had been thrown around in a clothes dryer for half an hour.

"J-just me, then?" he stammered. "That's great."

Jack clapped him on the shoulder, almost sending him sprawling. "Buck up, Sandburg," he said, clearly trying to suppress a grin. "You're in the Army, now..."

"You'll get used to it," Daniel reassured him. "Sooner than you think."

They set off across the field of long grass, towards a ridge about half a kilometre away. The sky overhead had a slight green tinge to it, and Blair looked up to see three moons visible to the naked eye. Other than that, though, his first sight of an alien world was surprisingly Earth-like.

Daniel evidently correctly interpreted whatever expressions were flitting across his face.

"If you think about it, any planet that can support humans is likely to be fairly similar to Earth," his friend said.

"I guess," Blair admitted. "It's still a bit disappointing, though."

"Well, prepare yourself to step into history in a minute," Daniel said. "The village is just over the rise, and it won't be like anywhere else you've ever been, even South America."

Blair was about to ask some questions about the planet's inhabitants, when Jim suddenly called out for them to stop.

"Something's wrong," Jim said. "I smell smoke." His face twisted. "And worse things."

Jack gestured for them to follow him quietly up the slope, where he threw himself prone in the grass. The others did likewise, until they were all in a line, looking down on what used to be a village, and was now a smoking ruin. The milk run had just turned into something quite different.

Jim followed the others down the slope and into a nightmare. As they got closer, he dialled down his sense of smell to prevent the reek of burnt flesh from overpowering him. He wished he could block out the sights that went with it, but kept his vision sharp, trying to find anything in the wreckage of the village that might give them a clue as to what had happened.

It looked like the settlement was pretty small; just a cluster of buildings around a central square, and there was very little left. A few beams stood upright amongst what was left of the houses, but otherwise nothing stood higher than a few feet from ground level. There was a scattering of bodies in the streets between the buildings, as if people had tried to flee and been cut down as they ran. Smoke drifted in the air, rising from a few places, where some ruins still smouldered, but there was very little left now that had not already burnt out. Whoever had done this had been extremely thorough.

Jack was already inside one of the ruined buildings, sifting through the debris with the butt of his gun, his face grim. Daniel had his camera out and was filming the site, presumably hoping to catch some detail that would prove useful on later analysis. Blair stood in the village square, looking around him, eyes wide and one hand over his mouth. Jim went up to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Okay, Chief?" he asked, realising as he spoke just how inane his words were.

"Not really," Blair said, his voice strangled. "Who could have done something like this?"

Jim was saved from having to come up with a reply by Daniel, who spoke up from several feet away.

"There aren't enough bodies," he said.

Jack jogged over to join them. "What do you mean, Daniel?" he asked.

"SG-15 reported a population of about fifty people," Daniel explained. "There aren't that many bodies here. So, some of the villagers must have escaped."

"Or been taken," Jack countered. He turned to Jim. "Ellison, can you pick up anything that might tell us more?"

Blair gripped Jim's arm, grounding him to his immediate surroundings, as he scanned the area, dialling up sight and hearing in increments and concentrating on a wider and wider circumference. After a few moments, he focused back on the others and gestured to a treeline off in the distance.

"There are some tracks that lead in that direction," he said, "and I think I can hear something moving about, though it might just be an animal."

"Okay," Jack said. "That's enough to warrant further investigation. And it's not as if we have anything else to go on. Move out, but be alert; we have no idea what we may be walking into here."

They set out at a slow jog towards the trees, Jack taking point, with Jim at the rear, keeping the two non-military personnel in the middle.

Jim kept both sight and hearing dialled up as they went, not so far as to risk a zone, but enough that he was hyper-aware of their surroundings. The idea of action and adventure through the Stargate, and giving Blair a chance to use his skills and knowledge more actively, had been seductive and exciting in theory. Now, suddenly, the reality of leading his guide into danger and possibly losing people under his command again had slammed into him with an almost physical force. While being a cop had its inherent dangers, and Jim couldn't exactly say Blair had been entirely safe as his partner in Cascade, dealing with unknown threats on other planets was a whole new level of risk that he realised he perhaps hadn't fully considered.

His thoughts were brought sharply back to his present surroundings when he picked up the sound of ragged breathing from up ahead. He caught up to Jack and gestured for him to stop. Jack held up a closed fist to alert Daniel and Blair, and they gathered into a tight group, Jim and Jack still scanning in all directions.

