Partners

by Melissa Good

Hands grabbed her and she twisted, pulling against straps that kept her flat on her back, wrenching her arms to pull them free to fight, her jaw clamping down hard as she shook her head violently and pulling it free from fingers digging for her eyesockets. .

It was dark. It was loud. She could hear screams and explosions. Nearby there was laughter, and then she felt the hot agony as a knife plunged into her back and she arched as she tried to move away from it.

An ankle came free, and she twisted more violently, lifting her knee up and kicking out against the hands holding her down.

"Jess!"

She heard her name. She tried to open her mouth to answer but there was a gag in it, and she could only growl in anger and frustration.

"Jess!"

The voice was suddenly louder, and she felt a sting on her arm and a breath after that the darkness mottled and faded and the screams muted, and she was out of the dream.

It was light, and quiet, and the air was full of the shockingly familiar scent of home.

"Jess."

Hands on her shoulders, shaking her. Her body free. Her back laying on a soft, conforming surface.

She opened her eyes, to see the a familiar face over her, a medic just behind him, pulling a injector back away from her.

Coiled muscles relaxed and she felt a wash of heat, then chill across the back of her neck as the tranq kicked in.

The echoes of laughter faded away and the sounds of the citadel surrounded her and she blinked, finding the familiarity of the base on all sides, and no enemies anywhere to be seen. "Sorry Stephen." She rasped, feeling pain in her throat from what she figured were screams. "Damn it."

"It's okay." Stephen Bock rested his forearms on his knee. "You all right?"

She lifted a hand and rubbed her temples. "Fantastic." Hiking herself up on the bed, she peered around, seeing the muted activity of late watch past the open door of her quarters. Slowly the tension left her, and she exhaled, willing herself calm.

"You might want to let Dustin here give you a knockout." Stephan said. "Got a while before first watch."

Jess shook her head. "I'm all right." She said. "Just another damn stupid ass dream."

"Okay." Stephen stood up. He waved the medic out, then waited for the door to close before he turned back to Jess.. "Listen, I know it's tough."

"Yeah." Jess answered briefly. "Too bad they don't have a wipe for this that's worth a damn. I"d take it." She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, resting her elbows on her bare knees.

Stephan sat back down on the padded stool near the bed. "Thought you were against re-patterning." He said. "Weren't you the one who told me only cowards try to deal with their problems that way?"

Jess cleared her throat and looked away from him.. "I was." She said. "Then I was knifed in the back by my partner and watched my whole team be butchered in front of me. Changes your perspective." Her eyes flicked up to his face, fastened on it. "I know what you're going to tell me, Stephan. Get over it."

He grunted. “You do need to.” He said. “Not that I don’t… “ He paused. “Jess, I’m not going to sit here and tell you I know how you feel, cause I don’t. Nothing like that ever happened to me.” He shifted. “Hasn’t happened to anyone before, that I know of.”

“Great. Another first for the Drake family.” Jess’s face twitched. “Eleven generations in service, always trying to be at the forefront of something.” She straightened up and ran her fingers through the dark , straight hair that fell to her shoulders.

“Well, that’s the point.” Stephan cleared his throat. “As much as we're bred for anything these days you were bred for this. Just like I was. Just like Mike, and Elaine, and Sandy were.” He said. “You’ve got a tough mind. You can get past it.”

“Sure.” Jess answered. “Just take a little time.”

Bock nodded. “Good to hear.” He stood and patted her on the shoulder. “Get some rest. We’ll talk in the morning. I’ve got some ideas on getting you re-partnered.” He watched the body across from him stiffen. “Maybe it'll help.”

Jess remained silent, however. She merely nodded.

“Okay.” Stephan turned and made his way to the door, locking through with a palm press and letting it shut behind him.

The medic was waiting outside. “Okay?” Destin asked, briefly.

Stephan shrugged. “Have no idea. “ He answered honestly. “I’m not a doctor and even they aren’t sure what buttons to press to try and fix that.” He steered the medic towards the door that separated the operations center from the living quarters and they passed through it, moving from dim peace into blue lit subdued tension.

Jess waited until she was sure the door was going to stay shut. Then she pushed herself to her feet and walked across the soft gray carpet into the sanitary unit, ignoring her too pale reflection in the mirror as she let a little icy cold water run in the sink and splashed some on her face.

She was tired, but not sleepy, not having any desire to return to the dream world they’d pulled her out of nor wanting to trigger another visit from the medic. She leaned her hands on the sink and stared at the gray surface, resisting the urge to throw up.

Primitive. She pushed away and went back into the space she’d called home for all the years of her adulthood, a free-form two level room that had her bed and storage space on one side and a curved workspace on the other with a comfortable chair behind it.

On the second level, in the loft was a small space for relaxing and meditation and the cabinets that held her personal gear.

All in shades of gray, blue and sea green, with indirect lighting that lent the space a sense of calm and peace and an almost luxurious feel she was due as the ops agent she was. Jess went to her desk chair and sat down in it, the surface feeling cool against the back of her thighs and her tank top clad shoulders.

She stared at the door to the left of the exit. It opened into a mirror image of the room she was in, where until her last mission Joshua had lived.

Joshua.

Her outsider partner, with his curly red hair and his bright, friendly smile. They’d clicked right off, had the same interests, even liked the same music. Jess had often wondered if they’d selected for that when they paired them, but she really hadn’t cared, she’d just been glad they’d bonded and because he’d been carefully selected and undergone the training, she’d trusted him.

Trusted the competence of the board and the professionals whose job it was to carefully pick the teams and vet the outsider applicants so that there was that trust, when you were in a group and were on an emplacement and knew the people at your back were your family and without doubt.

Joshua had fooled everyone. In his tenth emplacement with Jess, he’d turned and literally knifed her, after sounding the alarm and bringing the guards of the detention center they’d penetrated down on top of them.

She'd watched, as they cut the rest of the team to pieces, slowly, knowing a moment of bleak pride at their clench jawed silence before they came for her.

She would have gone the same way, except they misjudged her strength just a fraction. Just a little. Just enough for her to get loose, and free a hand, triggering the embedded recall chip just under her breastbone – just enough to get her hands on a gun and let her bone deep training take over.

Then the screams had been theirs. The last being Joshua's as he came into her sights and she blew his brains right out of his head with the heavy projectiles, scattering bone chips and blood all over the room.

She spent a moment reliving it, now in her conscious mind. They'd given her a commendation for it, but that hadn't erased the shame and the horror, and the sense of deep betrayal she wasn't sure there was any getting over.

There would be no re-partnering for her. No one would live on the other side of that door, standing at her back, ready to put a blade into it.

No way.

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"Doctor?"

Randall Doss looked up, and saw the proctor standing in the doorway. "Yes?"

The tall, brown haired proctor entered. "Here's the report you asked for." He handed over a chip. "And one of the directors of Interforce is here and wishes to speak to you."

Doss blinked. "Interforce? What does he want? Is there some problem with the last set we sent them?"

"I don't know, sir." The proctor responded. "It's Commander Bricker. He's waiting in your office."

The doctor frowned. "Very well." He got up from the tall chair he'd been huddled in, reviewing the digital scoping system. "I'll go talk to him now. I certainly hope there wasn't any mistake." He tugged his work tunic straight and hurried out of the lab, turning right and moving along one of the curving, well lit corridors of the crèche.

He passed through a steady stream of similarly clad men and women, most with digital pads strapped to their arms, and comm buds blinking in their ears as they moved in abstract distraction – only honed peripheral vision letting them proceed without collision.

He reached the grav tube and triggered it, waiting for it to open then stepping into the column of gravity, giving the little hop that started him downward along the curve. He turned and looked out as he dropped, admiring for the nth time the curve of the earth below him, and the deliciously crisp blackness of space beyond.

At the bottom level he triggered the exit and pushed himself into the hallway, regaining normal gravity in the faint bunny hop typical to the crèche and the other stations in orbit. Another few minutes walking and he was at his office, passing through the outside and giving his attendant a wave as he passed. "Hear I have a visitor, Gigi."

"Sir you do." The pretty young woman behind the console agreed. She had wavy brown hair and almond colored eyes, along with a delicately circuit traced collar around her neck. "May I bring you tea?"

"Please, and for my guest as well." The doctor tugged his tunic straight again and then palmed his door open, revealing his half circle office with it's twin bubble windows giving a gorgeous view of the stars.

A tall man in a formal uniform was standing near the first bubble, looking out.

"Commander..ah.. Bricker? They said you wish to see me?" The doctor waved the door closed behind him. "What can we do for you?"

The director turned to face him. He had iron gray hair, closely cropped to his head, and a neatly trimmed beard and mustache that didn't quite hide a plasma scar across one side of his face. "Doctor." He had a low, burring voice. "I have a problem I need you to solve for me."

"Oh?" The doctor felt a little anxiety subside. He went to his desk and sat down behind it. "Anything we can do for Interforce." He said. "Please do sit down. My assistant is bringing us some tea."

The director sat down. "You provide us with resources."

Doctor Doss nodded after a pause. "We provide you with biological alternative units." He agreed. "For many purposes. I believe you have our service units and recently we provided you with some higher end samples, for low space jet plane piloting."

"Yes."

There was a small silence. "They have been satisfactory?" The doctor finally asked. "There's no trouble with them is there? Our programming schemas are very stringent."

"They're fine." The director paused, as the door opened and Gigi entered with a tray. He watched the young woman as she expertly poured the tea, and served them. She was wearing a sedate sea green station uniform, and space boots and her well formed body was both graceful and assured as she bowed to him. "Thank you."

"Sir." Gigi straightened and picked up the tray, then left, closing the door behind her.

"New model." The doctor indicated the now closed door. "That's a G-G 3200. We are enhancing our basic service module with some entry level tech programming."

The director nodded. "So you are experimenting with mixing some of the genotypes" He stated. "That's good. It bears on the problem we want you to solve for us." He sipped his tea. "To state it plainly, doctor, we need you to develop an advanced design for us, but we don't have time for you to do it from scratch."

"I see."

"I need a bio alt I can put in the field as a operative agent." The director went on. "Military."

The doctor straightened up, his eyes blinking. "But director!"

The man held a hand up. "I know." He said. "We've told you a dozen times you can't make a model that will have the independent decision making that's' required. I still believe that."

"But.."

"But my problem is this. We had a failure of process." The director cut him off. "I can't go into the details. But the result is, we do not have confidence in a certain process right now and we have an urgent need for an operative."

Doss stared at him. "Director." He said. "We can do a lot. But this is… these are still biological organisms we're dealing with. They're not machines. They're human beings."

"Legally, no they aren't."

The doctor lifted a hand, much as the director had done a moment ago. "Legally, no. But from a scientific viewpoint, from the view of reality, director, they are. Regardless of what our society considers them."

"Regardless of how we pretend to ourselves you're not creating slaves, yes." The director assented, in a dry tone. "Let's not split hairs."

The doctor's shoulders twitched at the blunt rudeness. "In any case, we don't snap our fingers and create a program set just like that." He said. "There are physical, as well as mental structures to consider."

"I know that."

"The models we have in production right now are geared to be assistants, to serve, to provide a helpmate. They're not soldiers. They're certainly not capable of putting on a uniform and going into battle."

“Anyone can be taught to kill.” The director replied. “You may not believe that, but I’ve been in this business a very very long time, doctor, and you’ll just have to take that on faith from me.” He sipped his tea again. “But as it happens – the operative I need is not required to do that. They need to be a tech, and above all, they need to be absolutely trusted.”

“A tech.” The doctor mused. “Hm.”

“Think of it as a possible new line of business.” The tall man said, with an expressionless face. “If this works out, we could perhaps offer you a deal to supply us with this resource ongoing. It would relieve us of a certain responsibility.

The doctor licked his lips. “Well.” He murmured. “Certainly we would love to be able to continue our business relationship, enhance it, as it were.”

“I have to tell you – this is not a popular decision of mine.” The director said. “Many people think it can’t be done.”

The doctor folded his hands on his desk. “Director, given time, money and talent nothing is impossible. “ he watched the man smile grimly. “But as it happens, there might be a resource I.. well, perhaps we could do some modifications. “

The director nodded. “When? The need is urgent, as I said. There is a risk.”

Oh well,. Doss was already running the calculations. If it didn’t work, he could always say he’d told them so. “Two weeks.” He said. “And I will need to know the exact requirement, including any imprinting.”

The director’s smile widened slightly. “That can be arranged. “ He lifted his cup. “Got any more of this? We don’t get it much down side.”

The doctor leaned towards his comm unit. “Gigi?”

“Sir.”

“First, please bring us some more tea.” He said. “And then, please go to the crèche master and tell him I need to see him. I don’t want to disturb him if he’s programming by calling.”

“Sir.”

“Tell him to come to my office when he’s available, and to bring the NM-Dev-1 unit with him.”

“Yes sir.”

The doctor sat back and took a sip of his own tea, swirling the delicate beverage in his mouth before he swallowed it. “The programming could be complex.” He commented. “We’ll have to put a lot of resources into meeting your timeline.”

“We’ll make it worth your while.” His guest smiled now, with feral completeness. “You can be sure of that, doctor. Cost isn’t a concern for us at this moment.”

Now the doctor smiled, tapping the toes of his space boots together under the desk. “Given that, we’ll find the time and talent, director. You know that’s how that goes.” He lifted his tea cup and the director mimicked the motion, as the station rotation moved them into the light and the windows automatically filtered the glare.

“To success, doctor. For both of us.”

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A soft knock came on the top of her helmet. NM-Dev-1 put the program on hold and ducked out from under it, blinking a little to bring her eyes back into normal focus. “Hello, proctor.” She said, surprised to see him there.

“Hello, Dev.” The proctor sat down next to her. “How are you?”

Dev quickly arranged herself on the bench, sitting up straight and tucking her boots under her. “Doing well, proctor. I finished the first advanced program, and I’m looking at the second one now.” She answered confidently.

“Great.” The proctor shifted his body a little, and looked at her. “Dev, I came to talk to you because the administrator has asked me to bring you to his office. He wants to speak with you.”

She watched his face, seeing the tension there. “Did I do something incorrect?”

“No.” The proctor answered immediately. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Dev. It’s just that some people have come to us, and asked us to do a special job for them and the administrator thinks maybe you can do that job.”

Dev was momentarily silent. “I’m getting assigned?” She asked, with a small intake of breath. “Really?” Her eyes brightened.

The proctor’s brow tensed. “Well.” He shifted again, clearly uncomfortable. “These people.. they want us to give you some special programs, Dev, and then we’ll see if you can do what they want.”

“Oh.” Dev murmured. “Is it hard?”

“It might be.” The proctor admitted. “It’s not like anything you’ve done before. But we’ve tried to give you things that stretch your abilities, and this will be something like that again.” He watched the young bio alt in front of him, seeing the thoughtful look on her face.

He had his doubts. NM-Dev-1, though an experimental prototype that the name indicated, was not a type he would have ever considered for something as radical as this. She was a little below medium height, and slender, with a pleasant, friendly face and sandy colored hair currently pulled back in a holder.

Though she’d had the usual physical training, she didn’t look anything like what he supposed an Interforce soldier should look like, and the idea of her in those stark, gray surroundings made him truly rather uncomfortable.

He liked Dev. As much as one could like a bio alt. She was good natured and relatively clever, able to hold a conversation and even come up with an idea or two of her own once in a while. She smiled a lot, and was always eager to learn new things.

One of the Doc's best efforts, really, with his personal touch and it showed.

He just wondered if she’d enjoy learning what she’d have to in order to fill the order. Would Dev enjoy being set to operate the weapons systems Interforce used? It seemed very wrong for her type.

“Will I go somewhere” Dev asked, unexpectedly. “I mean.. out of the crèche?”

‘Yes. You’ll need to go downside.” The proctor told her. “Are you ready to come talk to the administrator? He’ll tell you more about what you’re going to do.” He stood up. “When he’s done, I’ll take you to the programming center so they can start giving you the programs you’ll need.”

Dev felt a little apprehensive. “Will you tell me what the programs are?”

The proctor put a hand on her shoulder. “I think it’ll be better for you if you just take them, Dev. Not think about it too much before you go.” He released her. “Let’s go now. The administrator is waiting.”

Dev followed along as he turned and started towards the big central grav stack, at this time of the shift filling with techs and minders heading to quarters, and at the outside edges, bio alts assigned to the station making their way to the dorms.

Dev saw familiar faces, and she lifted a hand to wave, getting a timid response as the eyes shifted to the proctor next to her, and the little separation between them and the crowd. She had thought she was going to spend a quiet night in the dorms, after the night meal and maybe have a game of chess with a few of her crechemates before sleep.

Now, who knew where she’d end up sleeping if she did at all.

It had started out such an ordinary day, too. A new set had come into the dorms, and there was lots of showing around to do before gym, and then the daymeal, and after that her studies. She’d almost been done before the proctor had found her.

Now, she really didn’t know what was going to happen. The thought of being assigned made her happy, but the look on the proctor’s face, and the way he’d spoken made her think there was something wrong with this assignment, at least to him.

They left the tube and walked along the outside corridor of the station, the transparent walls giving a full view of the earth orbit they were in. Dev smiled a little at the stars, and let them distract her as she traced their patterns in their endlessly fascinating variations.

It almost made the walk too short. She followed the proctor though as he turned inside a doorway and put his palm to a lock, waiting for the door to slide open then gesturing her inside.

Restricted zone. Dev had never been inside it. She glanced at the silver toned walls as they walked, passing office after office, now darkened for the day. At the very end, in the corner was a taller more impressive door, and that's where the proctor led her.

They stood inside the entrance. "Gigi, can you tell the administrator we're here?" The proctor asked the admin behind the desk.

"Sir." Gigi pressed a button, looking up and exchanging the briefest of nods with Dev.

They had something in common, and in fact, Dev was familiar with Gigi from the crèche. They were both something of an experimental set, though Dev's programming had started out from the beginning to be advanced while Gigi's added skills had been a recent development.

They were both different. She had daymeal with Gigi sometimes. The rest of the sets tended to stick together and while no one was unfriendly everyone knew the more skills you were given, the better your chance of getting a really good assignment.

So there was jealousy. Dev had talked to Gigi about it, and they had thought that maybe this was just a little indication of how parts of them were still like the natural born around them because no one was given a jealous program. You just had it.

Just like the natural borns just had it. Dev had told Gigi though, that they shouldn't talk about it.

Gigi had agreed. She was part of a small set, only six, and Dev.. well, Dev was just one. No sense in upsetting people when you didn't have a group around you and it wasn't nice to make a big thing of things you knew or could do that others couldn't.

The door in front of them opened and she followed the proctor in. The administrator's office was very large, and it had pretty white and blue carpet and a lot of clear glass ornaments. Dev turned around and stared at it for a moment, amazed by the tall ceilings, and the sense of light and air.

"Well, hello there NM-Dev-1."

Dev turned, and looked at the administrator. "Hello, sir." She said. He still had his lab overlay on, and with his curly hair in constant disarray he never seemed that threatening.

Another man was there, a tall, gray man and he was watching her. She looked at him, and saw the crease in his face, and the uniform. He was looking very intently at her and she felt like moving away from him.

Dev felt a little fear. Was this who she was going to be assigned to?

"This is Commander Bricker, of Interforce." Doctor Doss said. "Do you know what that is, Dev? Have you had that program?"

"Yes, sir, I do." Dev said.

"Good." The doctor said. "So you know how important Interforce is, right? They protect us from all the people who are trying to hurt us, don't they."

"Yes, sir." Dev said. "They're very brave." She added, unprompted.

Bricker produced a faint smile.

"That's right." Doss agreed. "Well, Dev, we have a wonderful opportunity to help the commander and all those brave people. They have a job, a tech job, and they came to us to see if we could help them, if we had someone who could do that job."

"To go there, sir? To Interforce?" Dev asked, after a moment's silence.

"Yes." Doss said. "They need our help."

"Sir." Dev felt her breathing go a little faster. She was afraid, and she wasn't. "I don't know how to be brave."

That got another brief, crabbed smile from Bricker. “We can teach you that.” He said, his low, burring voice tickling her ears. “If you have the heart for it.”

Dev looked at him, and their eyes met. Again, she was afraid and not, because she could see something real there, something interesting and complex that reminded her a little of some of her history lessons.

Some of the people she’d seen there. “Sir.” She murmured.

“We have some programs to give you, Dev, that will help you learn what to do, so you can help the commander. So I want you to go with the proctor and get started. We don’t have a lot of time. They need you very badly.”

“Sir.” Dev replied. “I’ll do the best I can.”

Doss smiled at her, a real smile. “I know you will.” He gave the proctor a nod. “Robin, you know what to do. Let’s get started.”

“Right away, sir.” The proctor touched Dev’s shoulder. “Let’s go, Dev. You’ve got lots to learn.” He guided her out of the office and the door slid shut behind them.

Doss leaned back against his desk, and watched the director out of the corner of his eye. “I know she’s young, and probably not what you were looking for.” He said.

“No.” Bricker sat back down. “Frankly, I had no idea what I was looking for. “ He said. “You people give me the creeps and I won’t lie about it.”

“Well, if we had more time..” Doss temporized. “We could breed something up for you, to your specifications but you said..”

“I know. I said I needed them now.” Bricker cut him off. “But as it happens, I think this one might be all right. I didn’t want a soldier.”

“Oh. Well good.” Doss sat down behind his desk.

“We don’t’ want programmable soldiers.” The director said. “Because it’s just as easy for someone else to program them. After our training they’re damned destructive, and damned expensive for us to maintain.”

“I see.” The doctor murmured, who actually didn’t see. “I’m not really sure, then…”

“You don’t need to be sure.” The director said. “Just give me what I ask for, and I’ll take it from there. “

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Dev sat in the programming room, her legs dangling over the side of the body shaped couch. The sensor grid was cocked and in place over the head of it, and across the room the tech was busy setting up the boards.

It was a quiet chamber. The walls were dimly lit and a soft green color, and the light in the room was a soothing light amber. She knew it was designed to make her relax, but even knowing that, she felt her stomach in knots and her mouth dry as a paper.

She’d been in here many times before, of course. Here, or in one of the many chambers like it on this level where she’d gotten her basic, and then advanced skill programming over the years. It was in this chamber, in fact that she’d gotten her first tech programming skill, waking to a delight of knowledge she’d run right to the sim lab and explored.

This, though, was different.

“Lay down, please.” The tech instructed. “The programmer is coming in. “

Dev took a deep breath and swiveled her body, putting her feet up on the gentle slope and her head down under the sensor grid. She watched as it slowly descended, the nodes settling over her head in familiar spots.

She felt the faint twitch as they synced and she took a breath and released it, forcing her hands to relax on the soft surface as the tech came over and adjusted the couch a little.

He had a digital pad on his arm. “Biological Alternative, set 0202-164812, instance NM-Dev-1?”

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “That’s me.”

The tech nodded. “Okay, just relax for me please. I’m going to test the grid. It might tickle.”

Dev closed her eyes, and immediately felt the faint twitchy/tickling sensation as the grid came live, sending testing pulses through her head. A flare of colored light behind her eyes, the scent of fruit, the sound of a gong, all without anything audible or truly visible. “Blue, apple, bell.” She said, after they’d died down.

“Excellent.” The tech patted her arm. Then he wrapped a sensor around her wrist, and gently tapped the center of her forehead. “Go down for me please. Let the system take over. Let go.”

And having no choice, Dev did. She felt a weight lift off her chest, and she focused on the soft echoes of the gong still chiming in her mind, the chimes now coming in the pattern of her heartbeat.

Deeper. Slower.

She was down.

The tech consulted a reading, watching the face under the grid of sensors relax and go still, the slim and toned body easing into compliance, hands uncurling, fingers easing out.

He adjusted a few settings., half turning as the door opened behind him. “She’s down.”

The programmer settled behind the console. “Thanks.” He said, with a sigh. “Damned last minute admin crap.” He settled his hands on the controls and reviewed the display, eyes flicking back and forth in absorption. “Wow.” He said, after a minute. “Didn't expect to see this.”

The tech trotted around and looked over his shoulder. “That’s military.” He said, flatly. “I’ve seen stuff like that in the pilot set.”

The programmer nodded. “Yeah, this one’s being sent to Interforce.” He perked up. “Hey, maybe they’re finally figuring out just how useful these guys are to them. Could be a big new contract.”

“But on her model?” The tech pointed. “Gonna cute them to death?”

“Tech.” The programmer started to work, setting parameters. “All tech side. This is a lot though. Hope she can handle it.” He picked up a sensor helmet and put it on, adjusting the leads with expert hands. “Okay, stand by.”

The tech went to the monitoring station and settled in, adjusting the monitors to watch the steady biological readouts. “She’s good.”

The programmer glanced briefly at the couch, then went back to his screens, eyes going to deep focus as he put his fingers over the digital sensors and exhaled.

The room faded out. He activated his helmet display and it flickered to life, a spiderweb of lightning shot tracers forming in his mind’s eye, a digital recreation of the mind under the grid. From long experience, he navigated through the pulses, knowing where he was by patiently taught instinct as he found the familiar areas of thought and reason.

It was good when they were young like this one. There was plenty of storage for him to set his code into, the pulses were gentle and regular and less of a chance of him screwing something up.

It happened.

He found the spot he wanted, and settled down, calling up the programming codes and feeding them in as that oldest of languages, electrical binary.

Yes or no. On or off. Building blocks of data that would slowly be made more complex but started out in a very basic way, changing thoughts and patterns. Changing what would be perceived as instinct to a different bias.

As basic as changing whether one flew, or fought, if that was needed.

This one, he noted, didn’t need that change at least.

He would give her the data and tech first, he decided. Build up that knowledge base and confidence and then, then just before they were ready to send her out, he’d give her that last set.

The brutal truth set.

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“Are you out of your cotton picking mind?” Stephan Bock stared at the commander seated in the big chair at the head of the table. “John? Are you nuts?”

Bricker let his hands rest on the table, folded together. “You never really lost that archaic language, did you?” He mused. “Nuts. Cotton.” He flexed his fingers. “I guess hydroponic pod and tartex don’t have the same ring.”

“John.”

The commander leaned back and studied his old friend. “Stephan, the options here are very limited. We have a problem.”

“Yes, we have a problem, but solving a problem with pointless insanity's never been your game play.” Bock said. “A bio alt? Why don’t you just suggest we put a lab rat in as a field partner. It’s be cuter, and probably have a better chance at making an independent decision.”

“You told me you have a trust problem.” Bricker said, in a calm voice. “You told me you not only have an ops agent refusing to accept a new tech, you have an entire ops group having issues with emplacements since they don’t trust the people with them.”

“Yes, but..”

“Yes, but nothing. “ The commander stood up. “You know how it is with us, Stephan. How small the pool of ops agents is. What do we have, a thousand, tops? In the whole of Atlantia?”

“Nine hundred ninety seven.” Bock stated quietly. “That skill set doesn’t come up so much anymore.”

“Exactly. So – they need to be teamed with a tech skill set, and the only place that comes from is outside.” Bricker said. “We take what applicants we have, and we vet them hard.”

“Not hard enough.” Bocks voice was bitter. “We got lucky nature slaughtered nurture that time. “

The commander sighed. “So my point is, we have to take what we can get. You can’t force someone into the corps. Much as everyone believes otherwise.”

Bock grunted. “Pool’s getting shallower.” He admitted. “Not enough diversity.”

“So there it is.” Bricker stood up and paced. “We have a gene pool that’s pathetically restricted, and no resources to support unrestricted breeding – we might even be past the point of no return anyway. We agreed?”

Bock grunted again.

“So.” Bricker turned and leaned his knuckles on the table. “We can’t afford to lose the agents we do have, Stephen. They have to be able to trust the people at their back, if we want to continue this long, painful fight of ours.”

“But bio alts?” Stephan said. “John, they’re just big collections of cell structures with basic instructions added. How can you seriously think one of them can even be able to do the most mundane tech tasks in the field?”

“The pilots fly.”

Bock waved that off with an impatient hand. “Sure.” He said. “They fly, they get from point A to point B, they can land and take care of their machines… but if they run into a drone high up in the gray, they freeze. You know it. We’ve lost a dozen.”

“Training’s too basic.”

“Their brains are plastic bags full of pixie dust.”

“Stephen.”

“John, they are. Just because I’m ops, doesn’t mean I haven't’ done the research. I took the classes, remember? So I could direct them?” He stood up now and did his own pacing. “Look, I’m not saying bio alts aren’t useful. They are. I don’t know what we’d do without them, since they take care of pretty much everything in this place except for operational activities. But they just take instructions, and carry out the basics. They don’t think for themselves.”

“Well.” Bricker sighed and sat down. “I want to try and see if we can make one think.”

“John.”

“Your ops agent, the one that won't take a partner? What happens to them if they can’t be convinced?”

Bock dropped into his seat with a grunt.

“Worth a try?”

“Jess won’t agree to this.” Bock said. “She has no use for bio alts, John. She's from Drakes Bay, remember?”

“We have no use for lone ops agents who refuse orders.”

Stephen frowned. “John, that’s harsh.”

“Life is harsh, Stephen. In case you hadn’t noticed.” Bricker retorted, dryly. “We’re the fine, thin edge trying to prevent complete collapse of our remaining society and frankly, I don’t have time for rebels. So either your prima donna decides to help us with this project, or they can go and spend their days harvesting seaweed. “

“What if I don’t want to help you. You sending me to rake the beds too?” Bock countered. “What if I think trying to send a bio alt out with Jess is the same thing as putting her up in front of a lead cannon.”

Bricker studied him. “Put your jackassery away for a minute and think about one thing. What if it works?”

“It won’t.”

“What if it does?” Bricker insisted. “What if we prove we can have bio alts made that can fill those roles, Stephen? If we take them to another level? If we don’t have to rely on the recruiters? What if this crazy idea turns out to mean we survive?”

Bock was silent for a few minutes. “You’re serious.”

“I am.” The director agreed quietly. “Look, this first trial – I know it won’t probably work. We took an existing model and threw some heavy tech into it. But I want to see the potential, if we can have one made to order, to our spec, you understand?”

Bock grunted.

“If this one even gets a few baby steps, we can see what the long term could be for us. “

“And if it doesn’t?”

Bricker shrugged. “Then it’s just a failed experiment, we send it back and get it wiped, and we look elsewhere. But at least it gives you something to toss at this ops agent of yours. Maybe it’ll be a challenge.”

Stephen sighed. Then he lifted a hand and let it fall. “What the hell. Sure.” He said. “Worst can happen is it wont’ work. I don’t think we can put Jess in the field right now anyway. Psych says she’s not fit for it.”

Bricker nodded. “That’s the spirit.” He said. “Did a good clean up job in all that mess I hear.”

Bock nodded. “Took out a whole cell. Killed two dozen including the infiltrator and ID’d the locale for the strike team. Made a very big hole in the ground.”

“Hm.” Bricker grunted. “Impressive.” He said. “I can see why you want to keep the op around.”

“I do, John. I really do.”

Bricket studied him. “I'm really not trying to be a dick, Stephen. I just want us to survive. Know what I mean?”

Bock sighed. “I know. It just seems like it gets harder every damn day.”

**

Jess felt the steady patter of rain against her skin as she stood in the sentryway, leaning her elbows on the armored rail and looking out.

The sky, as always, was dark gray, filled with layered clouds and allowing only the filtered, muted light to reach the surface that spread out ahead of her.

Gray, and black, and dark greens, and ochres. The cold wind blew against her face, bringing the smell of brine and damp rock to her nose and she exhaled, absorbing the surroundings of home.

The citadel was built into a granite cliff, protected by the hard, basement rock that surrounded it. At the base of the cliff on one side was the endless span of the sea, it's surge flowing through cut tunnels that generated power, and into caverns where they harvested what the tide brought them.

On the other side, rocky ground interspersed with gravel, and the odd patch of lichen spread as far as the eye could see.

There were no trees, and no plants, though once there had been. There were no people. It had been generations since homes and buildings had been seen anywhere and now you had to look hard to even discern the faint outlines of what had been roads, and the odd lumps of rubble that had been, once, civilization.

It was bleak. But it had been this bleak for her whole life, and rather than find it depressing Jess instead always felt a sense of peace looking out over this vastness of solitude, tucked into a fold of what had been called the Appalachian range, in what long ago was called Pennsylvania.

Here at least it was quiet, and safe, their outpost providing defense for the eastern coastline all the way up to where North Base took over near Quebec.

Once upon a time, she reflected, this had been a place of life and plenty. Back in the day when everyone had argued over the impact of humanity on the planet, and how they could somehow fix the effect they were having on it.

Back in the day, when there had been lifestyles, and money, and religion to argue over. Back when they'd thought humanity ruled the world and it was humanity's decisions that would chart the course of the future.

Everyone had thought a disaster would come someday. Almost no one had predicted that when it did, humanity would have no part in it, and no control over the results.

One after another, six big volcanos had erupted, along a crack in the planet's crust. It was simply a matter of physics after that – debris in the air that turned into clouds, that blocked the sun, and in turn spawned more clouds, and acid rain they couldn't escape, or block, or do anything about.

Horrifically, frighteningly fast, how a food chain can collapse. Plants, and forests, and animals and cultures, and civilization vanished in the blink of a planetary eye, reducing a fertile world to an almost barren bleakness.

Near constant rain. The shifting earth and melting ice making the oceans rise, and coastlines dissolve until the planet was reshaped into a place of restless seas and lifeless rock and vast extinction.

Almost.

The ten percent of humanity that had survived had done so because the one great strength of their species was the ability to adapt, and adapt, and adapt again, finding new ways to live, new resources to exploit, and new patterns to fall into.

And so they had survived, and learned to live again in a hard world where needs were boiled down to stark essentials.

But they were still human, and conflict was so written into the species that even when so few were left, still, there were sides to be taken. Now, the conflict wasn't over ideology or trade, it was over raw resources in a world where access to them meant life or death.

Was there a mind on the other side that had data they needed? They'd go take them. An invention they could exploit? Jess or someone like her would be assigned to find a way to locate and retrieve it. Was there someone who, though not useful to them, would give the other side an advantage?

Jess had killed her share of them. There was no sentiment. No compassion. Survival was as raw a master as humanity had ever known.

There could be no open warfare. There wasn't enough of them for that. They just fought step by step, in close rooms, or dark tunnels, infiltrating labs, and invading systems. Their lives depended on the sea, and on the hydroponic stations high above, circling the world, havens of technology and relative plenty far removed from the bleak, cloud covered world below.

Jess licked a bit of the rain off her lips. It had stopped being deadly to them generations back, as their biology adapted to the new conditions and so to her it tasted sweet. It dampened her hair, and the workout suit she was wearing, cooling her body down from the gym session she'd just completed.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and she took heed of the warning, ducking back inside the armored door and keying it shut behind her. It closed with a compressed thump, and she walked along the corridor towards the rad center.

She passed the occasional steadily moving figure in the hall, giving the brief nod of acknowledgement the contact required. Just past the major corridor that held the dining hall and rec area, she turned into one of many half rounded doorways.

It opened as her presence registered and closed behind her as she entered, the light inside altering from neutral to a soft twilight that outlined her as she stripped off her workout suit and set it on the cleaning shelf.

Naked, she moved into the rad room and it switched on, bathing her in a deep ultraviolet glow. She sprawled on a transparent, webbed chair, letting the artificial sunlight cover her skin as she touched the work pad on the arm of the chair, and called up the ops report.

The one thing they hadn't evolved out of, that need for the touch of the sun they no longer saw. Jess rested her elbow on the chair and propped her chin up with it, relaxing in the glow as she caught up on the events of the day.

Her dream of two days past was finally fading. She'd spent a good, restful night last night, and was to where she was starting to feel almost normal again. The details of the failed raid were fading, along with the scar on her back from the knife.

The trust hadn't returned though, and Jess had been silently gratified when the other ops agents had gone to the top and registered big concerns of their own as to how far they themselves could trust the tech partners they'd been given.

She knew Stephen thought she'd egged them on, and she would have, if they hadn't come up with it on their own. If it happened to her, they reasoned, it could happen to any of them.

And that was true. The techs were all very uncomfortable, sitting together in the dining hall as the agents in residence gathered at their own, and getting faintly concerned and maybe a little suspicious looks from the rest of the citadel staff.

Not fair. Jess readily conceded. Joshua had been the first turned in as far back as anyone knew, and there was no real reason to suspect any of the other techs but they were suspected anyway.

Tough luck for them. Tougher luck for Stephen, who was now having to deal with far more than just her problem.

It was time for him, and for his boss to put the thumb down on the council, since it was their process that screwed up. Someone should pay for it.

But even as she thought it, Jess knew in her guts the finger pointing would eventually deflect fault to the four winds likely right back to them, and their group, and her.

Humanity hadn't changed all THAT much. Crap still insistently and never-endingly rolled downhill.

A soft knock sounded at the door, an anachronistic touch that almost made her smile. "Come." She called out, hearing the soft click as the vocal systems analyzed her response and acted on it.

The outer door opened and she saw a shadowy form enter, crossing in front of the dim light long enough for her to recognized Stephen's tall, solid, bulk. "In here."

He crossed into the sun chamber and sat down on the bench. He was dressed in a workout suit much as she'd been, and his hair was plastered to his head with sweat. "You up for dinner?"

Hm. "Sure." Jess agreed, wondering what the pitch was going to be. "What's up?"

"I've just had a crap filled day ad I'd like to sit across a plastic table from a good looking woman and talk about trigger ratios and forget it was a crap filled day." He answered, with surprising bluntness. "That's all."

Jess looked up from her pad, watching him. He was sprawled on the bench and she read honest exhaustion in his body set. She knew Bricker had been with him most of the morning, and she knew she was probably one of the subjects of the meeting, but she read no dissembling in his face and that surprised her.

Stephan was a friend. But first and foremost, he was her superior and even though they'd grown up together, been schooled together, and been in service together for years she had no illusion of where his loyalties lay.

Ah. There were those trust issues again. She smiled briefly. "Sounds good." She replied. "I've got backed up rations, want to share a liter of grog?"

His face creased into a responding smile. "You're starting to sound like your old self."

Jess considered that. "I'm not sure that old self still lives in here." She answered. "But I got a decent night sleep last night so who knows."

He nodded. "Know how that feels." He indicated the light. "Mind if I share your glow? Mine's being serviced."

"Feel free." Jess went back to her pad as he stripped out of his suit and went to the transparent lounge, dropping down onto it and stretching out. The floor and walls were reflective, so every inch of them got some of it and though a necessity, she had always found it relaxing.