"What is it?" Jack asked in a low voice.

"There's someone just inside the treeline," Jim replied. "I can hear them breathing. It's sounds like they're in some kind of distress."

"Okay, let's carry on – slowly," Jack said.

They resumed their formation and approached the trees cautiously. Nobody leapt out to attack them, and no missiles appeared from within the cover. Jim motioned to a particular spot, where the breathing was coming from, and they all made their way towards it. A few feet inside the treeline, a man was lying in the undergrowth, propped up slightly against a thin trunk. He was wearing rough, homespun clothing – a tunic and trousers – with shoes that resembled moccasins on his feet. He had greying hair and a scraggly beard, and his face was contorted with pain. His hands were clutched over his belly, and Jim could clearly see blood leaking out from between his fingers. It was very dark, and had spread in a considerable pool around him – likely a liver wound; slow blood-flow but probably fatal.

Jack took up a position just past the prone man, his attention focused further into the trees. Jim similarly placed himself on the other side, looking back to watch the way they had come. He listened as Blair and Daniel knelt down beside the man, who gave a sharp intake of breath as one or other of them presumably moved his hands to inspect the wound.

"Daniel?" Jack said, a wealth of questions imparted just by uttering the one word.

Daniel's answering tone was grim. "Not good, Jack. I don't think there's anything we can do for him. I'm sorry." This last was evidently directed at the man.

The man spoke up, his voice low and rasping. "Do not worry," he said, haltingly. "I know I go to meet my ancestors soon. You came through the ring, like the others?"

"Yes," Daniel replied. "We came to talk more with your people, to see if we could trade. What happened to the village?"

"The attack came from nowhere," the man said, struggling to make his words clear. "It was before first light. Most were abed. They set fire to the buildings and killed many of the men as we tried to escape." He coughed, and gasped with the pain of it. "They took children, and some women. I – I tried to follow, but they caught me and cut me down."

"Who were they?" Blair asked. Jim could hear the tension and emotion in his voice.

"I – I don't know," the man replied, his words getting weaker. "There are other villages in this direction, but we don't have much contact with them. We – we haven't seen a trader in a long time..."

His voice trailed off, and there was a long moment of heavy silence.

Then Daniel said, "He's gone." His tone was weary and sad.

Jack remained businesslike. "Okay, so we've got an unknown number of hostiles, with an unknown number of hostages, some of them children. We don't know what kind of weapons they have, though what we've seen suggests we won't be up against heavy ordnance. We know which direction they went in, but not how far." He squinted up at the sky. "They're probably not more than a few hours ahead of us, though, and with their hostages they'll be moving more slowly."

"Should we go back to the SGC and get re-enforcements?" asked Blair.

Jack thought for a moment. "No," he said. "I think we'd be best pressing on and getting more intel. Once we know what we're dealing with, we can come up with a plan. Dammit, today wasn't supposed to go like this."

"When does it ever go the way it's supposed to?" Daniel asked. "Jim and Blair might as well learn that sooner rather than later."

If it was an attempt at humour, Jim thought it fell rather flat, given the circumstances. He looked down to see Blair kneeling dejectedly in the dirt, and reached out to give his shoulder a squeeze. Blair looked up, his face awash with despair, but he managed a very small half-smile of reassurance. This was indeed not the way today was supposed to go, and Jim wondered again if they'd made a mistake coming to Colorado at all. Then, Blair got to his feet, set his shoulders, and pasted a look of determination on his face.

"Are we going to go and save these people, or what?" he said, gripping his gun.

"That we are, Sandburg," Jack said. "That we are."

Jack put Jim on point, thinking that the advantage of his senses would help them in the tracking department. It also meant he could bring up the rear and keep an eye on Daniel and Sandburg. He knew his decision to press on rather than going back to alert the SGC was the right one, given the circumstances, but it didn't stop him from worrying about putting his team in danger. He didn't have any qualms about leading Jim into a potential combat situation, and he figured Daniel and Sandburg wouldn't thank him for hesitating on their account, either. Admittedly, Sandburg was untested at the SGC, but his record with Cascade PD spoke for itself. From what Jack had read, the anthropologist had managed to more than hold his own in many and various dangerous encounters.