She and Stephen were relatively alike in looks. They were both tall, and they both had spare, well muscled bodies with well developed arms and shoulders and powerful legs. The same training had stamped them, and though the biological differences were still obvious they didn't obscure the fact that here were two people who had come out of the same mold.

Might even have been sibs, once upon a time.

Jess wondered how long it would take for him to corner her into whatever it was Bricker wanted.

She'd already decided to refuse. What would the threat be? What would the price be?

Did she really even care?

"Anything new on the boards?" Stephen asked, his eyes closed.

"Nothing yet" Jess smiled grimly. "Anything new from the top?"

"Nothing yet."

**

Dev woke to the soft chime of her scheduler, opening her eyes to find the soft neutral colored interior of her sleeping pod surrounding her. The sedate glow that accompanied the chime intensified a little and she stretched, waiting expectantly until the latch triggered and the pod opened.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side, leaning her hands on the edge and peering out to see the normal, placid activity of the early dayshift in the crèche.

All around there were people emerging from sleep pods, some entering them as well who had worked the night through, groups of her crèche mates briefly chatting nearby. Overhead the walls curved to meet a dome, and beams of sunlight arched through to hit solar panels, moving from one to the other in a stately dance as the station that held the crèche rotated.

To either side of her, a line of sleeping pods extended around the curved wall, layered one over the other on sliding tracks that positioned the units for exit at the right time and place. Once a pod was evacuated, it slid up and out of the way, allowing the next one to use the landing space.

And speaking of that, her own pod was gently beeping, warning her of imminent motion.

She stood up on the platform outside, and moved away from the pod, hearing it close behind her as she walked down the sloping ramp and joined a line of bodies heading into the bathing and changing center, all in light sleep-suits, all with bare feet, all with faintly lit collars around their necks.

Like hers. Dev never thought much about it, since she could hardly remember the time when she hadn't worn one. It was light and fitted very well to her skin, never chafing or causing her any trouble and with the delicate tracery of the electronics on it, she actually found them rather attractive.

Or at least, that's what she told herself.

"Morning , Dev." Aybe 285 was in front of her, flexing his hands and stifling a yawn. There were five or six of his set in front of him, and behind her were some Ceebees, and she spotted Gigi and another of her set as well and gave her a little wave, which she returned.

They all looked alike, of course. But she could pick Gigi, the Gigi she knew out because she had the bracelet that let her into admin space around her wrist, setting her aside from the rest of her set mates. The Aybes and Ceebees, on the other hand, were indistinguishable from each other.

"Morning." Dev responded automatically. She could hear the soft hum of conversation around her, and behind the edge of the crèche she spotted a splash of the sun coursing through the station walls and it brought to mind the fact that she was due in the lab right after she broke the night's fast.

She had new skills. She could feel them, a tickly sensation in the back of her skull that almost made her want to scratch her head there as she wondered what the scope of the new knowledge was.

It was tech, that she knew, and a lot of it. She'd spent an evening and the following day in programming, and she'd seen the rings of dark fatigue under the eyes of the programmer when they'd finally let her come up, in a hazy mixture of adrenaline and euphoria that had her breathing hard and shaking.

A little dizzy, and ravenous. One of the meds had walked her to the dining hall and sat with her as she'd consumed her tray, her head finally clearing by the time she drained her second cup of cinnamon tea as her body adjusted back to something close to normal.

The med had gotten her a second sandwich, giving her a pat on the shoulder before he left her there to finish up. It wasn't unusual, he'd told her, but she'd never taken that much programming at one time, and she had to admit it had unsettled her.

She was next in line, and went to an open cleaning station, stepping inside and ducking her head a little as the air blasted away the set of paper clothing she'd been wearing to sleep in, the warm pressure feeling good against her skin.

A quick flash of irradiated light cleaned her, and then she was stepping out, turning to the right and going to the line of cabinets that ringed the outer wall. Twenty third in the row to the right of the door, on lower level A, was hers.

She opened the door and stepped inside, waiting for it to close after her. The inside light came on and the sound around her faded and she was in the only piece of privacy she'd ever known, given to her when she'd graduated from basic instruction.

Her crib, as they called it. Barely big enough for her to stretch her arms out twice, it held a cabinet, a padded bench and a counter, her workspace and the narrow, shallow drawer she kept her few personal possessions in.

Not everyone got one. Only those destined for higher skill programs were issued one of the limited cribs and it was a definite mark of status in the crèche along with the ability that went with it to manage the small amount of unregulated time in their day.

She could come here, and study, or watch a lecture from the library or just sit and think for a few minutes by herself. It was nice to have a place of quiet and peace in the crowded crèche, and the padded bench was even long enough for her to lay down and relax if she wanted to though she seldom did.

Dev went over to the closet and opened it, sliding into an under tunic, then pulling on a snug jumpsuit over that. The fabric was comfortable, and a soft blue green in color, the gears patches on either shoulder indicating her assignment to tech and a change for her from the neutral beige of the unassigned.

It felt good. She liked the color. It contrasted with her pale hair much better than the other ones had and it made her feel happy to be getting new skills and the opportunity to be a part of something that the director had told her was so important.

She was still a little apprehensive about the programs, but so far nothing felt strange or out of sorts – she'd had some programs that had left her sick to her stomach and once had come up with such a headache they'd had to put her back down again and adjust something but even though these sessions had been very long, she'd come up feeling all right about whatever it was they'd given her.

She remembered a brief dream in her sleep last night which she sometimes would happen after a long session. It had been nothing more than a few images, a gray space, a cliff, a face, and the smell of brine but they were new and different and she found them intriguing because they weren't skills.

They were something that was intended to get her ready, programs that would let her know what to do when she got to wherever they were sending her and give her enough information for her to know the proper way to respond and interact with the people she'd meet there.

It wasn't knowledge, precisely, it wasn't facts she could call up and examine. This was deep stuff. This was the kind of programming they gave the permanently assigned, who were destined to spend all their lives doing certain tasks.

She liked the feeling they gave her.

She picked up her ident badge and clipped it to her front pocket then she went to the small mirror and picked up her comb, raking her thick, short hair into some kind of order. She peered at her reflection, nodding a little at it as she put the comb back down.

She checked the chrono over the door, then she pulled back the simple chair in front of the equally spare desk and sat down to review her notes before the time she was due in the dining hall. After a minute, though, she pushed the monitor pad on it's arm aside and opened the drawer to her right hand, removing a tattered square object and setting in on the desktop.

With a faint smile, she opened the cover of the book and read the first page, as she had so many times before, savoring the images the words brought to her and in the simple luxury of reading – a skill not always programmed in her crèche mates.

It had been her first indication that she was going to maybe get to do interesting things. Up until then she'd felt strange in her class, since she was the single member of her set, and unsure of what they intended her to do, unlike the others who had a set history to look at and set their expecations.

But she'd been assigned to the advanced section early and if she had to bear up under the strangeness of being a one off, at least she had that to comfort her.

A teacher had given the book to her when she'd left basic, on the day her birth group had sat in the speaking hall for the last time, before they were sent through processing and given their programming track when they'd learned what level they were being sent to.

It was an old favorite of his, he'd told her, the book given to him by his grandfather, and passed down through his family. Dev wasn't sure why he'd given it to her, aside from him saying he thought she would enjoy it, but she was very happy she had it and she often took minutes like this to read a few pages of it.

It was a long story, full of fantastic creatures and places.

She spent a quarter hour immersed in the book, then she closed it and put it away, getting up and heading for the door. The lights dimmed as she left, trading the quiet dimness for the bright lit common space of the crèche and all of it's inhabitants.

"Hello, Dev." Gigi had appeared from her own crib, several down to the left of Dev's. "How are you? I missed seeing you at daymeal yesterday."

"Very well." Dev matched strides with her. "I was down." She said, briefly. "I made it up for late serving."

"Oh, that's right." Gigi nodded. "Was it a good program set?"

"I think so. I haven't worked with it yet." Dev joined the line in the dining hall, walking along the shelf and accepting the tray that was handed to her. "Thank you." She addressed the server, a tall, quiet man with black curly hair and pretty hazel eyes.

He was an Eren, she thought. Eren or a Erem, one of the more common sets with lots of members. They were nice, and they liked music, she recalled. They got programmed for a lot of different admin things but of course took their turn in the service line just as she did sometimes though Dev usually ended up back in the prep area rather than the front.

She pushed her tray down the line as Gigi picked up hers, and they both walked across the huge room and took a seat at one of the blue tables on the left hand side.

"What are these?" Gigi poked one of two round white objects on her tray.

"Eggs." Dev answered knowledgeably. "You cut them open. They're good. I guess they finished some experiment on them or something. I had them once. I like them."

Gigi cut one in half and examined it. "Oh. It's pretty." She displayed the inside, which had a perfectly round yellow ball inside the white outer part.

"It is, isnt' it?" Dev put a little jam from the tiny paper cup on the tray onto her wafer and bit into it, adding a slice of her own egg on top for the next chew.

"So, you're going downside, right?" Gigi looked over at her. "I heard the director say that."

Dev nodded. "I think so." She said, taking a sip of tea to wash down her wafer. "I wonder what it will be like."

One of the tall, lanky Beeayes slid down the bench towards her. He was also dressed in a tech jumpsuit and he gave her a small grin. "Hi."

"Hi." Dev smiled back.

"Beeaye 512." The newcomer introduced himself. "I think we're going to the same place." He said. "My subset's going to be mechanics at Interforce." He offered a hand in greeting.

Dev took it and returned the clasp. "That's good." She said. "it's good to know people if you're going to a different place. I am NM-Dev-1." She turned and indicated Gigi. "And this is Gigi 3200. She's admin for the director."

"Hi." Beeaye 512 offered a hand. "Nice to meet you." He turned back to Dev. "My set mate heard you were going to be a real tech for them Not just fixing things like we do. In ops."

Dev blinked at him. "He did?"

"Wow." Gigi looked at her. "That's big. We don't do that."

Dev tried to recall everything the director had said to her. A special job, wasn't that what he'd said? Something to help them with a problem? She was sure he hadn't said anything about her being an ops tech. "Gigi's right. We don't do that." She objected. "They won't let us do that. It's

too hard to program. “ She added. “I don’t think it can be that. Maybe something with the admin systems.”

Beeaye shrugged. “That’s what he heard. In any case, I’m glad you”re going with us. It’s good to know people.” He slid back down the bench to where some of his set-mates were sitting, along with three or four others in blue green jumpsuits.

Gigi made a face. “That sounded strange.” She said. “I don’t think people are supposed to be talking about this.”

Dev finished her egg and wafer, and drank her tea. “You know how things get around.” She said, putting the cup down. “Do you remember that story about Proctor Joan and the head chef?”

Gigi chuckled, covering her mouth hastily with her hand. “Bananas!” She whispered.

Dev laughed. “Exactly.” She got up and picked up her tray. “I’m off to the lab. See you at daymeal.” She put the tray in the disposal and walked quickly out of the dining hall, joining the flood of bodies moving along the walkway.

The sun speared through the station walls, and Dev walked through slices of filtered light, lifting her hand a little to intercept a bit of it and watching as it gilded her skin. It made her smile, and she kept smiling as she turned down the hallway and entered the big cross tunnel that led to the tech lab.

The walls slanted into the entrance, which had a bio reader and a screen. Dev stepped up to it, and waited for the soft glow to appear overhead. She felt that little tickle on her skin, then the screen lit up.

“Ident.” It said, briefly.

“NM-Dev-1” Dev answered.

The door slid open, and she continued inside, moving directly across the big entrance to the processing desk that squatted directly in the center. She went to the processing agent and unclipped her badge, handing it to him and waiting as he keyed it in.

He studied the screen, then handed her badge back. “Lab 26, first corridor, third door, eight hours. Reset when done.”

“Thank you.” Dev clipped her badge back on and then circled the desk and headed for the lab. She didn’t pass anyone on the way there, the halls were quieter than usual, and most of the labs were dark and empty, their doors gaping open into the hall.

Lab 26 illuminated as she entered, and the door closed behind her. Dev paused and looked around, seeing floor to ceiling gray consoles packed into every square inch of the room, leaving only a half octagon desk with a chair behind it.

It smelled just faintly of silicon. She circled the lab first, examining the consoles, but found nothing on them to indicate their purpose which was intimidating in and of itself. Usually tech rigs had plates and decals, but these were blank and somehow seemed a little scary to her.

Maybe it was the flat gray color.

With a sigh, Dev went to the console and sat down in the chair, feeling the surface of it warm to her body, and conform to her figure a little. She adjusted it to her height, then she put her hands down on the tablet surface and heard the almost soundless click and hum of electronics starting up.

A panel slid aside, revealing a headset. Dev took it out and put it on, smelling the newness of the plastic and steel as the contacts settled over her head and she felt the ear piece snuggle into her ear. For another moment here was silence, then the boards all lit up.

She jerked, a little, surprised at all the activity. The half octagon suddenly came alive with sensors and readout panels, the banks lining the walls showed a thousand or more systems and she waited, just letting her eyes roam, for the programming to kick in.

It took a little while, sometimes. The instruction sets were all in there, but it was sometimes like having a book and it being just out of focus. You knew the words were there, but you couldn’t

quite see them until you brought them closer or a little further and your mind pulled them into clarity.

Until then, it was just a blast of lights and gauges. She looked ahead of her, feeling the slightly crawling sensation on the back of her neck just before the flickering kaleidoscope abruptly shifted and took on meaning as a blast of comprehension overcame her.

A machine voice started whispering into her ear as she found herself short of breath, her body jerking a little as she tried to sync with the program, let it take over and show her what she needed to know.

She knew what the gauges were now, what that screen was, and this screen was, and why that set of readouts was so important.

A wash of tingling dismay made her lean forward, as she took in the whole of it, and understood what the assignment was they had given her. She sucked in a breath hard, feeling her heart beating like thunder as the lights dimmed and went to blue and a scenario started.

The consoles shifted and the two nearest to her changed to show controls her hands jerked back from as the voice whispered about metrics, and targets and the three dimensional spatial understanding that now flooded up into her conscious mind.

She felt like throwing up. This was wrong. This was dark, and cold and implacable.

But the program had her good and no matter how much she tried to pull her mind back from it the insidious comprehension pushed aside her doubts, spurring her body to obey the insistently whispered instructions as her hands moved, and her breathing slowly steadied and she lost herself to the rush of it.

Just lost her grip. Like the knowledge was water, flowing fast as it had in the old story she read, carrying her along to a destination of it's own choosing.

There was no fighting it. The seduction of the knowledge pulled her forward after her brief struggle, as she could sense the opening up of corridor after corridor of new skills she knew were waiting for her.

As good as a narcotic to one of her kind. The one thing they all craved at least those who comprehended that much. To be given the skills that took them beyond a superficial mediocrity. This was that kind of program, she now understood.

It was tech. Deep tech. Really knowing things that mattered. Knowing people that mattered. Being a part of something truly important with the opportunity to do more than she'd ever dreamed of.

Did it really matter if it was dark? If she sensed it was going to be scary?

The whispered voice wound around her and took hold, and she felt her heartbeat settle as her body translated the understanding to a sensual level, as a trigger inside her released a jolt of pleasure into her awareness.

It felt good. The more she relaxed, and thought about the skills, the better it felt. The fear faded, and the sense of nausea with it, replaced instead with a tingling in her guts and a feeling of anticipation.

She drew in a breath and refocused her eyes on the screens, now nodding just a little as the voice started reporting what she was seeing, and her reflexes woke up, responding to the prompts as the scenario progressed.

She was sure it would turn out all right.

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Stephen waited until they were halfway through dinner, with a half a liter down before he told her. Public space, he figured, with all the rest of ops around them would keep her from at least punching him in the face. "So that's the deal."

Jess leaned back and twirled the glass in her fingertips, watching him with an expressionless face. “Let me make sure I understand.” She said. “Some idiot decided it was a good idea to try making a bio alt into a tech ops agent?” She had kept her voice down. “Really?”

“Really.” Stephan said, encouraged by the calm response. “Frankly, Jess, I told him I thought it was crazy.”

“I see.”

“It’s become really political.” Stephan said. “The rest of the ops group lodging protests like that… so it got them embarrassed. You know how dangerous that is.”

Jess studied the liquid in the glass. “Despite what you think, I didn’t kickstart that.” She said. “Everyone’s just watching me and saying that could be them.” She looked up at him. “So their answer is to come up with the equivalent of me walking in front of a laser cannon? Cause that’s what it is. Never mind not trusting it at my back – the poor stupid critter will probably shoot me in it accidentally.”

Stephen frowned. “Jess, they said they were programming it to be able to do this.”

Jess rolled her eyes.

“Look, what do you want me to tell you? Tell them?”

“That they’re liars.” Jess said. “Because they are. They’re just looking to save face. Put that thing in here, we both get offed, everyone turns around and says, well, I guess the council knew better all the time, and should go on picking they way they always have. But look! We listened to them. We tried!” Her voice dripped with raspy sarcasm. “Rest of the group’s just relieved it wasn’t them.”

Stephen exhaled, an unhappy expression on his face. He’d known Jess for most of the years of his life, had sat across a table from that tall, rangy form with it’s dark hair, and those light blue eyes many times, had fought many fights with her, and of all the agents in the group he trusted her the most.

Not because Jess was nice. She wasn’t. But she was honest and her focus was true and it killed him that it was her that Joshua had knifed because there were others who deserved it more. “It’s a political thing.” He repeated. “Not really a whole lot of choice in it, Jess.”

“What does that mean?”

They were both keeping their voices down, ostensibly just enjoying dinner together, in the uncrowded ops dining hall on level 3. There were six other people in the place, three pairs of two at the small tables and everyone else was making a show of pretending to ignore them.

“What does that mean, Stephan?” Jess repeated, slightly louder. “You know I’m not going to agree to this.”

He leaned forward. “Not sure you have a choice.”

Jess’s face went very still.

“Look.” He glanced around. “I told you this is political. Bricker has a lot on the line. He has debts to pay to the council. So it’s either we cooperate, or..”

“Or?” Jess repeated.

“Or he said there’s no place in the organization for people who didn’t.”

Jess’s expression got even more still. ‘So, let me see.” She said. “Either I agree to walk into fire, or I get booted out into the streets, since I don’t have enough years in to retire. Is that right?”

He couldn’t even look at her. “It’s political.” He muttered. “This whole thing got bigger than us.”

“Are those my choices, Stephen?”

He finally looked up. “That’s what Bricker said. Either you cooperate with the plan, or you’re out.” He said. “But Jess, listen, give it a chance, for Pete’s sake. You don’t know, maybe it’ll work.”

“It wont’ work.” Jess said, in a remote tone. “I’m not going to go out on a failure that also kills some poor beast that has no choice in the matter. Tell Bricker he can take his political ass and trash compact himself.”

“Jess, think about what you’re doing. “ Stephen urged her, keeping his voice low.

Jess put her glass down. “Screw yourself..” She said, standing abruptly. “Process my outpapers. I’ll go pack. Not that I‘ve got a lot to.” She tossed a chit down on the tray and turned, heading for the door to the hall.

Stephan was far too stunned to react until it was too late and she was gone. He stood up and started after her, aware of all the eyes on his back as he got to the door and went through it, looking quickly right and left.

The hallway beyond was empty however, only two cleaning staff were carefully vacuuming along the wall, their gray coveralls almost blending into it. Of Jess there was no sign, and he debated whether he should go to her quarters.

Go and try to talk her down? Stephen frowned. He started towards the bunkhouse but his comm unit chirped and he stopped as the soft bing and central comms voice sounded in his ear. “Commander Bock, to central ops, priority.”

He paused, then reluctantly headed down a slightly different corridor, a sinking sensation already in his stomach.

**

Jess kept her pace relaxed until she’d entered her living space, waiting until the door slid shut behind her before she let herself react, spinning her body and slamming her fist into the wall with enough force to dent it.

Then she dropped into one of the chairs and stared at the ceiling, her eyes staring at the Interforce shield above the workspace. “Mother fucking bastards.”

Her voice sounded loud in the room. There was no echo. The fabric on the walls absorbed everything, even the crack of her fist against the surface underneath.

Her stomach was in turmoil. The meal she’d just eaten was lodged somewhere up near her breastbone, and suspected it wouldn’t be long before she ejected it. ‘Damn them.” She whispered. “Spend your whole life giving it all to them and what does it mean? Jack nothing.”

Jack nothing. Jess rested her head against her hand. A hundred emplacements, countless liters of blood shed, more successful missions than any other agent and on top of it, this last damn cluster and what?

Nothing. “What have you done for me lately? Wasn’t that the old saying?” Jess felt the anger draining out of her, leaving her mostly just depressed. “Come cover our asses or get lost. Yeah well…” She glanced around. “Guess I’ll go get lost.”

Literally, she would get nothing. Her last pay transfer, any supply chits she had on record, and a ride out to the nearest shelter. They wouldn’t even give her a transfer home.

Not that home had any meaning for her, anymore. Jess half closed her eyes. She’d been submitted to the corps when she’d been old enough to walk, and entered for school and training. The cost was covered by the agency, and she was guaranteed a job for life, as long as that life lasted, given what they did.

She’d been back home maybe a half dozen times in all, strange, awkward visits with her mother and two brothers, the one hardly knowing what to say to her and the two boys resentful they didn’t get to go where she had.

No way was she going back there anyway. No way. If her father had still been alive then maybe it would have been bearable but without him? No way.

He'd been one of the lucky ones, been able to retire to inactive, go civ for a while, get married and have kids and live a kind of life out at the Bay.

But they'd gotten to him in the end. She remembered getting the call at base and the long, somber ride in a transport home surrounded by active members of the force, all in blacks, all grim and angry.

She remembered standing in the cavern and watching his outprocessing, barely exchanging a few words with her blood family as she stood with her service family to say goodbye to a brother.

Ten generations. She was the eleventh. To now find out just what that was worth – it hurt.

Maybe she'd just tear into central command and go after Bricker. They'd gun her down, and at least she wouldn't have to suffer living in a crate, and scraping seaweed from the rocks downstairs. Be a fast exit, wouldn't it?

She was glad Dad wasn't around to see it. Even more glad he hadn't been around to see Joshua's defection. Close as he'd been to his tech partners, he'd have lost his mind with it.

With a sigh, she pushed herself to her feet and went over to her workspace. She sat down in the big, comfortable chair and keyed in the pad. Would Stephan have already processed her? She waited for a lockout, but the pad logged in and gave her access with no complaints.

She keyed in her own profile and watched it form on the pad, sliding at her command to the section where her service status was and pausing. She reached over to tag herself inactive, when a soft chime indicated some incoming event.

Maybe Stephan was just a step behind her. She keyed over to the input and opened it, finding instead an info packet there.

"That makes no sense." Irritated, she was about to flip back and effectively kill herself in the system when she caught the sending entity and paused, realizing it was from the district assignments group. Reluctantly, she keyed it and watched it open, reading the first few words before she realized this had to be part of the insanity Stephan had told her about.

"Screw that." She closed the file and went back to the status, resetting the field to voluntary dismissal, and applying it before she could talk herself out of it and into a compromising honor suck. "Done."

The screen went blank immediately, and she heard a soft whir and clack from upstairs as the weapons locker sealed itself. A glance to the door showed a red light next to it as well, and she got up, feeling an irrational sense of loss hit her unexpectedly.

Even though she'd made the choice. Even though she thought it was the right choice, and that it would at the very least save the bio alt they'd picked a gory, terrifying sacrifice. Knowing she was now no longer a part of this place, of these people, of this world she'd been given to was hard to accept.

Hard to fathom. But she could hear the echo of the weapons lock in her mind and she knew if she tried to go outside she'd be met with an armed guard, denied access to anything except the lockdown if she persisted.

She could stay here, until they mustered her out. Then she'd be taken to the service exit and the door would shut behind her, and she would never enter it again.

Done. Over. She doubted any of the others would even come to say goodbye. You didn't, when someone walked out. She certainly had never, though she'd seen a half dozen agents do it, some she'd considered friends.

Quitters. She remembered feeling embarrassed about them, unable to understand why they would just walk out.

Well now she knew.

Jess walked over to the bed and lay down on it, half curling up in a ball and wrapping her arms around the pillow. She felt an odd sensation in her throat, and a tense pain around her heart, and she closed her eyes tightly, focusing on letting it all go past her.

**

Stephan entered central comms just as the big screen was fizzling to gray. He walked over to where Bricker was leaning against the main console and looked at him in question.

"Took you long enough." Bricker said, in a crisp tone.

"I was in the dining hall."

Bricker turned and put his hands on his hips. “Danao just transmitted a burst report. They got word through some scientist who just transferred up to Garden Station there’s been a breakthrough.”

“Yes?” Bock tried to focus on it, his mind distracted by recent events.

“Light amplification screen. They got photosynthesis working on a twelve by twelve meter platform.” Bricker informed him. “We need that tech. Council’s told me to get that tech.” He put hand on the planning board. “So let’s get going on it.”

“Commander.” One of the ops monitors came over and handed Bock a pad. “This just activated.”

Stephen looked at it, and cursed under his breath.

“What?” Bricker said.

“I presented your idea to Jess Drake.” He said, handing the pad over. “She elected to muster out instead of going along with it.”

Bricker took the pad and stared at it. “Are you kidding me?” He looked up at Bock. ‘What kind of idiot is this?”

“No kind of idiot, sir.” Stephen responded, quietly. “Family's been in a long time.”

Bricker handed the pad back. “We don’t have time for this crap. Agent wants out? Fine. Get someone else to be part of the project. I’m sure you can find someone.” He looked at Bock’s face. “What’s the problem? You need a visit to psych too?”

“Maybe.” Stephen said. “Maybe I just got Jess’s point.”

“What?”

“John, you reminded me how few our resources are. So now you tell me to throw one of them away?” Stephen said, slowly. “We’re not machines.”

Bricker looked exasperated. “We don’t have time for this.” He said. “Do you not get it? Do you not understand what that breakthrough means? That they’ve found a way to grow plants again, here, on the surface?”

“I get it.” Bock replied. “So now you want me to send people… People, John? Our people? Into enemy space to try and get that technology and bring it back. People who are here, who don’t trust us, who don’t trust the people that back them now.”

“Maybe we should go all bio alt.” Bricker said. “At least then they’d do what we told them to do, instead of wringing and crying and being pansy assed pieces of crap. I told you. I don’t have time for this. The Council wants a plan, by tonight, to get someone in there.”

“I’ll see if I can find anyone willing.” Bock turned and started to leave.

“If?”

Bock turned. “Unfortunately, sir, until you make good your plan to replace us with biddable robots, we still have a choice. We don’t force our people to go. We ask them.” He swiveled and left the comm. Center, heading for his office in the back section of the stronghold.

Word was already spreading. He could see ops agents loitering in the hall, watching his approach, gathered in groups. He remembered being one of them, wondering what ‘they’ were going to ask now, viewing ‘them’ as the Brickers of the world who never really cared about what the cost was, only saw results.

Well, he was a them now. Stephen grimaced uncomfortably. At least, that’s what his title said.

“Stephen.” Jason Anders cut in front of his path, with Elaine Cruz next to him. “Can we speak with you?” Both were experienced agents. Both veterans. Apparently they’d been elected spokespeople, and, he abruptly remembered, both were friends of Jess.

Bock regarded them, then sighed. “Sure.” He waved a hand towards his door. “C’mon.”

“He doesn’t get it.” Bricker said to the closed door, and then swiveled around to look at the rest of the people in the comms center.

They were all looking back at him, with closed, silent faces. He could sense the anger in the room. “I can replace all of you with them too.” He warned. ‘We have a mission here, people. That’s bigger than any of us.”

He turned back to the console and started keying in requests.

**

Dev was seated on a plastic bench, her elbows braced on her knees, sweat dripping off her as she tried to catch her breath. Her whole body was shaking with her just ended effort, and she blinked salty droplets out of her eyes that landed on the gym floor.

She had never been so tired. She flexed her hands, rough and sore from the climbing system and felt a blister forming just at the pad between her fingers and palms. She was dressed in the light singlet they used in the gym and there were bruises on her knees and arms from all the work.

“NM-Dev-1?”

Dev looked up, to find a phys proctor there. “Yes.”

“You have completed group A and group B tasks. Well done.” The proctor said. “You are complete for the day.” The woman gave her a sympathetic look.. “I know it’s been a long session.”

“Yes.” Dev responded, direly grateful for the news.

“The rest of the day is scheduled clear for you, to review previous classes. Okay?”

“Yes.” Dev said. “Thank you.”

“Your welcome.” The proctor gave her a smile, then she shut her pad down and walked away, leaving Dev alone in the preparation area.

She straightened up and ran her hands through her damp hair, knowing from the ache in her arms she would be experiencing this class for quite some time. At least she had some space to relax now, and a night meal to look forward to.

It was cycle end today. That usually meant the dining hall would give them something a little different, or two cakes, or maybe even some protein bars and she was glad of it since her body was craving replenishment from the past while.

Footsteps made her look up again, and she blinked as a familiar figure entered the gym and came over to where she was sitting. “Hello Doctor Dan.”

“Hello, Dev.” Daniel Kurok took a seat next to her. “How are you?”

“Tired, right now.” Dev answered honestly. “It was a very hard gym session.”

You could always answer Doctor Dan straight. He was the first doctor she remembered recognizing as a child, and the one who always had the time to talk, and explain things. He was a man of middling height, with straight, blond hair the same shade as hers, and a calm, appealing personality.

She had always liked him. All the sets did. Doctor Dan was one of the very few who would talk to you as if you were actually a person. Not talk at you like most of the teachers and all of the other administrators tended to.

“I can imagine.” The doctor’s gentle grayish blue eyes regarded her. “I know you’ve been very busy preparing for your new assignment. Are you excited about it?

Dev thought about that. “I am.” She said, eventually. “It’s hard, but knowing so much is good.”

Doctor Dan smiled at her. “I’m glad to hear that.” He said. “I came to find you, because something has happened, and they need you to go to your assignment sooner than we thought. I’d like to talk to you about it before you start getting ready.”

“How soon?” Dev asked. “I still have programming to get.”

“Tomorrow.” Doctor Dan put a hand on her shoulder as she stiffened. “But don’t be scared. You have what you need. The rest of the programming is just information, not skills and we’ll send it with you.” He reassured her. “Can you come with me? We can have dinner, and talk.”

It was like getting a buzz. Dev wasn't sure what to say. She'd never been invited to go to a meal with anyone except one of her crèche mates. "Yes." She finally answered. "I need to change first."

"No problem." The doctor patted her bare shoulder. "Go on, and I'll wait for you outside in the lobby. " He watched her walk off towards the changing space and sighed, glancing up as someone else walked up. "This makes me very unhappy, Randall."

"I know." Doss sat down on the bench just vacated. "I know you had plans for this one."

"It's not just that." The chief geneticist sighed. "I know you think I'm probably against the assignment, but I'm not. I think it's a damn good idea, matter of fact."

"You do?" Doss seemed astonished.

"Yes, I do."

Doss scratched his head. "So you think this might work?" He asked. "Do you really think one of our products can do this?"

Doctor Dan looked at him with an oddly wry expression. "Yes, I do." He repeated. "I just wanted to be prepared for it. Send the right set, properly trained and programmed. " He frowned. "Not something jury rigged like this is. I have suspicions about their success motives."

Doss shifted uncomfortably. "What do you mean??"

Kurok stood up. "Never mind. I could be wrong." He said. "But I'll be escorting Dev down there. I have our flight assignments already."

"Oh, but Daniel!" Doss protested. "You have so much in work here!"

"I know. It will need to wait." The geneticist replied. "I want to find out what this emergency is. My sources in Interforce have told me the situation downside is not good." He frowned. "I don't want us to end up a scapegoat."

"But they wanted us. They came and asked us, Daniel." Doss looked troubled.

"Mm. Yes, they did." Doctor Dan frowned. "And you should have brought me in when Bricker was here. I know them better than you do." He turned and headed for the entrance. "You should have known better, Randall."

"Oh." Doss got up and followed him out the door and into the quiet lobby. "But there wasn't time, really!" There were three bio alts sitting on a bench near the door, waiting for their classes to start, but otherwise it was empty. He lowered his voice anyway. "Daniel, please don't cause us trouble. I was hoping this order was the start of something big for the company. A breakthrough"

Doctor Dan looked at him. "I'm afraid you'll just have to trust me, Randall. I'll do what I think is best for all of us." He responded. "And if not I'll try to warn you in advance." His face tensed into a faint grin. "But no promises."

"What does that mean, Daniel?" Doss now looked really unhappy.

Kurok put his hands in his lab coat pockets, an anachronism they all kept over their light, pale, one piece jumpsuits. "It means you need to just let me do what I think best." He said. "Not that you have a choice, Randall."

"Yes, well, all right." Doss sighed. "Please keep me advised on the progress." He hurried off, leaving his colleague to take a seat in the lobby to wait.

Kurok did, dropping into a chair and idly studying the three men seated waiting. Ayebees, he mused, his mind running over the DNA he'd encoded in them, laying down a biological structure suited for the role they were meant to fill.

One of them noticed him, and waved. He waved back, and all three smiled a little, glad to be paid attention to by a doctor they knew held high status in the crèche. "Have a good session, lads."

"Thank you , Doctor Dan." The one who had waved spoke up. He stood then, and led the other two into the gym as the door opened and chimed green, leaving him alone in the hall.

Dan sighed. Then he caught motion in his peripheral vision and turned his head to see Dev emerging from the gym, fastening her badge to her coverall pocket. He smiled in reaction, proud of his meticulous work that was so evident in Dev's attractive features and well made body.

He supervised many sets. But Dev had been one of his personal efforts. "That was fast." He stood up. "Let's go get something to eat. I bet you're hungry."

Dev smiled, a little bashfully. "They worked me hard in the gym today." She admitted. "And it's cycle end. I think we were going to get some extra tonight."

"Well, don't worry about it." Doctor Dan led the way through the halls. "We're going to the little place we working scientists eat, so you will get fed, absolutely, as much as you want." He triggered the door to the grav lift and stepped in, waiting for Dev to join him before he pointed up with his thumb, and they both kicked off.

The tubes were pretty empty, and they drifted upward through the clear glass, as the stations rotation brought then to aphelion, and they were faced with a vast star field overhead.

Dev enjoyed the sight immensely. She didn't usually get the opportunity, since most of the crèche areas she was accustomed to were down lift. "They're so pretty."

Dan had been looking up also. "They are, aren't they?" He said. "Savor them, Dev. You won't get to see them downside."

"That's what they said." Dev agreed, as they reached the top and she followed the doctor through the hatch. They were now in one of the upper residential areas, and she turned her head from side to side looking at the plush carpet, and woven tile walls. "Only clouds."

"Only clouds." Dan led the way to an entrance, where a bio alt was standing, manning a small desk. "Hello, Ceebee 245."

The bio alt, dressed in a black jumper with silver piping, looked up. "Oh! Hello Doctor Dan." He glanced at Dev, but didn't address her. "Would you like a table?"

"Yes." Dan said. "For two, please. My friend Dev here is joining me."

Ceebee 245 looked briefly at Dev, then he half bowed, and indicated the door behind him. "Of course Doctor. Please come this way."

Dev felt very out of place. She followed Doctor Dan inside, and found herself in a bubble that held several dozen tables, about a dozen of which were occupied. She knew the people in the room were all looking at her, and she had some idea that her kind weren't allowed.

Doctor Dan, though, seemed oblivious to this. He pulled out a chair for her at the table they were led to, and sat down himself. "Ceebee, please bring us two fruit punches to start with."

Ceebee 245 nodded in acknowledgement, and disappeared, heading towards the service area.

Doctor Dan leaned on his forearms. "Dev, I know this seems very strange to you. But I'm doing it for a reason. "

Dev looked around. "I've never been here before." She agreed. "It's very pretty."

The doctor smiled. "Yes, it is." He said. "You know, the assignment we're sending you on, I think sometimes you might end up in places like this, with your natural born partner." He added. "And you might even be wearing clothing that will make people think you're not a biological alternative."

Dev remained silent, listening to him intently. That was all extremely interesting information and she filed it away for study later.

"So I wanted you to just see what this was like, before you went downside." Doctor Dan looked at the pad on the table. "But I think I'll order for both of us, if that's okay with you."

"Okay." Dev agreed. "I don't really know what any of this is." She indicated the ordering pad.

"I know." Doctor Dan said. "And for a while, you probably won't downside either, but your partner will help you with that."

Dev smiled and nodded.

He keyed in an order, then turned his attention back to her. “They’ve given you a lot of programming this week, haven’t they?”

“Yes.” Dev was relieved to be talking about something more familiar to her. “I had two sessions. The first one was very long. It was all tech, really hard.” She said. “Then I had lab.”

“I saw your lab results. You did very well.” The doctor said “The programmers were really pleased with how you took the program, too.”

Dev grinned in response. “Thank you.”

Doctor Dan smiled. “I’ve seen the programming. What did they actually tell you about this assignment, Dev? What did they say you were going to do?”

Dev was a little confused. Wouldn’t Doctor Dan know that? “Well.” She said. “Doctor Doss explained there was some problem that they wanted me to try and help with. He took me to meet a man called Bricker, who said I would be working with them to try and solve the problem.” She paused. “They didn’t say exactly what I would do, but the programming was a lot of tech, so I guessed I would be working with that, and with something to do with security.”

Long speech. Doctor Dan regarded the young, serious face across from him. “Does that worry you?”

Dev considered the question. “I don’t know.” She answered, finally. “Should it?”

Ah. Doctor Dan waited as two plates were delivered to them, and the server silently left. He watched his dinner companion study the contents, then pick up the implements on one side and put them neatly to use.

That, at least, they’d given her. “They must have told you what Interforce does, didn’t they?” He sliced up his protein and took a sip of the fruit juice.

Dev shook her head, chewing thoughtfully and swallowing. “I know what we got from the downside class. That's all.”

Figures. “Well, Dev, you’re right that you’ll be doing something with security.” Doctor Dan said. “Interforce sends people to do things that make the lives of people who are on our side better, and prevent people who aren’t on our side from hurting us.”

Dev thought about that. “That doesn’t sound so bad.” She hesitantly offered.