Daniel had proven himself over and over again in recent times, such that Jack knew he really shouldn't still be thinking in terms of needing to protect him. It was just difficult sometimes to expunge the image of the myopic, sneezing, distracted academic of their earliest acquaintance from his brain. He actually missed that side of Daniel, if he thought about it; everything that had happened to them in the last few years had served to focus his attention on less esoteric subjects, and turned him into more of a soldier than Jack had ever anticipated, or wanted. But it had also apparently opened the door to a potential level of intimacy between them that Jack hadn't anticipated, either, but very much did want. He was vaguely aware of the revelation from the locker room still swirling around the back of his brain, but knew both that there wasn't anything he could do about it right now, and that he really should be concentrating on the situation at hand.

After they had been moving swiftly and quietly through the woods for some time, Jim held a hand up and brought them to a halt. They moved into cover and crouched down together.

"I think there's some kind of camp up ahead," Jim said. "I can hear a large-ish group of people and what smells like a fire."

"How far?" Jack asked, marvelling at the usefulness of Jim's abilities.

"Maybe a couple of clicks further into the trees," came the answer.

"You may be able to hear them from here, but the rest of us are going to need eyes on the enemy before we can formulate a proper plan," Jack said. "So, we need to get closer. Can you lead us round on a concealed approach from the other side?"

"Yes, sir," Jim replied, crisply.

"Okay, stay alert, kids," Jack told them. "We've got hostiles and hostages, which is never a good combination. At the moment, we're focusing on gathering intel, so no heroics."

They formed up again and moved on, all of them paying more attention to being quiet as they progressed through the forest. It's wasn't the best environment for stealth but, as they got closer to the enemy camp, the noise that Jim had identified became audible to the others, and Jack was reassured that it would successfully mask their movements. The party that had attacked the village were evidently not expecting any pursuit, which was reasonable considering they thought they had left no-one able to mount any. There was the general commotion of a group of people setting up a camp, with intermittent sounds of distress, presumably from the hostages.

Jim led them around in a wide circle, keeping a reasonable distance from their target until they had reached the opposite side. Then, they made their way towards the edge of what was apparently quite a large clearing in the forest. A fallen tree gave them a vantage point that allowed them a decent view into the camp, without exposing them to discovery.

"No outlying sentries," Jim reported in a low voice, and Jack nodded acknowledgement.

Then, he turned his attention to the camp itself to take stock of what they were up against.

The clearing was about 20 metres across, with a couple of hummocks making the surface of the ground uneven. The split between bad guys and prisoners was strikingly clear. Jack counted ten rough-looking men who were obviously directing proceedings; he saw three crossbows, in the possession of men stationed near the edges of the clearing, while the rest had staves or large knives. On the far side of the fire that blazed close to the middle of the area, a group of nine children huddled miserably on the ground. Jack guessed their ages ranged from about four through to about twelve, and they looked to be a mix of boys and girls. Two women, one young and one much older, sat with them, doing their best to comfort them, though the presence of a guard standing over them clearly wasn't making it easy. Two other women crouched by the fire, preparing food under the supervision of two of the men. Closer to the observers, three more women sat in a group, also under guard.

That made ten bad guys, seven adult prisoners of unknown ability, and nine minors who would likely cause problems during any kind of rescue attempt. The odds were not in their favour, but Jack figured they also weren't insurmountable. As long as they could ensure that the children would be kept out of the firing line, they had a decent chance of being able to overpower the hostiles, given their superior firepower and military experience. If there was a way to alert the women to their presence without revealing themselves to the bad guys, they might also be able to count on some additional help when they made their move, whatever that move might be.

Daniel, too, had been studying the lay of the land. He caught Jack's eye and nodded towards the group on the far side of the clearing. He leaned in close so that the others would be able to hear him.

"Only one guard with the kids," he murmured.

Jack nodded decisively; evidently he had been thinking along similar lines.

Daniel articulated his plan further. "If I could circle round there, I might be able to get them out of the way so the rest of you can take out the bad guys."

Jack grimaced, as if he wasn't particularly keen on that idea, but then he nodded again. Daniel knew that getting the kids out of the line of fire was the most important thing they needed to do, and he knew that Jack knew it, too. Any attack they mounted was likely to devolve into chaos very rapidly, however carefully they planned it out, and their current situation wasn't exactly conducive to detailed planning. If they could make sure the kids at least were safe, it would be much easier to concentrate on eliminating their captors.

"Okay," Jack said, looking round at them each in turn. "Daniel is on babysitting duty. Ellison, you and I need to take care of the crossbows first, then move on to the others. Sandburg, you get the women together and out of the way, then do what you can to help us."