“Well, it doesn’t, if you just look at the surface of those words.” Doctor Dan said. “What that really means, Dev, is that you will be doing some dangerous things, and it’s possible you could get hurt doing them. You could see other people hurt. “

“Oh.” Somehow, though, Dev had known that. Something in the programming had told her, she reasoned, since she felt no prickle of surprise at the words, nor dread hearing them. “I”ll do my best to be safe.” She said.

Doctor Dan smiled again. “I know you will.” He said. “When I put you together, Dev, I tried to give you the ability to adapt, and to handle difficult things. This assignment is going to be difficult, but I think you can do it.”

Dev produced another tentative smile at the compliment. “Thank you.”

“What I am going to warn you about though, is about how people downside will feel about you, about what you are.” Doctor Dan’s voice gentled. “There are other bio alts in Interforce. But none of them will be doing what you will. Some people might not like it.”

Dev nodded. “Like here, when they don’t like it when someone else gets higher skills.” She said. “They want it too. Or they think they should get it.”

Impressed, Doctor Dan regarded this product of his making. The insight was more than he expected, and showed a self awareness he hadn’t quite anticipated. “Yes, that’s it exactly.” He said. “Have you had trouble like that much here?” He asked, curiously.

Dev shrugged. “A little.” She admitted. “I think its also mostly because I’m .. “ She hesitated. “There’s no one else in my set.” She explained. “So everyone else has someone else who is just like them, and it makes them stick out less.”

“Well, that's true.” Kurok confessed. “You're a developmental unit. The other sets know that.”

“They do.” Dev said. “But it doesn't stop them from wanting the programming too, even if they're not sure what it is.”

Doctor Dan put his fork down and touched her hand. “You should have come and talked to me about that, Dev. I could have explained it better for you.”

The pale green eyes took on the faintest hint of a twinkle. “It was hard, sometimes.” She admitted. “But… being the only one in my set made me think maybe I would get to do something special.” She said. “And I guess I will.”

Doctor Dan rested his chin on his fist, his face creasing into a grin.

‘So even if it turns out to be scary, and maybe really hard and not a lot of fun.” Dev continued. “I’ll still have gotten to do it. “

Part of that, Doctor Dan knew, he’d programmed into her. He’d selected the genes carefully, moving towards a half imagined , not quite all the way designed different step – maybe forwards, maybe sideways.

A developmental unit. That was what the Dev stood for, but the NM designation also meant new model. His new model. He’d rolled the genetic dice and only now was he getting to see what numbers those dice were returning to him, almost impossible to know before the set reached maturity and a full realization of all the synaptic growth.

Now a thousand questions were popppping up in his head and he felt a sense of regret that his investigation of his project was about to be cut off.

Dev now put her fork down and looked earnestly at him. “Doctor Dan, can I ask you for something?”

“Absolutely.” He responded, still a bit bemused.

Dev’s eyes went to her plate, then lifted up to him. “If it’s too hard.” She paused. “And it doesn’t work out, could you make it so I don’t have to forget all this?”

Pinned by that soulful look, Doctor Dan bit the inside of his lip and had to pause to let the tension in his throat relax before he answered. “I promise you, Dev. I’ll only let that happen if you ask me to do it.”

Dev smiled in relief and returned her attention to her plate. “Thank you.” She said. “And thank you for letting me come here. This is really good.” She indicated the plates rapidly depleting content. “Or maybe I was just really hungry.”

Doctor Dan patted her shoulder. “It is good.” He said. “And it was my pleasure, Dev. I’m glad we got a chance to talk.” He put his mind to his plate as well, his thoughts already racing far ahead. “I really am.” He glanced back at her. “Would you like another portion?”

Dev's brows hiked up a little, and she swallowed hastily. “Yes I would. Is that correct?”

Doctor Dan chuckled. “Sure.” He signalled at the Ceebee. “No problem at all.”

**

Dev was aware of how quiet it was in the crèche when she returned. A proctor caught sight of her and approached, with a pad strapped to their arm. “Hello, proctor.” She greeted the woman.

“NM-Dev-1?”

“Yes.”

“You are late back.”

Dev regarded the proctor thoughtfully. “Doctor Dan required my presence.” She said. “He just sent me back here.”

“Doctor Kurok?” The proctor said. “He didn’t log his request with us.”

Dev didn’t respond to that, having no control over what Doctor Dan did and knowing the proctor knew that.

The proctor tapped on the pad. “We have been told you are being transferred out tomorrow on the first transport, hour ten.”

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “They told me.”

“You may take one size small pack bag with you.” The proctor said. “Everything else you need will be provided by your assigned contractor. You have no schedule tomorrow, after breakfast report to the transfer station no later than hour nine. Understood?”

“Yes.” Dev hoped the proctor was done. She was tired, and after the evening of being treated to the attention of Doctor Dan, the impersonal and rote instruction felt a little grating.

Just a little.

The proctor nodded. “Very well. The pods are already programmed for this sequence. Since you’re late, you will need to overnight in transit quarters.” She consulted the pad. “B32, section 2 in the outer ring has been cleared for you.”

“Thank you.” Dev said. “Good night.”

The proctor glanced up at her in some surprise. The she pointed to the outer ring and left, taking her pad with her.

Dev exhaled. Then she headed towards the corridor, glancing back to see the night pods making their slow, gentle transit and realizing she wouldn’t be feeling that comforting motion again, at least for a while.

Change was happening. The unknown was pouring down on her far faster than she’d expected. By tomorrow, she realized, she’d be in her assignment and tonight she stood on the cusp of having her life move to a completely different mold.

Good? Bad?

Or just different?

**

Dev felt the rumble as the transport inserted into the atmosphere and wished they had a view outside. She hitched her body forward a little in it’s strapping and looked around, seeing most everyone else sitting with their eyes closed, and their bodies pressed back into their seats.

Her heart was racing. She wasn’t entirely sure why, since the process they were performing seemed ordinary to the people there. But the stresses around her were changing, and she was starting to feel gravity again, tugs that settled her feet on the ground and as the rumble deepened she imagined the fire outside as the shuttles shields shed the increasing atmosphere to either side.

It was quiet otherwise in the cabin. There hadn’t been much talk during the undock and orbit, the rest of the passengers being used to the travel, apparently.

Dev flexed her hands a little as the rumble eased and then they were back in full grav, only it was planet grav, not artificial, and the feeling was curiously different. She couldn’t really quantify what the difference was, but shifted in her seat a little, moving around to get used to it.

Doctor Dan opened his eyes and looked over at her. “Feel strange?”

“A little.” Dev admitted.

“It’s more consistent.” Doctor Dan said. “On station, the gravity is generated by machine and it’s not always exactly the same. You get used to that.” He indicated the inside of the cabin. “Downside, it never changes.”

“Oh.” Dev considered that. “Is that good or bad?”

“Neither.” Doctor Dan said. “Just different.”

A soft chime sounded. “Atmosphere insertion complete. Please remain in your seats.”

Dev settled back in her seat to experience the rest of the trip. She had come to the transport station early and had gotten to see the shuttle dock, watching in fascination as it drifted in, maneuvering jets firing gently as it matched station rotation and locked on.

It had come from a ring of other stations down-orbit from them, and they had been the last stop before it left space and returned planet side to deliver it's cargo and passengers. From the crèche, some bio alts had joined them, Beeaye machine techs and two Kaytee pilots, including the ones she'd met in the dining hall.

No one had spoken though they'd watched Doctor Dan escort her and Dev could almost feel them wishing they had his attention too as a physical thing.

Doctor Dan had ignored them though, using the time in the vessel to take a nap.

Now they were heading to their destination and she was starting to get nervous about it. Until they landed, she could just experience everything in sort of a neutral way, as a new thing, but once they got to where they were going it would start to get a lot more real, and the hard part would begin.

She was really glad Doctor Dan was going too. He seemed very relaxed. "Do you go on these very much?" She asked him.

"Oh, I've done my share." Doctor Dan said. "When I was younger, I did a lot of different things." He added. "But I haven't in a while. I don't think it's changed much though. There are only so many ways you can enter a planetary atmosphere, you know."

Dev's ears popped, and she reached up to rub them.

"Almost there." Doctor Dan remarked. "Interforce's Base Ten is on the east coast of what was originally referred to as the North American continent."

Dev nodded. "I remember that from basics class." She said. "Now it's just Atlantia." She added. "It's much smaller now too."

"Under water." Doctor Dan said. "Only the highlands survived." He tightened his straps a little. "Okay, Dev, we're gong to land now so sit back."

Dev did, and took a breath as she felt the stresses change, and the rumble suddenly got a lot louder. The craft altered it's trajectory, and she felt it tipping upward, the vibration of the engines making the cabin shake and jostling it's passengers in their seats.

"Retros." Doctor Dan commented, over the noise. "That's normal."

Then the rumbling died down and she felt a thump under them, and they were still.

"Please remain seated." The PA voice came over. "Vessel is being secured. Do not attempt to stand."

Dev could hear bangs and thumps outside, and then after what seemed a very long time, she heard the clash of locks being released, and a sudden change of pressure that seemed to thrum against her ears.

The inside hatch opened, and one of the flight attendants appeared. "We have arrived. Please prepare to debark." The man said, pressing a button on the wall. The straps around them all slacked, and they were free to stand up.

Dev did, as the others did, and she paused to stretch her body out after the ride. Moving felt a little strange, and she glanced at Doctor Dan as he likewise manipulated his body. She took a breath, and found a strange scent hitting her nose, rough and chemical smelling.

"Ah, the smell of rocket fuel." Doctor Dan muttered. "How I haven't missed that." He indicated the row. "Go on, Dev. Let's get outside."

Dev moved slowly along the seats, watching the rest of the passengers get in line in front of her. She found herself at the tail end, and used the wait to get used to how different the gravity felt. It wasn't bad feeling, just strange, and she flexed her hands as they reached the exit of the craft and she found herself at the top of an outside ramp.

Outside. Dev felt a prickle of shock as a gust of air blew against her, and she could taste and smell all kinds of things on it, from machine oil to salt. It felt wet to her, and she licked her lips a little as she started down the ramp after the others.

They were in a kind of bay, she realized. Ahead of her was a tall uneven rock wall she remembered from programing and a sealed opening dug into the bottom of it, with some lockers and benches outside and a loading platform full of sealed containers.

Seated on the benches were two people dressed in charcoal jumpsuits and as Dev looked at them, the closer of the two looked up and met her eyes.

It was a woman, with dark hair and a planed, angular face that looked tired, and defeated and sad and Dev's heart gave a thump as she felt a surge of empathy for her without having the least idea why.

Then her foot caught on the ramp and she missed her step, and Doctor Dan was catching her, and when she looked back over, the woman had looked away, and it was over.

They were down the ramp and past the benches, and the big door was sliding open to reveal a group of men with weapons, dressed in steel gray armored suits and she had to set aside the strange encounter and focus on this new thing instead.

Everything was strange. The smell of the air was almost overwhelming, and she was almost glad when the door behind them slid shut and the movement of it was blocked out. She stood back as three men came forward and took charge of the other bio alts, pointing them towards an orange painted corridor.

They passed through a gateway on the way, and she could see the pale blue light as it coursed over each one of them, the gateway softly chiming and data flickering on the console as they passed.

The armed men ignored all of them. Dev wondered what they were there for, then she was being guided forward by Doctor Dan and it was her turn to go through the gate. "What is this?" She asked him softly.

"It records who you are." Doctor Dan said. "Don't worry. They're expecting you. We sent them your scan ahead of time."

Reassured, Dev entered the gateway, and felt a sharp tickle against her skin as the beam passed over her. It felt a little bit like being connected to a programming cradle, and it wasn't entirely comfortable. She stepped out of it at the chime, and waited for Doctor Dan to join her.

A man in a green jumpsuit approached. "You the new experiment?" He asked Dev.

Doctor Dan quickly came up next to her. "This is NM-Dev-1." He said. "I believe she's expected." He gazed steadily at the men. "Although I probably am not."

The man in green studied something on the pad strapped to his arm, then he looked up sharply at Doctor Dan. "The director asked me to bring her to the ready center." He said. "He didn't say anything about you."

"Well, let's just go ask him, shall we?" Doctor Dan put a hand on Dev's back. "I have the transfer authority for my friend Dev here, so I'm sure the director will be happy to talk to me about it."

Dev felt very unsettled. She could sense the hostility all around, and the man was looking at Doctor Dan in a very wrong way.

The man in green entered something on the pad. "One minute." He said. "Detail, stand down." He ordered, directing his voice towards the men with the weapons. "The exit event went without issue." He said. "Return to barracks."

The soldiers safed their weapons and shouldered them, then started back towards the inside of the building, heading down a blue colored corridor without any comment. That left the man in green alone in the entryway with Dev and Doctor Dan.

"The genetiscan won't positive ident you." The man said to Doctor Dan. "It just passes your scan and given name as secure."

"Mmhm." Doctor Dan agreed. "That'd be about right."

"Please wait here." The man in green went over to a console on the wall, and started typing into it.

Doctor Dan chuckled a little. "Some things never change." He sighed. "Well, Dev, this is your new home. What do you think about it?"

Dev looked at him in apprehension. “Everyone seems angry here. Or upset.” She said. “Doctor Dan, who were those people outside?”

“Which people?”

“The ones on the bench.” She said. “The ones in dark suits.”

“Ah.” Doctor Dan cast his memory back a short while, running through their arrival in mental pictorial shorthand. He called up a shot of the wall, and the bench, and two figures…. Ah. “Those were enforcement agents, Dev. “

“Oh.”

He half shut his eyes and focused on one of the two faces, and then his body stiffened a little as he put the presence, and the security troop together.

“Please come with me.” The man in green had returned, and was gesturing towards the furthest corridor, sealed tightly with a metal door. “The director asked me to bring you both to the ops center.”

Doctor Dan looked at the door, then shook his head and motioned Dev to follow as they left the entrance and headed further into the complex. “Something's not right here. Just hope we find out what it is before it's too late.”

**

It was Stephen who came to escort her.

Jess was sitting in the chair near the door to her quarters, her neatly packed duffel at her feet. The room was bare and clean, the workspace cleared, everything tucked into place ready for whoever was going to live in it next.

She’d come with terms with two things. First – regret for making a snap decision and acting on it before thinking it all the way through. Second, that she was sticking to the decision anyway, even though she knew it was mostly due to ego alone and not the best choice for her at this stage in her life.

She was stubborn and proud, and she knew it. She knew everyone else knew that also, and given the choice of breaking down and asking for a reneg, or sticking to her pride and doing something stupid, she’d pick doing something stupid every time.

Family trait. Jess was studying the scars on the back of her right hand when the door unlocked and slid open, and Stephen walked inside and faced her. “Ready?”

“Yep.” Jess stood up and shouldered the duffel. The sudden reality of the moment made her breath catch, but she waited for Stephan to turn and lead the way out, gazing quietly at the floor.

“Jess.”

She looked up at him, a little surprised at the expression on his face and the distinct shadows under his eyes. “Yeah?”

Stephan took a breath, and then released it. “Everyone wanted to come with me. Wanted to… come see you the past couple days. Bricker blocked it off. Didn’t want them getting any ideas, he said.”

“Fuck him.” Jess said, in a mild tone. “I hope he walks off the edge of that cliff out there and ends up fish food.”

Stephan nodded. “I just didn’t want you to think no one gave a damn.” He said. ‘They did. I do.”

Jess wasn’t sure if it made it worse or better to hear that. “Let’s go.” She said. “I”d like to have time to find a place to crash before dark.” She appreciated what he had said, but in her heart, she knew if anyone had truly wanted to come and say good bye…

They would have. No one wanted to rock the boat though. Jess had no illusions about the relationship with the rest of the ops battalion she was leaving. They were colleagues, they occasionally crossed paths during emplacements, they’d step in front of a laser cannon for each

other in the field but there was no one here, save perhaps Stephen, she could have characterized as a true friend.

She'd thought Joshua was a friend. He sure acted like one. She followed Stephan's silent form down the empty hall, memories chasing her footsteps. She remembered the easy companionship, the casual dinners, and games of cards in their quarters in the infrequent intervals they'd been in them.

She still wanted to throw up every time she thought about him. With a sigh, she shifted the strap of her duffel on her shoulder as they crossed the central corridor and turned into the series of blast shields that led to the transport entrance.

Doors slid shut after them as they went, each one putting her more on the outside until they got to the last one, and she could smell a transport off gassing nearby. Just before the door was a lock clearance, and first Stephan, and then Jess stepped into it, enduring the electric blue tickle of the genetiscan that was the final determination of identity.

Jess heard the soft chimes and burbles. "Ident complete. " The calm voice of the system announced. "Final exit confirmed. Do not attempt reentry."

Stephen keyed open the external entrance, and the smell of the transport got a lot stronger. He led the way outside onto the landing pad and waited for Jess to join him.

The door slid shut behind her, and Jess felt a sudden sense of deep loss that made her jaw clench. Even the sight of the transport, usually an interest of hers, didn't dull it. She moved to one side and sat down on the bench to wait, as the big jet's hatch was still sealed shut and the techs were still bringing out umbilicals and cooling to it.

Stephen sat down next to her, resting his elbows on his knees, watching the gasses from the jet lifts evaporate. "I'm sorry." He said, after a long moment.

"For what?" Jess leaned back and rested her head against the rock wall. "None of this was your fault, Stephan."

"I know." He agreed. "I'm just sorry. I don't' want you to leave. I'll miss you."

Jess was so surprised she nearly fell off the bench. She turned her head and looked at Stephen, but he was staring ahead, his shoulders hunched. "Well." She said. "I'll miss you too." She waited for him to look at her, and their eyes met. "I'll miss this place. I'll miss the force. It's really the only home I've had."

"Stupid mother fuckers." Stephen said, clipping the words, and clamping his jaw shut. "If Elias was still here…"

"Well, she's not." Jess sighed. "But she would have kicked Bricker's ass, that's true, and put a shut on his damn crazy ideas."

The transport door opened, and moved down to form a ramp, and after a brief pause, several people came out. Most were in Interforce uniform, and didn't really give them a glance on passing. The last two were a man and a women, both blond and in civ space gear, both looking a bit unsteady under downside grav.

The woman had a bio alt collar, and as she cleared the ramp she looked over and her eyes met Jess's.

It was an almost physical impact. Jess felt her nape hairs lift a little, bringing a chill to the back of her neck as her heart did a funny little thump in her chest. She watched the blond woman almost trip on the edge of the ramp, and then she looked away as the man next to her put a hand on her shoulder and urged her towards the entrance.

Jess saw the door close behind them and she jerked her attention back to the transport. Was that Bricker's damn crazy project? "Bricker keeping that bio alt idea going?" She asked, clearing her throat a little as she heard the rasp in her voice.

Stephen had been obvious to the drama, apparently. "Yeah." He stood up. "Told them he wanted to start early, matter of fact." He looked at Jess. "Lets get you settled on board."

It must have been the bio alt. Jess stood up, resisting the urge to look behind her, at the closed door. She'd never seen that set before, and she'd come in with what looked like a proctor.

Huh. She followed Stephen up the ramp, then exhaled, and dismissed the unlikely newcomer, since she was heading in the wrong direction to care. "That's too bad." She said. "I was hoping they'd at least kill that idea, and save that poor bastard pain and trouble."

"Yeah, well, we don't have any unpaired agents so I don't know why he wanted them now." Stephen stopped abruptly, almost making Jess crash into him. "Oh." He took a step back. "Sir."

Jess looked up quickly, and edged to one side. Standing at the top of the ramp was an older man, with silver white hair and a long, saturnine face. He had a hooked nose, and bushy eyebrows, and she felt her own eyes open wide as her brain identified him.

The Old Man. That's what every one she'd ever known called him, but never to his face, and she was careful to school her tongue not to utter that description rather than his name. Alexander Bain, the man who ran Interforce, though she had no idea what his actual title was, or whether he really did own the vast organization or just operated it for some moneyed consortium.

"Commander Bock." The man rumbled. "I don't believe we've met."

"No sir." Stephen inclined his head a little. "It's a great honor."

"Hm." The man mused. "And this is Agent Drake, I assume?"

"No." Jess replied quietly. "Not anymore, sir."

"Hm." The old man studied her, making a little beak with his lips, and knitting his brows. "I see. Well, perhaps you could join me inside for a moment, so we can have a chat. I would hate to lose this opportunity to exchange a few words with someone who has tendered my organization such excellent service."

Jess felt very off balance, and not only because she was standing on a ramp. "Yes, sure." She managed to mutter.

"I didn't know you were arriving sir." Stephan said, meekly. "We would have made arrangements."

"You didn't know I was arriving because I took some pains to make sure you didn't know I was arriving." Bain informed him. "What's the fun of being the Old Man if I can't show up unannounced and scare the living daylights out of everyone?"

"Sir." Stephen responded.

"Please go take a seat there, Commander." Bain pointed at the bench. "Do not contact anyone, do not move until we come back. Understood?"

"Sir."

Bain turned and went back into the transport, clearly expecting Jess to follow him. She did, shifting her duffel a little to allow it to clear the door frame as she went inside, moving off the metal ramp onto the solid steel of the airframe.

They went down the port passageway, past the general seating section with it's rows of cramped bucket seats and belt ins. The lights were dim, and there were three bio alts there vacuuming the interior with the intent, single minded purpose of their kind.

Bain led the way through a second passageway, and then down into the aft of the transport, opening a door and passing through into a smaller, more comfortable section.

He took a seat on one of the large, plush chairs and indicated the other with a wave of his hand. "Please sit down."

Jess unloaded her duffel and put it neatly against the wall. Then she sat down in the chair and put her hands on the arms, facing him and waiting.

He could be there for many reasons. She was not quite vain enough to think she was one of them. Jess knew she could be forgiven if she immediately started explaining her part and viewpoint in the whole situation but she was savvy enough to know sometimes it was just better to shut your mouth and wait.

So she did.

Bain studied her. “You have a reputation for many things. “ He said. “For stubbornness and arrogance, for courage and perseverance, for strategic brilliance and occasional criminal insubordination.”

Jess pondered that. “That’s pretty accurate.” She said. “I trust my own judgment, and have learned painfully not to trust pretty much anyone else's.”

“Hm.” The Old Man burred. “You know, I learned much the same lessons myself.” He said. “However, I never quit over any of it.”

Jess waited, not really offended by the accusation as it was, in essence, true.

The silence lengthened. Eventually, the Old Man smiled a trifle. “It occurs to me that perhaps what I was told regarding this entire event was not entirely accurate.” He said. “Would you like to enlighten me further?”

Perfect opening. The tantalizingly offered leverage made her tongue itch. Jess watched the Old Man’s body language, and evaluated him as she’d had to so many others over the years. “The official report is the official report. Sir.” She said. “I’m sure the director had reason for the report he tendered to you.”

Bain steepled his fingers and regarded her. “Come now.” He said. “I’m sure you have a side to this event to tell. There’s always more than one.”

‘That’s true, sir.” Jess said. “But my view is my view, not the corps view. That’s what is relevant to you.”

Now Bain smiled more easily. “Ah.” He leaned back. “Eleven generations, hasn’t it been? Given at six, taught and trained by the corps, loyalty bred in the gut for years. Even if the corps just turned its back on you regardless of your service at the whim of a single minded chimp with a view so narrow it’s a wonder he does not trip over his own jackassery.”

Jess remained silent for a few moments, as she watched him watch her. Then she exhaled a little, deciding on honesty. “Only home I’ve ever known.’ She admitted. “But I’d be damned if I was going to walk the corps into an embarrassing disaster just to serve the purpose of being the scapegoat for the Council.”

“Hm.” Bain mused. “Is that what you think this is?”

“Don’t you?” Jess responded bluntly. “Or why are you here?”

“Why am I here.” The Old Man tapped his fingertips together. “Now, that’s a very good question, isn’t it. “ He said. “Before I get into that, let me express to you how personally grateful I am that you concluded the ambush you got into the way that you did. I think you must know that the results of that incident turned out badly for the group who planned it on the other side.”

Jess wasn’t sure how to feel about that. “We lost good people.”

“We did.” Bain agreed. “But they lost more good people, and it seriously pains me to think our final consequence of that situation will be losing you.”

That could only be a compliment. For no apparent reason, Jess suddenly recalled a pair of pale green eyes looking into hers and she let herself have a moment of possibly wondering if there was a way back. “Thank you, sir.” She answered. “It hurts me to separate myself.” She paused. “I had hoped by taking myself out of the situation, it might stop the Directors plans. But it seems not to be so.”

“No.” Bain shook his head. “But consider this.” He said. “It might well be the idea of replacing a tech with a bio alt is a pitch to deflect the investigation of the Council.”

Jess nodded.

“However, it’s equally possible that this idea, as unlikely as it seems to you, might succeed.” Bain said. “And in which case, almost certainly we will achieve a sea change that might alter the way the corps operates in a good way.”

“All due respect sir, I don’t really think so.” Jess said. “It takes years to train a tech. They’ve had only a couple of days to prepare and even with the knowledge, the instincts aren’t there.”

“Hm.” The Old Man leaned forward. “Jess Drake.” He said. “Do you truly wish to leave?”

There was a long silence.

“Do you truly wish to become a harvester? Live in a stone box? Sleep on the floor? Scrape moss and seaweed for two meals a day?”

“No.” Jess finally admitted. “But I don’t want to lose my honor either.”

“Ah.” Bain said. “That I do understand, as I too put a great stake on my honor.” He looked intently at her. “Let me ask you this. Would you put your honor to one side just long enough to accompany me back inside that rock pile? There is something I believe I would like to show you. This might or.. might not allow you to bend your principals enough to consider remaining.”

It was so tempting to immediately agree. Jess knew she wanted to – the surge of emotion at the offer was undeniable. Catching Bain's eyes on her, she realized abruptly that he knew that, he was reading her just as clearly as she often read others, and so – she just smiled. “I can do that.” She agreed. “Gladly.’ She added.

Bain smiled. “I imagined you might say that.” He stood up. “Let’s go then. Before your Commander Bock cannot sit on his instincts any longer and rushes inside to ruin my surprise.” He waited for Jess to get her duffel, then led the way back out.

He paused, just before they were about to exit, and turned. “Drake.” He said in a completely different, lower, and more serious tone. “I do understand what you experienced. I understand why you have lost trust.”

Jess studied him. “I’ll carry the memory of his laughter as he cut me to my grave.” She said. “That takes a lot of getting over. I’m not sure I can.”

Bain nodded. “Consider helping me resolve this crisis, as you did the last one, and I will put you in a position that will not require that of you.” He watched her eyes intently. “Think on it.” He turned and descended the ramp, now in pristine condition from it’s cleaning.

Jess took a deep breath and released it. She followed him down the ramp and across the landing pad, seeing a group of bio alts, and several security troops waiting there to board. Stephan saw them and stood up, approaching quickly.

“Bock.” The Old Man waved him forward. “Glad you didn’t go with your base instincts. Join us.”

Stephen just nodded and fell in next to Jess. He raised his eyebrows at her, and she raised her shoulders at him, and they walked on in silence.

The troops braced to attention at Bock's signal. The bio alts just looked confused.

Jess kept her head down as she caught up to the Old Man at the stronghold entrance, watching him key open the door and step inside. “Sir.”

“Hm?” Bain turned and looked at her.

“They’ll need to reset my creds.” She pointed at the scanner. “I’m not much in the mood to be crisped to death right now.”

“Ah. “ Bain turned and pointed at one of the guards. “Deactivate that.” He indicated the scanner, squatting mutely over the entrance.

“Sir, we can’t.” The guard looked distressed.

“You can.” Bain said. “Or did you mean to tell me you don’t know how?”

The guard went to the console. “No, sir, I do know, but…”

“Come along, lad.” Bain said. “Just tell them I said to do it. I am the last court of appeals. The final judge., as it were.” He glanced at Stephen, and smiled. “Has a nice ring, doesn’t it?”

“Sir.” Stephen murmured.

The guard still looked uncertain.

“Or, I could just order Mister Bock here to kill you and do it himself.” Bain went on. “Since I am the top sec, as it were, hmm? My name, since you seem unsure, is Alex Bain.”

“Sir!” The guard's eyes got as big as clams. “Yes sir!” He rushed forward to deactivate the sytems.

Jess stood quietly waiting, not exactly sure what emotion it was that was stirring up her guts. As the faint hum ceased, and the light went out over the scanner, she had to force herself to cross under it, wondering if she really hadn’t just gone from bad to infinitely worse.

“Well done.” Bain started forward with her. “Now don’t you worry, Drake. We’ll get this all sorted out Tally ho.”

**

It was a long walk. They followed the guard mostly in silence. Doctor Dan’s brow was now creased with worry, and Dev was too busy looking at everything to talk.

It was very, very strange. Dev tilted her head back and looked up at the high ceiling, it’s irregular surface seeming odd and out of place. She followed the two men through the now open steel door, and down a corridor that seemed very long, and very bisected by many other steel doors blocking their way until they were keyed through.

Security? Dev felt the sensation of the space they were in closing in on her, aware suddenly of how much solid material was around them as they moved further inside the facility. There were no other people around until they entered the last door in the corridor, which opened up into a huge central space, with yet more corridors leading off in all directions.

Here, there were people. Lots of them. Dev felt their eyes on her as they passed, and she moved closer to Doctor Dan in reflex at the borderline hostility directed at her.

The man in green led them to a door set in stone with a rotating red light over it. He scanned through, and then held the door open for them to enter.

“Thank you.” Doctor Dan gave him a brief smile, and then he guided Dev inside a round cavern of a room, with consoles around every available edge, and lined up in the center around a big lit screen and table where four people were standing.

One, she recognized immediately as the director who’d visited them. Bricker, his name was. The other three were unknown to her, not even a memory flash indicating they’d been programmed. She followed Doctor Dan down three steps, then across a ramp up to the central table.

Bricker was juggling a light pen. “I thought they were sending her alone.” He said. “I don’t need anything that needs an escort.”

Doctor Dan stepped up onto the platform and took a seat on one of the stools, folding his arms across his chest in a typical pose. “I don’t need to turn over one of my projects to ignorant gits.” He said. “You cut short the programming cycle. I want to know why.”

His voice was casual, and unafraid, and Dev felt a certain awe of him. Even though she knew he was important, at least to her kind, she knew from her programming they were in a dangerous space.

The other people in the room were staring at Doctor Dan. Bricker had stopped juggling his pen and was also staring as though unable to believe what he was hearing.

“You have any idea where you are,. Buddy?” Bricker finally said.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan replied. “Station 10, Central Design level 4, comm space Alpha, control central, data store prime.” He said. “Now please answer my question. If you can’t, then I will be more than glad to take my friend Dev here, and go back where we came from.”

Dev merely stood very still, having no reference at all as to what to do.

“As the chief geneticist of LifeForce on Bio station 2, whom you've asked to provide you with this resource, I need to know why you have truncated an already insufficient release cycle.” Doctor Dan restated his question. “I have no intention of providing you with either a scapegoat or an excuse for failure.”

Bricker started juggling his pen again. “So that’s who you are.” He said. “Figures why we didn’t have an ident on you. Made sure no one could look at your insides too close. Huh?”

Doctor Dan didn’t answer, here merely sat there, head cocked a little to one side, waiting.

Bricker turned to the display table. “Well, you're gonna have to wait, buddy, since I’ve got an activity in work. If it completes, maybe you can just take this jelly bag with you and go back to that crystal palace you got up there after all.”

The door opened behind them, and Bricker glanced over his shoulder as three people entered. “What ..” He straightened and started to reach for a pad, then stopped. “Sir.”

Alexander Bain strolled up the ramp. “Bricker.” He glanced at the rest of them. “I found these two outside. Seems a terrible place to leave agents, seeing as you’ve lost so many lately.”

Dev backed up a little as the two other people emerged from the shadows, revealing the two from the outside bench. Now they looked wary and uncomfortable, and she held her breath as they both looked around and she found herself once again meeting the woman’s gaze.

Doctor Dan had gotten up off his stool and taken a step back, putting himself between Dev and the table and the tension in the room ratcheted up to a higher level. “Well now. This is getting interesting.”

Bain’s eyes swept over and pinned him, one grizzled gray brow lifting sharply. “You!”

“You asked for a bio alt.” Doctor Dan’s lips twitched. “I come with the territory, Alex.”

“Ah huh.” Bain mused, then shook his head. “Bricker, what’s going on here?”

Bricker recovered. “Sir, that person requested dismissal, we followed procedure and processed the request. “ He pointed at Jess. “She was supposed to leave on the shuttle.”

“I see.” Bain regarded him. “And you allowed this without intervention?”

Bricker shrugged. “I don’t need quitters or lone wolves.” He said. “I saw no reason to intervene or even ask.”

“I see. Hm.” Bain half turned and regarded Dev, who was standing as far back as she could on the platform. “And you, my dear?”

“This is Dev.” Doctor Dan said. “The resource requested.”

“Ah..” Bain strolled over and regarded Dev. “What a charming young lady.” He said. “My name is Alexander Bain, my dear.”

“NM-Dev-1.” Dev answered quietly, extending a hand in greeting. “Its’ very nice to meet you.”

“And I, you.” Bain shook her hand. “Now. He released her and turned back to Bricker. “I received reports your other agents refused assignment. Is that true?”

“They tried.” Bricker answered grimly. “I persuaded them otherwise. I have two teams out now, about to make a grab for the new photo synth technology.” He tried, somewhat unsuccessfully to keep the triumph out of his voice. He turned and pointed at jess, who was waiting silently in the shadows. “She tried to make the whole team a bunch of refusers. But I put them against the wall and told them they’d end up in point Alaska without envirosuits if they tried.”

Jess took a half step forward, and stiffened. Bock put a hand on her arm.

“I see.” Bain nodded. “So you felt this was the best way to motivate them?” He tilted his head in a calm, almost quizzical manner.

“It worked.” Bricker turned back to the display. “Excuse me. Tac 2, report.”

“Sir, I tracked them they’re in shadow right now.” One of the techs standing at console spoke up. “Due in position one hundred ninety seconds.”

“Sir.” Jess spoke, her low voice echoing softly in the chamber. She fell silent when Bain held a hand up in her direction.

“Director Bricker, please turn around and face me. “Alexander Bain said.

“Sir, I’m sorry, I’m in the middle of something here.” Bricker glanced up. “Can it wait?”

“No, I am afraid it cannot.”

Bricker straightened up and turned. “Yes?”

The room swirled into motion Bain lifted his hand from his side and there was a hand weapon in it, and both Stephen and Jess stiffened, then Jess made a sign and they both froze, and Doctor Dan spun Dev around and put his body between her and Bain and…

The projectile caught Bricker in the throat, and exploded, sending blood and skin out to either side with a splattering sound as it hit the consoles to the right and left of him. His head lolled and dropped off to the floor, and his body collapsed to the ground, thumping and twitching as the techs jumped out of the way.

Absolute shocked silence fell, until Bain replaced the weapon into it’s hidden holster and dusted his hands off. “I never have approved of shooting anyone in the back.” He commented. “Now.” He turned. “Bock, please take charge, and have this unpleasantness cleaned up.”

He looked at all of them. “Any questions for me?” He glanced at Jess. “Drake, I suggest you take a look at what those colleagues of yours are into. I suspect it’s not good.”

Jess stirred out of her shock and jumped up onto the platform, shoving aside the tech as she stepped over Brickers body, muttering curses under her breath.

Bain clapped his hands. “Come on, people. We’re in some trouble here. Let’s think our way out of it, shall we? Start moving.”

Bock went to the comms panel, and started speaking into it, as the other men on the platform went to consoles, giving Jess an uneasy look.

“Oh.” Bain noticed that. “Please don't do anything unpleasant to Agent Drake. She's kindly agreed to rejoin our service and I'm most grateful for that.”

The ops staff relaxed and resumed their stations, a few of them giving Jess a nod.

Dev stood as still as she could, her mind on overload trying to absorb all the data she’d just been given. She tried to make sense of it, but found her focus irresistibly turning to the ops console, where the woman Bain had called Drake was sitting finding it much easier to think about her than about the man she’d just seen made dead.

She no longer looked sad, or depressed. There was energy crackling from every inch of her, as her eyes flicked through the screens with intense concentration.

She was so interesting. Dev could see her eyes reflected in the vid screen, surprised at how pale and clear they were, a light crystal blue.

“Dev.” Doctor Dan stirred her from her focus. “Are you doing okay?”

Dev started, then looked at him. “I’m all right.” She said. “I just don’t know really what’s going on.”

Doctor Dan looked around, then shook his head a little. “I’m not really sure either. But we’ll find out, don’t you worry.” He did, in fact, look worried himself. “I wont’ leave you here otherwise.”

Dev nodded. Then she glanced past Doctor Dan to the platform, to find the woman Drake looking back at her, with wary curiosity.

“We’ll find out.” Doctor Dan patted her shoulder. “Don’t worry.”

Dev looked down at the ground, surprised to see spatters of blood on the steel only a few inches from her boots. “I’m not worried, Doctor Dan. I'm sure it will be okay.”

She looked back up, back at the agents profile, and wondered.

**

Jess was aware of the security team behind her, and the medical techs bundling up Bricker’s body. She could hear their breathing, a little faster than normal, and sense the insecurity around her as everyone tried to adjust to what had just happened.

She focused past that. She had her elbows on the console and her eyes flicking from status readout to predictors, listening for the incoming bursts from the two teams out there.

Two teams of two people, agent and tech, in armored personnel carriers whose flight characteristics were roughly those of the ancient and mythic sperm whale. Only thing going for them were two engines powerful enough to launch the damn things into space and a lot of strap webbing that kept you from killing yourself inside one.

Jess sighed, and flicked a few settings.

Running the boards wasn't her favorite task. She hated being here, and not there, able only to react to what was going on, but she'd done her share of this. Every agent had, in training and in the times they couldn't be out in the field for any number of reasons.

But she was glad she was here now, and able to concentrate on those signals because otherwise she'd have to think about how her life had gone into a radical tailspin in the last hour, and what the hell she was going to do next.

Less time to think about the quiet figure seated near the far wall, hands clasped, eyes absorbing everything around her. NM-Dev-1 wasn't anything like what she'd expected. She'd figured they'd taken one of the pilot duffs, and tweaked him for this gig

This wasn't a pilot. This wasn't any of the types they'd gotten before. She glanced to one side, watching the bio alt's serious face as she studied the console next to her. This was unknown.

A bleep caught her attention, and she looked back at the screens.

Bricker had screwed it. Jess checked the position of the two teams, seeing them on the very edge of the dark side "Tac 1, Tac 2, base." She uttered into the comms. He'd sent the two in without full intel and they'd gotten their asses chomped by a big armed patrol with long range guns.