Daniel was glad to see that Blair didn't object to being assigned as the other hostage wrangler. He knew Blair was capable with a weapon; he wouldn't be there if he wasn't, but he also knew Blair wasn't the type to bristle at not being included in the frontal assault part of the plan. He would understand the importance of his role, and the sense in Jack and Jim taking point in combat.

"Now, everything's probably going to happen quite fast once Daniel makes his move," Jack continued, his voice low but clear. "So, be ready."

He locked eyes with Daniel, and there was a moment when something quite profound passed between them. Daniel saw concern in Jack's expression, but also an absolute trust in his abilities, which sent a bit of a thrill through him. It had been a long road to Jack seeing him as an equal on missions, and it felt good for Jack to accept his assessment of the situation and let him implement his plan.

Daniel edged backwards, away from the clearing and back into the foliage.

Blair watched as Daniel melted into the trees. Listening to Jack and Daniel coming up with an instant plan and then Daniel doing his best impression of some kind of special forces commando brought Blair to a greater understanding of just what he was getting into with the SGC. Clearly, a very great deal had changed since the days when he and Daniel had been students together at Rainier. They had both taken rather unexpected paths and ended up regularly encountering dangerous situations, but it seemed that Daniel had transformed himself far more into a soldier than Blair had into a cop. Now was not the time to reflect on that, though, since Jim and Jack seemed to be imparting vast amounts of information to each other via military hand signals, and Blair really needed to pay attention to his part of the plan.

Once the attack started in earnest, he knew he was going to need to throw himself basically into the middle of the firefight, since the women were scattered across the whole clearing. In an ideal world, they would all immediately realise the best course of action was to bunch together and follow him to safety, but the events of the day so far had categorically demonstrated that this was very far from being an ideal world, so Blair wasn't going to count on that.

Once Daniel felt he had travelled far enough, he rose to a crouch and made his way in a large circle, being careful to make as little noise as possible. He unholstered his zat and held it ready. He calculated distance in his head and started back in towards the camp when he thought he'd gone far enough round. He felt an unexpected surge of achievement when the clearing came

back into view and he saw that he was approaching at almost exactly the right angle to reach the group of children. He lay prone and continued forwards on his knees and elbows. The nearest guard was facing partially away from him, not really paying attention to his charges, which would work to Daniel's advantage. Once he was close enough, he found a small pebble on the forest floor and tossed it gently towards the older of the two women with the children. It landed with a small thump a few inches from her foot and she jumped slightly, looking round in surprise. Her eyes widened when she saw Daniel, who was crouched behind a bush.



Daniel held her gaze, a finger to his lips. Then he raised his zat, pointed towards the guard, gestured at the group of children, and finally pointed back behind him through the trees. There was a brief moment when he thought she wasn't going to understand him, then her eyes narrowed and she nodded slightly, her expression set and determined. Daniel smiled encouragingly at her in return.

He took a couple of deep breaths, then leapt to his feet, primed the zat and fired at the guard in one smooth motion. The blue beam of light hit the man squarely in the chest and he dropped like a stone. Then, just as Jack had predicted, chaos erupted in the clearing. Daniel heard cries of anger and alarm, more zat blasts, and the sounds of multiple people moving around frantically. He kept his attention on his assigned task, though. The older woman was ushering the frightened children towards the treeline, while her younger companion stood frozen in shock at the edge of the clearing. Daniel crossed to her in two quick strides.

"Take the children and go!" he ordered her, but she just looked at him in fear and confusion.

Daniel heard Jack yell his name, and spun to see one of the bad guys on the far side of the clearing raising a crossbow. Without thinking, Daniel pulled the young woman down into a crouch and covered her with his body. A split second later, he felt something hit him hard in the back and he pitched forwards, landing on top of the woman. She screamed and squirmed out from under him, at last galvanised into action. Daniel watched the children and the two women disappearing into the treeline, his angle of view strangely skewed. At least they were safe, he thought, as darkness closed in from the edges of his vision and everything slowly drifted away.

Blair heard the unmistakable sound of a zat gun priming, a burst of blue light came from the trees opposite him, and the guard standing over the children fell to the ground. Jim and Jack primed their own zats and started firing from their vantage point behind the fallen tree. Blair rose to his feet and launched himself into the fray.



Within seconds, the three guards with crossbows were already down, as per the plan. Score three for the good guys, Blair thought. The other men were clearly startled by the wholly unexpected attack, and were reacting with varying levels of competence. Some of the women were screaming, while others were looking around in confusion. Blair made himself visible to one side of the area where Jim and Jack were firing into the clearing and called out to the women to head in his direction. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the children being ushered towards the treeline by one of their guardians, and dismissed them from his mind as a problem already solved.

The three women who had been seated nearest their observation point all scurried over, but the two who had been preparing food had much more ground to cover and were in greater danger of getting caught in the crossfire. One of them took up an iron skillet from where it was positioned over the fire and brained one of the bad guys with it. The other guard in that area reacted by grabbing the second woman by the hair and dragging her in front of him to act as a shield.

In the thick of the fight, Jack and Jim were doing their best to take out the bad guys, while the other two got on with their own assigned tasks. Jack was focused on the enemy, not allowing himself to worry about where Daniel was or what he might be doing. He and Jim had managed to take out the goons with crossbows early on, and were now trying to pick off the others. This

was made harder, of course, by the fact that they had now lost the element of surprise, and the remaining hostiles were scrambling for cover. Or, at least most of them were.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack spotted some movement and spun to see one of the men scrambling over to a fallen colleague to take up his discarded crossbow. Judging his planned trajectory with the weapon, Jack saw Daniel right in the line of fire.

"Daniel!" he yelled, raising his zat to take aim.

Before he could fire himself, though, a zat blast shot out from the trees nearby and hit the man, causing him to fall, but not before he'd managed to get a shot off. Jack saw Daniel go down, and a spear of anguish shot through him, but there were still enemies in play, and he knew he couldn't risk the rest of his team by breaking off the fight to go to Daniel now. He gritted his teeth and went back to work.

Blair heard Jack call Daniel's name, but couldn't spare his attention, as the woman with the skillet was now facing off against the man who had grabbed her friend. He had a knife to the throat of his hostage, and she was wide-eyed and trembling. Blair stepped up to the group and put out a hand in a placatory gesture.

"Get under cover with the others," he told the woman with the skillet. "I've got this."

She glanced over at him and looked like she was about to protest, then evidently thought better of it. She dropped the skillet, picked up her skirts and hared off towards where the others were gathering.

Blair considered just zatting both bad guy and hostage, but they were standing very close to the fire and he didn't want to risk the woman falling into it. He also didn't want to end up with an unconscious hostage to drag out of the middle of a battle. She was looking at him, her eyes pleading with him to help her. She was obviously terrified, but there was also an air of intelligence about her and Blair decided to use that to his advantage.

He brought his zat up and aimed it at the man's head.



"Let her go," he said with as much authority as he could muster.

"I'll cut her!" the man cried, his voice slightly crazed. "I'll do it!"

While the man was fixated on his threats, Blair caught the woman's eye, bared his teeth for a moment, then looked pointedly at the man's wrist. The woman nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I will shoot you," Blair said to the man, then looked back at the woman. "Now!"

She bit down hard on the man's arm, then shoved an elbow in his side when he yelped and loosened his grip. It was enough for her to break free and, once she was clear, Blair fired his zat. The blast sent the man toppling backwards, and he landed in the fire, his clothes catching light immediately. In seconds, he was ablaze.

Blair turned away, sickened, then took stock of what was going on in the rest of the clearing. Jim and Jack were making their way out of their hiding place, Jim making a beeline to Blair's position, while Jack sprinted across to where Daniel had been. It seemed that all the bad guys had been eliminated, one way or another, so the battle was over. There was some wailing from

the women and children, but the more together members of the two groups were doing their best to keep everyone calm.

Jim was suddenly in his personal space, reaching out to cup Blair's face in his hands.

"Okay, Chief?" he asked, a bit breathlessly.

"Yeah," Blair reassured him. "You?"

"All good," Jim replied.

Blair scanned the clearing and saw Jack kneeling on the ground next to a prone Daniel, and his heart leapt up into his throat. Breaking away from Jim, he ran across to see Jack ripping Daniel's jacket away to assess the damage. A crossbow bolt protruded from Daniel's back, high on the right side, and an alarming pool of blood was spreading out around him.

"Shit!" Jack exclaimed. "Daniel, you idiot!"

Jim joined them, producing a medical kit from somewhere, and he and Jack did their best to stem the bleeding and stabilise Daniel with the materials they had available to them. Blair stood by, feeling helpless, until a hand on his arm distracted him from the activity at his feet. He turned to see the woman who'd just had a knife held to her throat regarding him solemnly.