There was only crackling for answer The two teams, in their armored carriers had gone in over sea and tried to penetrate a small research station but they were caught now on the flats, the edgy cross-lines of laser cannons pinning them down.

"What's the game?" Stephen slid into the seat next to her. "This is crazy."

"I can't get to them." Jess pointed at the scan link. "They're blocking comms. Only thing I can tell is they're intact. I can see the outline."

"Shit."

A blast of antiseptic made them both turn, to see a medic with a tank on his back washing down the floor. He glanced at them, then went back to his task.

Jess glanced at Stephen. "Wasn't how I figured this day to go."

Stephen snorted and shook his head. Then he leaned a little closer. "Glad?"

Jess's face tensed into a faint smile.

"All right, people." Alexander Bain came back into the comms center. "Report."

Stephen swiveled in his seat. "No new status sir. The two carriers are pinned down under tracer fire, no comms."

"Well." Bain strolled over. "Then suppose you go to the briefing center and join me for a strategy meeting. I think we need some strategy. Been sadly lacking here for a while, I believe." He considered. "Drake, please take our new recruit here and have them kit her out. Get her creds. My orders."

Jess stood. "Do I have creds?" She asked. "Hate to walk into security and get shot."

Bain's face shifted into a somewhat piratical smile. "I appreciate a sense of humor, Drake." He said. "I believe my presence has been advertised sufficiently that you should be safe walking the halls. Once that's settled, join us in the briefing center." He glanced at Doctor Dan, then crooked a finger at him. "You come with me."

Doctor Dan regarded him. Then he got up and patted Dev on the shoulder. "Go with the agent, Dev. I'll see you shortly."

They all shifted and moved. Jess walked over to where the bio alt was standing, and gestured. "This way." She waited for the silent figure to join her and they walked down the ramp and out the door.

The halls were very quiet. Jess was glad, not wanting to run into a hundred people all asking her questions. She hadn't decided yet what to tell anyone, so it was good to just walk down the familiar floors passing from the enforcement area into the circling boundaries of security.

She'd passed through the first scan gate before she realized it, her body jerking in reaction at the tickle then relaxing as only a sedate bong reacted to her presence. "Guess he was right." She muttered.

"Pardon?" The bio alt asked.

Jess looked at her. She was relatively short, her head only reaching to Jess's shoulder, and she had a slim body presently encased in a standard space jumpsuit. "Talking to myself." She said. "That scanner we just passed could have boiled my brain."

Dev looked behind them, a startled expression on her face. "Oh."

Jess paused as they reached the security center. "Sorry." She eyed the bio alt. "My name's Jess." She extended a hand. "I won't say welcome. You probably don't really want to be here."

Dev reached over and took the offered hand, closing her fingers around Jess's and giving them a firm pressure. "Thank you." She said. "I don't really have much say in it." She remarked. "But so far it's been really interesting"

Jess cocked her head a little, not expecting so self aware a response. "Right." She turned and keyed the door open. "Let's see how much more interesting it's going to be." She walked inside the center and went to the ops desk. "Jackson."

The security captain had straightened when she entered, and was now waiting for them, his hands resting on the desk. He was big, taller than Jess and about twice her weight, with a very muscular body and the typical security buzz cut. "Drake."

"Bain sent me down." Jess said, briefly. "She needs creds." She indicated Dev. "And I guess I need reissued ones."

"We heard." Jackson said. "He really plug Bricker?"

"Yup." Jess nodded.

"Good. Jackass." Jackson turned and motioned to a sergeant. "Open up Drake's access." He ordered, then turned to Jess. "What level is this one?" He indicated Dev. "Staff? Support?"

"Enforcement ops tech." Jess replied, dryly.

Jackson's jaw dropped a little, and he stared openly at Dev. "Thought that was bullshit rumor."

"Apparently not." Jess said. "Since here she is."

Jackson shook his head. "Jackass." He muttered. "Place is going to hell." He keyed in something, continually shaking his head as he worked. "Go stand in that." He pointed to the genetiscan, waiting for Dev to comply before he continued coding.

Jess didn't respond to the muttering. She nodded at the sergeant when the woman came over to her, running a hand wand over her. She held out her left hand, and the wand touched it, making her flinch a little as she felt the chips embedded there react. "Thanks."

"Agent." The sergeant responded. "All clear."

Jess flexed her hand, glancing over to see Dev standing quietly in the scanner, traces blinking in the collar she wore around her neck. Their eyes met, and she managed a brief smile she hoped was reassuring.

It was something. The bio alt smiled back.

"They assigned her quarters yet?" Jackson asked. "None coded here."

"Heading to supply next." Jess said. "I guess they'll do that there." She looked up, her face going a little blank. "We've got plenty of space at the moment."

Jackson nodded. “Heard that.” He said. “All right, done.” He motioned the sergeant forward. “Cred for ops.”

The sergeant went over to Dev, and scanned her. They were more or less the same height, but the sergeant had the powerful muscularity typical of security and would have had dark red curly hair if it hadn’t been shorn close to her skull. “Done.” She handed Dev a set of clip on creds. “Wear that for the biology based systems. The mechanicals don’t need it.”

“Thank you.” Dev took the creds and applied them to her jumpsuit.

“Good luck.” The woman said, unexpectedly, extending a hand. “I’m Boston.”

Dev returned the shake. “Thank you.” She said, again.

The sergeant turned and made her way back behind the desk, and Jess motioned to the door. “Next.” She let Dev go ahead of her, and they exited the security center. “You can expect that kind of reaction.” Jess said, after a moments walking. “Pretty much everyone thinks your being here is asinine.”

Dev gave her a sideways look. “Do you?” She asked, in a mild tone.

Jess took a breath to answer, then paused.

“It doesn’t offend me.” Dev said. “There’s not much I can do about it since I’m here and I didn't have a choice about it.”

Well, that was true, wasn’t it? Jess felt very off-balance. This bio alt was turning out to be more of a surprise than she needed at the moment. “I don’t know.” She finally answered. “I thought it was a bad idea when I heard about it.”

“Why?”

Why. Jess was glad to see the supply hallway at her left. She turned and swiped the door controls, leading Dev inside to the big processing center. “Hold that question a minute.”

Here there were more bio alts. She watched them catch sight of Dev and react, then go back to their tasks, a little distracted and intrigued by the wary expressions on their faces. She stepped up to the counter, manned by an older man with a scar across his face and through one destroyed eye. “Hey Buddy.”

The man gazed gravely at her. “Jess. Welcome back.” He said. “That was the shortest outprocess in the history of Interforce, I’m guessing. I heard the Old Man himself talked you down, then blew Bricker’s head off. Been quite the morning.” He glanced to one side. “Who’s this?”

Jess nodded. “Been quite the morning.” She agreed. “This is Dev.” She said. “She’s Bricker’s experiment.” She exchanged glances with the supply master. “Bain asked me to get her kitted out. He wants to continue it, I guess.”

Dev regarded the man and noted he had a somewhat kinder eye than most she’d encountered so far in this new place. She also noted he and her escort called each other by common names, and that Jess also seemed more relaxed here.

The security place had been stern and a little hostile, even though the people there had done what they’d been asked to. “Hello.” Dev said.

“Hello, Dev.” Buddy replied. “So we need to give you all the crank you need to be a tech, huh?” He keyed in something on the console. “Sure hope they know what they’re doing.” He looked up. “Plenty of berths available., unfortunately. Preference?” He directed the question at Jess.

Jess took a mental step back and thought about the question. There were a lot of empty berths. Aside from the recent deaths, they’d already been six teams short. Dev could be given any of them, since all of the bunks were more or less the same.

She looked up and found Dev watching her. She’d known what Bricker’s intent was, and felt the truth in her own rejection of that. Nothing really had changed and yet, in the small space of the morning, everything had changed.

Had she changed? “Put her in Joshua’s berth.” She heard herself saying. “Bain asked me to get her settled.”

Buddy didn't blink an eye. "Done." He said. "I'll have the bulk of it sent there." He glanced at Dev. "Could you please go stand on that other platform there?" He pointed to the outfitting console. "Thanks."

Dev obediently went over and stood in the box, which scanned her with a completely different type of signal. It felt a little warm, and not at all tickly and it took only a moment. Then she stepped out and returned to Jess's side.

Buddy turned and removed a green sack, which he handed over to her. "Basics." He said, as she took it. "Everything else will be sent. Okay?"

Having once again no choice in the matter, Dev nodded.

"Let's go." Jess said, briefly. "I'll drop you at your bunk, then go see what the bad news is." She glanced at Buddy. "I guess I need resupply too."

"Already done." Buddy waved her off. "We saw it come active again from security."

"Thanks." Jess led the way again. They went through the doors and turned right. "You got kit on the shuttle?"

Dev touched the small bag hanging at her belt. "Just this." She said. "They told me I would get everything here."

"Well, at least they got something right." Jess produced a brief smile. They continued down the hall and then into the centrum, passing through two scanners, then a third as they entered a blue shaded hallway.

A few turns later and they were at a door. "Scan it." Jess stood back. "Might as well find out if they actually did what they were supposed to do."

Dev put her hand on the keypad, and the door slid obediently open. She glanced back at Jess for instruction, then walked inside at the slight gesture she received.

Jess entered behind her. "Listen." She said. "I have no idea how this is going to work out. You could just be in here for an hour, then be packed back upstairs."

Dev nodded. "You don't think I can do what was requested."

Jess let the door shut behind them and then she turned, studying the bio alt in silence for a bit. "They train people for years do this job. You've had a week. So no, I don't think so." She said. "Actually I think a lot of people don't want to think so, because if you could…"

"If I could, we could replace you." Dev concurred. "And we're cheap and expendable. That's what they say." She watched Jess's face, taking a breath as she suddenly saw an intent personality become present there, as Jess abruptly looked at her, not through her and she saw more intelligence and emotion in that one glance than she'd ever experienced before. "So you know, I don't know if I can help either. I just have what programming I have, and I'll do the best I can if they want me to try."

Jess exhaled. "Yeah well." She glanced past the bio alt to the rest of the room. "Lately we've been sort of expendable too." She indicated the room. "Until they figure it all out, you bunk here. "

Dev looked around at the space. "By myself?" She asked, in a surprised tone.

Jess twitched a little and looked at her. "What?"

The bio alt, for the first time, looked a little off balance. "Sorry." She peered around. "It's a big room." She explained. "It wasn't like this in the crèche."

"No, I guess not." Jess felt faintly amused. "Okay, well, that's the sanitary station." She pointed, then paused. "You know what that is, right?"

"Yes."

"Shower and lav in there, you can put your kit in the cabinet." Jess swiveled around. "Sleep." She pointed at the bed. "Relax." She pointed to the left hand side loft. "And work." She pointed at the right hand side loft. "I'll leave you to explore. We'll call you if we want you to come to the comms center. Otherwise, stick around here. It's easy to get lost in this place."

Dev nodded. “Okay.”

Jess turned to go. At the door, she paused and looked back. Then she turned and left, without speaking.

Dev drew in a deep, deep breath, then she let it out. There was so much to absorb, she was really glad she had a few minutes at least to just do that. She set the green bag down , then she sat down in the chair behind the workspace on the lower level, which was soft and comfortable and reminded her just a little of her sleeping pod back in the crèche.

She sat back in it and turned it around, regarding this huge space with more than a little bemusement. So here she was. Things were not at all going according to plan, but she’d ended up in this place anyway with all this incredible strangeness around her.

At the very very least, she’d have a cycles worth of stories to tell them back in the crèche if they did send her back. Dev pondered that idea, and decided she really hoped they didn’t.

Really.

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Jess detoured past the caffeine station on her way back to the strategy center. She put her palm down on the dispenser plate and the system produced a vacuum bottle full of her preference. She uncapped it and took a sip, turning around and leaning against the counter.

What could have been. She studied the bottle. By this time she should have been in a scavenger station, trading her jumpsuit for an exposure kit, and if she’d been lucky, assigned to a work battalion down in the caverns harvesting seaweed.

And at that she would have been one of the lucky, with basic but functional housing and the promise of a meal so long as the quotas were upheld.

She knew what it was. She had two siblings out there who had done the work, since they hadn’t qualified for anything better as youngsters and their family’s tenure in service guaranteed them at least that.

Those that had neither family connection or needed skills ended up in the out lands, the only shelter there what they built themselves, and as for what they lived on?

Jess’s face tensed into a grimace. They lived on what they could steal, and being caught out in the out lands was as dangerous to someone like her as taking a trip to the other side.

So here she was instead, her whole intent reversed, and she’d have been lying if she’d said she was sad about it. It was one thing to stand on your honor. It was another to actually like the consequences of that and Jess was self aware enough to know she’d lead a relatively privileged life and she liked it that way.

It was nice to know she’d likely be lying down in her comfortable bunk tonight rather than on cold stone, or in a rough worn hammock, and she could have caffeine when she wanted, and a meal in the ops mess.

She felt a bit guilty over how glad she was Bain had showed up, brought her back in, then blew Bricker away like he’d been no more than a sea rat caught in the storage silo. A bit guilty, but not too much.

Very unexpected She’d thought maybe Bain would come in and take charge, make plans, maybe make some changes.. hell she’d hoped he would do that but outright kill Bricker?”

Ah, no. More than a little scary. Jess capped her drink and took it with her, heading with no further delay towards the strategy planning center. Outside the door she met up with two of her remaining peers and they all looked at each in silence for a long moment.

“Jason.” Jess murmured. “Glad you two weren’t the ones out there.”

“Jess.” Jason Anders finally said. “What in the Hell’s going on?” He was a tall man, with thick brown hair and hazel eyes.

“Crap all, from what I hear.” The woman next to him said. “Is it true? Bricker’s dead?”

“They didn’t’ send a squirt out?” Jess frowned. “Public as it was? Bain splatted him in the middle of central ops for craps sake. In front of some doctor from the bio station on top of it.”

“No, nothing.” Jason shook his head. “Elaine? You get anything on comms?”

“Not a damn thing.” Elaine Cruz shook her head. “I just heard something from one of the med techs they sent in there to clean the mess up.” She put her hands on her hips, her rust red hair making her fair skin and green eyes stand out.

Jess glanced at the door. “Well, you got the baseline of it. I was humping up onto the shuttle when I ran into Bain. He knew everything. Asked me to come back with him, and about two minutes after we got to central he pulled a blaster out and took Bricker’s head off.”

“Damn.” Jason said. “Just like that? For nothing?”

“Bain could do it for nothing.” Elaine said. “Who’d stop him?”

“I didn’t.” Jess said. “I got the feeling it wasn’t just one thing that caused it.” She studied the both of them. “They call you in there?”

Elaine nodded. “Tucker and Brent are in their quarters. Scared to death.” She said. “Afraid Bain’s going to do the same to them.”

Jess turned and palmed the door. “Let’s find out how screwed we are.”

“Jess?” Jason said, just as the door started opening. “Glad you’re back.”

“Ditto.” Elaine said.

The door was open and Jess didn’t answer. She led the way into the strategy center past the outer chamber with it’s scattering of austere chairs and to the second portal, which was guarded by two members of the security group.

Jess half expected to be challenged, but the guards merely drew aside and triggered the door for them, and the three enforcement agents proceeded inside.

It was quiet. Stephen was seated near one end of the large plotting table, and Bain was in the big leader’s chair at the very end. The table was lit with statistics, and the curved wall behind the table was brilliant with readouts and scans.

“Ah. There you all are.” Bain said. “Did you get your new colleague settled, Drake?”

“Yes.” Jess sat down mid table, and Elaine and Jason took seats next to her, on the side away from Bain.

“New colleague?” Jason asked, in a low tone. “What’s that about?”

“Did you say something, Anders?” Bain asked. “We don’t really have time for idle chit chat you know. Not if we’re going to find some way of getting those two teams back.”

Jason cleared his throat. “Sorry sir.” He said. “I was just wondering what new colleague we have.” He returned Bain’s look steadily. “It’s been a sore subject here lately.”

“So I have heard.” Bain stood up and leaned on the table. “Perhaps I should explain. “

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Dev stuck her head into the sanitary facility, entering after a moment and putting her small personal kit down. The space was clean and austere, the stone lined walls with faint flecks of reflectivity in their depths described a roughly rectangular space with inset cabinets on both long sides.

A half wall concealed a lavatory. Dev studied it curiously, reaching forward to press one of the buttons on the top and jumping back a little as she was rewarded with a faint roaring sound. She peeked inside the bowl and saw a moving substance, not the vacuum system she was used to. "Ah."

Well, she'd figure that out soon enough.

With a faint shrug, she went on to the counter, which held a neatly folded set of assorted fabric. She touched the surface of one, finding it soft and nubbly. It was too small to wear, and she picked one of them up, unfolding it and releasing a faint, to her unrecognizable scent into the air.

Another puzzle. Dev examined the inset bowl next to them, which had a hole in the bottom, and mechanisms at the top. She reached out and touched one, and leaped back as something rushed out of the pipe at the top and splashed into the bowl with a thick, almost musical sound.

Urgently, she searched her programming, and found nothing regarding it, but then a deeper memory triggered, and she relaxed, recalling something from her basics programming.

She stepped forward again and hesitantly put her hand under the flow, inhaling a little as it chilled her skin. Her other hand joined it, and she rubbed them both together, then she touched the mechanism again. She stood with her hands dripping into the sink for a moment, then with a satisfied grunt, she picked up one of the pieces of fabric and used it to dry her hands off. So this was water, freely running water, which she'd never experienced before. "Interesting."

She continued her exploration, opening the cabinets and finding more fabric, larger pieces, again neatly folded. At the end of the room was another half wall, and she peeked behind it to find a square space with a drain in the floor, and a pipe extruded out with a round, flat head. Curiously, she reached in and touched the controls, letting out a yip of surprise when a blast of water came out of the head and drenched her.

She batted at the controls and turned the water off, then stood, dripping, her arms held out away from her body a little. She blinked, and then shook her head, scattering droplets everywhere. "Ah hah." She licked her lips, finding that the water tasted a little sweet, and then she decided staying in the wet jumpsuit in the cool air of the chamber probably was not a good idea.

She unbuckled and slipped out of it, laying it across the counter and then turning to the cabinets and removing one of the large, square fabrics. She wrapped it around her as she bent over to unbuckle and remove her boots, setting them down under the counter as well. Going to her small kit, she removed her comb and ran it through her wet hair and setting it to order.

Glad to be free of the cold wetness, she used another fabric to dry herself off, then she went back into the main part of the room. This left her in a quandary though, as she could hardly respond to any of the requests that might be made of her without clothes on. She started towards one of the cabinets in the main part of the room when she heard rumbling behind it, a set of bangs and slams that sent her back to the sanitary facility, unsure of what was going on.

A soft chime sounded. "Main stores, provisioning complete."

Dev regarded the speaker, then she glanced towards the big cabinet again. The doors in it - previously solid and dark gray, were now turning translucent, back lit with a gentle golden glow Cautiously, she approached it, opening the front to find a line of dark jumpsuits hanging there, and a set of shelves below. She opened the first one, gratified to find familiar looking underwear there. "At least I know what this is." She muttered. “There’s a lot of stuff they forgot to program about this place.”