"You saved us," she said, simply.

"Well, you didn't do too badly yourself, given the circumstances," he pointed out, a little uncomfortable under her gaze.

She smiled. "But, without you, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to fight back. So thank you."

"You're welcome," Blair said.

"Will your friend be all right?" she asked.

"I don't know," Blair admitted. "We need to get him back to the Stargate." At her confused look, he elaborated. "The big metal ring on the far side of your village."

At the mention of the village, her eyes filled with tears, but she scrubbed them away impatiently and turned to call out to some of her friends. They formed a huddle and had a brisk conversation. Then they scattered, moving with purpose and returning with various materials they'd collected from all round the camp. A piece of canvas was quickly secured to two long branches and, by the time Jack declared Daniel ready to transport, a sturdy stretcher was available to carry him.

The women gathered some other bits and pieces from what was lying about, marshalled the children into a sensible formation, and they all set out en masse, back the way they had come.

Jim stayed close to Blair as they made their way back through the forest towards the village. He scanned the trees and listened hard for any sign of danger, but also used Blair's scent and heartbeat to centre himself and reassure himself that Blair was safe.

Once they were clear of the trees and back out in the open, Jim allowed himself to relax a little bit, though he kept his weapons at the ready.

"Do you think we made a mistake?" he asked.

Blair looked up at him in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Joining the SGC," Jim elaborated. "Do you think it was a mistake?"

Blair gestured at the group of people around them. "I think there are seven women and nine children right here who would say absolutely not."

Jim shook his head impatiently. "But what about what we saw at the village?" he said. "And that could just as easily be you on that stretcher." He had been imagining exactly that, ever since the end of the battle, and was finding it difficult to dispel the image from his mind.

Blair responded by laying a hand on his arm.

"We always knew this would be dangerous," he said. "And it's not exactly as if I was wrapped in cotton wool in Cascade. This is important work, Jim. I still believe that, and I'm still willing to take risks to see it through."

"But you could still do important work at the SGC, and not go on missions," Jim persisted.

"And where would that leave you?" Blair asked, simply. "Out here without a guide. No, Jim, my place is at your side. And you need to figure out a way to handle that. It's only the same as me riding along in Cascade – just with added aliens."

Jim huffed a laugh and briefly covered Blair's hand with one of his own.

"Okay, Chief," he said.

They skirted the edge of the village. The women were well aware that there was nothing left for them there, and they didn't want the children to be upset by what they might see there. Jack had offered them temporary sanctuary at the SGC while they figured out their next move, and they had gratefully accepted. There was some discussion about scouting out the situation at the other villages on the planet, and Jack had said an SG team would be able to help with that.

It was a weary group of travellers that finally arrived at the Stargate. Jim kept slightly apart, ostensibly watching their rear, but really wanting to avoid the barrage to his senses that came from tired and fractious children. Jack was obviously very tense, worrying about Daniel, and

eager to get all of them through. That came out clearly in his rather brusque conversation with whoever was manning the gate at the other end, once they'd made contact. It didn't take long for permission to come through for the women and children to accompany them.

Blair waved Jim over. "Let's go home," he said, and they stepped through the Stargate together, their first SGC mission completed.

Daniel was propped up against several pillows in the infirmary, his right arm strapped across his chest to stop him pulling the wound in his back. He looked awful; his skin had a greyish tinge to it and his features were drawn with pain.

Jack was feeding him jello, though it was proving almost as difficult as feeding a recalcitrant baby, since Daniel seemed less than enthusiastic.

"When I said we'd have dinner after the mission, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind," Jack said, temporarily laying the spoon down in defeat.

"Yeah, romantic, huh?" Daniel murmured, showing an encouraging spark of humour.

"I honestly don't know what to do with you, Daniel," Jack went on, mock scolding. "I mean, really – throwing yourself in front of a crossbow bolt to save the girl? There are better ways to get my attention."

Daniel gave him a wan smile.

"I thought your attention had already been secured," he said.

"Well, yes," Jack admitted. "And now look at you. I've been thinking all sorts of interesting thoughts ever since I finally bought a clue. And it's going to be weeks until I get a chance to put any of them into practice. Talk about a prick tease!"

Daniel actually flushed, and it was extremely cute. He reached down and took hold of one of Jack's hands, entwining their fingers together on the blanket, then looked up at Jack coyly.

"Rain check?" he asked softly.

Jack squeezed his hand.

"You betcha."

THE END