She traded her fabric for the garments, which fit neatly, then she removed one of the jumpsuits and slipped it on. It too, fit her perfectly, but the fabric was unlike anything she'd ever felt before. It was soft and a little stretchy, conforming to her body and very comfortable.

It had a collar that extended up covering the back of her neck, and was gathered at her wrists and ankles with many pockets and rip strips to hold things.

She liked that. The color was dark green with black trims and it had a deep blue ring around the neckline, but no other insignia to it. Almost the same as the one Jess had been wearing, save hers was all black, except that same blue ring.

She glanced at her reflection in the door mirror, blinking a little at the unexpected outline. She'd pulled the front catch all the way up, and the fabric had sealed around her neck, completely covering her collar and a part of her felt a little strange, looking at herself and not seeing that.

Thoughtfully, she studied herself, wondering how long she would get to wear the new clothes. Then she shrugged, finding several pairs of boots on the floor of the cabinet and selecting one of them to take back with her to the comfortable chair near the desk.

She sat down, and set the boots down next to her. Then she looked around, wondering if.. ah. She got back up and went to the counter on the other side of the sanitary room, where she'd spotted a refrigerated dispenser.

That, in it's essential form, she knew. In the common spaces of the crèche there were always stations you could get a drink from and they looked pretty much like this one.

She opened it, and was cheered to find sealed containers of liquid and solids. She removed one of each and brought them back to the desk, feeling a luxury all out of proportion as she opened the liquid, finding it clear and clean and apparently water, and unwrapping the solids to discover crispy little crackers that smelled faintly of brine and were sprinkled with tiny seeds and salt.

Dev bit into one cautiously. It had an interesting taste, and after a few nibbles she decided she liked it.

She sat in her chair, munching her crackers and sipping from the water, looking around at this inconceivably huge space they'd assigned to her. She could see the upper level on one side had consoles, and she brightened, realizing she might be able to practice some of her programming. On the other side, she could see a couch, and what appeared to be a big console, with some shelves and mats. Jess had said something about relaxing up there, and Dev considered that maybe she could use it like she had her little cubicle back in the creche - as a place to sit quietly, and maybe read some of her book.

Everything was so different here, but different in a way she didn't mind, Dev decided. She finished her crackers and set her water aside, then she climbed up to the second level with her book in her hand, and sat down on the couch. It had an overhead light and she lay down bathed in it, opening the book and settling herself down to enjoy a page.

After a moment, she looked up, and looked around, then smiled, and shook her head.

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"Are you kidding me?" Jason stared at Jess, aghast. "That's real? They did it? They sent it here? Really?"

Jess glanced across at Bain, who merely tapped his fingers against his lips in silence. "Well." She said. "In that they brought a bio alt here, yes. That parts real."

Jason looked at Bain. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Are you advocating this, sir?"

Bain regarded him. "You would not?"

Jason and Elaine exchanged glances. "Sir." He said, in a respectful tone. "We..." Then he paused, and a frown appeared on his long face.

"Caught in a conundrum?" Bain said. "I believe you were just about to inform me that you have to place great trust in your technical assistants, hmm? " He observed them. "And yet, we do indeed have a trust issue here. You do not trust your colleagues, you do not trust your leadership, and quite likely, you do not trust that I will not blow your heads off as I did the director's this morning. Hmm?"

The door slid open, and Dan Kurok came in. He gave them all a cursory glance, then took a seat near on the opposite side of the table from Jess. "Your central records store is a mess." He told Bain. "I have a query running but likely it wont' turn up much more than a recipe for chocolate cupcakes."

Jess's eyebrows jerked up at his casual address. She was beginning to wonder who this man was, aside from some gene doctor from topside.

"And what do you think, Drake?" Bain turned to her. "Do you still disagree with this experiment of ours having met it's subject?"

Jess felt all the eyes on her and she hunched her shoulders a bit in reaction. "Why don't we talk about what the plan is before we go into that" She said. "We've got four people out there pinned down and in terminal danger - I think that's more important than how I feel about bio alts."

"And yet." Bain watched her. a faint smile on his lips. "You had her put in quarters adjoining yours. Interesting?"

"Statement stands." Jess responded dryly.

"Very well." Bain left off prodding her. "As I was discussing with Bock here, it seems the issue was that your colleagues were attempting an insertion here." He pointed at a mapping coordinate. "Where they were expecting to find an exhaust station." He stood and juggled the laser guide in his hand. "What they found was a half dozen armored carriers."

"Trap?" Jason asked.

"Or did they get skunked?" Jess quietly disagreed. "Someone tipped them."

Bain pursed his lips. "I think their plans were known." He said. "As there is indeed an exhaust station at that locale" He brought up another overlay. "Just as the last mission was compromised - but we thought we knew the information vector there."

"They were waiting for us.." Jess agreed. "I heard the hatches clamp just before Joshua turned on me." She studied her hands. "He hadn't had a chance to send comms before we got there. I would have heard it."

Bain nodded. "So. it was my conclusion that someone else within Interforce was compromised."

"Is that why you shot him?" Elaine spoke up. “Bricker, I mean. Was he the leak?”

"No." Bain regarded her. "I shot him because he was a blithering idiot." He said, then paused. "Although." He went on. "That could possibly have been the reason for the compromise." He cleared his throat. "The problem is, he was put in place by someone at a high level, who was put in place by someone else at a high level, who was put in place by me."

"Ah." Jess nodded.

"You run out of magnesium slugs after awhile of that." Bain said. "So the truth is, people, we don't know where the hole is."

Kurok snorted softly, and shook his head.

Jess looked at her two fellow agents. "So someone is leaking our ops to the other side." She said. "And it could be all the way up."

"Yes."

"So.. Josh was probably turned from this side. From the inside." Jason said, slowly. "We've been trying to figure out when he was nicked, and no one could." He looked at Jess. "Maybe he never was. Maybe someone was just talking him into it over dinner, here."

"Huh." Jess grunted.

"So we have a another quandary." Bain said. "Obviously we need to go and assist the two teams who are now trapped under fire. However, outside this room I cannot tell you that the very plans we make might not be sent ahead."

"Outside this room?" Stephen queried. "So you consider this group secure."

"Yes." Bain said. "Congratulations. No one else is going to die here today."

Everyone flinched a little, except Kurok. He cleared his throat. "So the issue is, you can't trust the outsiders. That includes your techs, and most of the staff inside this facility." He looked at Jess. "That was why Bricker came and asked us to design a set that could be programmed for the job. We know what's in their minds. You can't say that about anyone else."

Jess returned his look. "Doesn't do me any good if they can't do the job."

"How do you know Dev can't?" Kurok countered. "Listen, I know you people think what we do is just create amiable rag dolls for slave labor, but I wouldn't be here with her if i didn't think she could be of value to you. Regardless of what Doss promised. He doesn't own me."

Bain chuckled softly. "No one ever did."

Kurok glanced sideways at him, then returned his attention to Jess. "You've met her. You tell me. Mindless?"

Jess was aware of the silence in the room, and very aware of the intent looks focused on her. She thought about her few minutes with the bio alt, running back in her mind their conversations. "No" She answered, in a somewhat surprised tone. "More complex than I expected." She admitted. "But that doesn't mean she can be a tech."

"Drake." Bain leaned on the table again. "This is the bottom line. For this plan here.. " He pointed at the screen. "We will send your colleagues there to stand by, to cover for the two trapped teams. But to get them out, we need to distract, and for that we need you,and you need someone with you that you have to trust since you will be putting yourself in the wolves mouth."

"Why me?" Jess asked. 'Send someone else. "

"Because they want you." Bain answered, with a thin smile. "You were stabbed, and we lost four good teams all because they were intent on keeping you - and they would have if you hadn't been just that much better than they had anticipated."

Jess felt cold. "Me?"

"Crap." Jason uttered.

"You." Bain said. "And before you ask, no, I don't know why. Likely you made some enemy on the other side who has now gained high level there."

"So you're going to throw Jess into the fire?" Elaine asked. "Since you know they want her?"

Bain straightened up and paced around at the head of the table. "Yes." He said. "Because we know they want her. It will provide the distraction we need, as they send all their assets after her, to set the other teams free."

"Wait a minute.." Stephen stood up. "Sir.."

"Stephen, sit." Jess waved him down. "I'll do it." She said. "We'll give this experiment a try. Worst I can end up is dead." She pointed at the displays. "Send a burst to my account. I want to study the layout. I'll do the setup."

"Jess, c'mon." Stephen said. "I thought you said this was asinine! Isn't this the very same thing you were quitting about this damn morning????"

Jess nodded. "It was." She said. "But I didn't have all the intel I needed to make that choice. All I had was your pitch of what Bricker said. Bricker's dead. The story's changed."

Bain gazed at her with surprising fondness. "You are a throwback, aren't you?" He said. "So you will accept Kurok's little project, hmm?"

Jess found herself nodding.

"Jess!"

Was she crazy? Maybe. Jess felt a sudden and surprising shame over walking out and figured maybe this was just her ego's way of erasing that. Right? Wrong? Who the hell knew. She looked up at Kurok, who was studying her with quiet, intent eyes. "Can she drive a carrier?"

"Yes." He answered, in a quiet tone. "She's been programmed to."

Jess stood. "Give me the dump." She said. "Stephen can you plot the weather? I thought I heard a storm coming in." She glanced around the table. "Are we done here? I've got gear to settle."

"So you don't wish us to go over the plan, Drake?" Bain asked. "All of us together?"

"No." Jess said. "It just became not your plan." She gestured to Jason and Elaine. "We'll meet later. Prep to go less 24."

Silently, the other two agents rose and followed her and she left the conferencing center, the door sliding shut behind them with a soft metallic thump.

"Hm." Bain grunted.

'You wanted her to participate." Kurok leaned back, a faint grin on his face. "Someone used to tell me to be careful what I asked for, as I recall."

Bain gave him a dour look.

"Would you excuse me, Sir?" Stephen got up. "I've got things to do." He waited until Bain nodded, then he turned and left the room from a different door, heading back up the secure hallway to central comms.

Bain sat down and swiveled his seat to face Kurok. "Not a good situation, DJ."

"No." Kurok agreed. "And I"m not sure we're going in the right direction in solving it."

"Hm."

The doctor glanced up at him. “Been a damn long time since the last time I was called that.”

Bain smiled briefly. “You may need to get used to hearing it again.”

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Jess steered her slightly rabid sounding followers into the caffeine station. “Look.” She held a hand up. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t know.”

“Jess, how can you even consider going out with one of them?” Elaine asked. “Why not just find a cat outside and let them drive? You’re going to get your self killed. No one wants that.”

“Maybe I do.”

Utter silence fell for a long and uncomfortable moment. Jess fell back to lean against the wall. She ran her hand through her dark hair, avoiding their eyes. “It’ll be fine.” She said. “Worse comes to worse I can drive the damn thing.”

“What if they catch you?” Jason asked. “You heard what he said, they want you, Jess. Why put yourself in their hands? Tell these guys no. You can. I’ve heard you.”

Jess studied them both. “Because it’s not the right thing to do.” She said. “We’ve got four people trapped there.”

“Who could give a crap about you. They went. We didn’t.” Elaine said, bluntly.

“Doesn’t matter if they give a crap about me.” Jess said. “Doesn’t even matter if someone dumps the plan. I’m not going to sit here on my ass while four people are out there getting shot. If you two don’t want to go out – don’t. I’ll be the decoy then figure out how to get over to them and get them out.”

“Jess.”

“So I’m an asshole and its impossible.” She shrugged. “Who cares?” She pushed off the wall. “Now I’ve got to go prep. Hell if I know what’s secure around here… if you’re interested, I’ll let you know when I’m ready and we can meet in my quarters.”

Jason sighed. “Do we bring Tucker and Brent?” He didn’t even look at Elaine, obviously sure of her answer. The two had been in training together, were several years older than Jess was, and were frequently paired in the field.

“Do you?” Jess turned the question back at him. “They’re your partners.”

Elaine went to the dispenser, and requested a bottle. “I hate this.” She turned around, holding the bottle between both hands as though warming them. “How in hell do we know what’s safe and what’s not?”

“Tucker and I have worked together for ten years.” Jason said. “Brent’s been part of the team for twelve. “

“And Joshua was for nine.” Jess shrugged. “But if what you said in there was right, Jace, and he was turned recently then time in service doesn’t matter.”

Both older agents looked disturbed. Then Jason scratched his scalp at the back of his neck and looked at Jess. “Shit. Maybe your damn bio alt makes sense after all.”

Elaine snorted softly. “Until it drives you into a cliff wall.” She studied her bottle. “I say you and I meet with Jess, Jace. We can fill them in later. This sounds more like an in and out anyway, no hard tech.”

Jess nodded. “Deal.” She reached around Elaine and requested her own bottle. “Let’s hope the weather clears and we can get this done.”

“Let’s hope the weather clears regardless.” Jason followed them out and down the hallway, heading back towards the residential corridors. “We don’t need any more floods.”

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Jess cleared into her quarters, glancing around as she entered and spotting the evidence she’d been re provisioned in her absence. She could see the uniform module in service, and her duffel had been delivered back and was sitting next to her bed.

She dropped into the chair at the workspace and swung the pad around, reaching over to trigger her console and freezing as she heard a slight noise beyond the sliding portal to her left.

For a moment, she’d forgotten. “Ah.” She studied the door with a frown. Then she got up and went to the inner door, pressing the annunciator chime and waiting.

After a very long pause, the door opened, and she was facing the bio alt.

Dev had changed, she noted, into the dark green field service kit. “You get settled in?” She asked.

“Yes.” Dev said. “They brought everything I needed.”

“Good.” Jess said. “Okay, so.. “ She held her hand against the door so it wouldn’t close. “Um.”

Dev tilted her head a little to one side. “Is this where you live?” She pointed behind Jess.

Jess turned, then turned back. “Ah, yes.” She said. “It is.” She watched Dev nod thoughtfully. “We’re going to have a planning session later on in here. We have to go and get some people out of some trouble.”

Dev’s body posture altered, as she straightened up a little and her chin lifted. “We?”

‘That’s what you came here for, right?” Jess asked. “Wasn’t it?” She looked curiously at Dev. “They did program you to do this, didn’t they?”

“Yes” The bio alt responded. “They did.”

“Okay.” Jess said. “So I’ll call you when we’re having the session. “ She watched the woman nod again. “Did you get a meal?”

Dev turned and pointed at the refrigerator. “They left water and crackers there. I had some.”

Jess winced.

“I liked them.” Dev went on. “Were they not for eating?”

“Let me show you where the mess is.” Jess exhaled. “C’mon.” She motioned the bio alt forward. Once Dev cleared the door she let it shut, then she led the way to her own outer door. “You can eat those. Not sure why you’d want to, but they’re survival rations.”

“Oh.”

Jess led the way down the corridor and around the bend towards where the communal area was. She passed a number of people, most of whom did a double take on seeing her, and then a second on seeing her companion.

Mild entertainment. They crossed the large central hall and paused, as Stephen caught sight of them and hurried over.

“Jess, here’s the weather.” Stephen glanced at Dev, then at the film. “Nothing good. Don’t think you can.”

He stopped talking as Jess put her hands over the report and stared at him. “Thanks.” She said. “I appreciate your checking.” She folded the film and put it in a pocket. “We’re going to the mess.”

Stephen glanced again at Dev. “Oh.”

Jess circled around him and continued on down the corridor, moving past the operations desk and down the left hand turn that would take them into the operations dining hall. "Only field ops in here." She commented briefly, scanning the door open and motioning Dev to precede her.

Dev stepped inside, and looked around. The room was large, with many different levels to it, the same dark gray at the rest of the facility but with somber splashes of color in the fabric of the chairs arranged around the small tables.

In the back, on the highest platform, there were several large tables arranged near the wall, with seats behind them. They were empty. Two of the smaller tables were occupied, and the people at them had turned to stare at her and Jess when they entered.

Dev was getting used to being stared at. It didn't bother her. She returned their gaze with a mild neutral expression, waiting for Jess to instruct her further on what they needed to do.

"C'mon." Jess indicated a food line in the back. "We line up for everything but dinner when we come in here. That they serve."

"All right." Dev followed her willingly as they passed through the tables. She watched what the other woman did, and picked up a tray, putting it down on the railings as they moved down them. "We had facilities like this in the crèche."

Jess glanced at her. "Did you?" She pointed. "That's lunch."

Dev studied the now incomprehensible things facing her. There were dispensers and trays of what she assumed were edibles, but the smells and sights were completely unfamiliar. "Yes. But there was only one thing. They just gave it to us we didn't have any choice about it." She looked back. "What do you do now?"

"You pick what you want." Jess frowned. "You know how to do that? I didn't figure lunch was a challenge."

Dev's face twitched a little. "I don't know what any of this is." She admitted. "We had different foods in the creche."

"Ah." Jess rubbed the bridge of her nose. Then she turned and punched in a set of numbers, waiting as the dispenser rumbled and clattered, then opened to reveal a divided tray of steaming food. She put it down on her own tray, then coded in the same set again. "Well, this has never killed me so it probably won't kill you either." She took the second portion and gave it to Dev.

Dev studied it, as she followed Jess down the line, finding a glass of something added to her selection before they picked up the trays and walked over to a small table. She sat down, glad now that Doctor Dan had brought her to the fancy place to prepare her.

People were still staring at her. She retrieved the utensils, reaching over and taking a sip from the glass to give her a moment to study what was on the plate.

The taste in the glass made her pause though, and she pulled it back and looked at it. "What is this?"

Jess looked up from cutting her food. "What?"

Dev lifted the glass. "This?"

"Kack." Jess said. "Generic caffeinated grog with vitamins."

It was very odd. Dev took another sip of the dark orange beverage, trying to decide if she liked it or not. It was faintly spicy, and a bit sweet, with a hint of effervescence. Then she put the glass down and took a bit of one of things on the tray and put it in her mouth.

It had a mildly chewy texture, and a nice taste. "And this?" Dev asked. "It's good."

Jess swallowed a mouthful of it. "Fish stew." She said. "Most of what we eat here is fish based." She pointed down and to the left. "Locally got."

"Fish." Dev spoke the word thoughtfully. "That is, I believe, an animal that swims in the water."

“Yeah.” Jess pointed at the rest of the tray. “That’s fish, and this is seaweed, but they make it taste like something. This is mushroom.” She pointed at the last section. “They grow it in caverns near the bottom of the cliff.”

“Oh.” Dev tasted a bit of of the seaweed. It seemed to be in a creamy substance, and she found she liked it as well. The mushrooms were dense and rich, and reminded her very faintly of the protein cakes from the crèche.

All good. She dug in with a sense of relief. Doctor Dan had warned her there would be very different things to contend with downside, but she was very glad to see not all of them were different in a bad way.

“That all right for you?” Jess asked, after a moment of silence.

Dev nodded. “It’s very good.” She said, after a swallow. “Thank you.”

Jess was silent for a few minutes more, then she looked up again. “What did you have upside?” She asked. “Plastic pellets or something? Must have been if you could eat those crackers.”

“Well.” Dev took a sip of the beverage. “Tea mostly, to drink.” She indicated the cup. “And they just made a cake for the main thing, I think it had beans or soy, with greens and maybe some fruit. It depended on what the test facility was working on.”

‘Fruit.” Jess mused. “Maybe Bain knows what that’s like.” She went back to her plate. “None of us could afford it.”

Dev paused and studied her for a moment. Despite the words, there didn’t seem to be any resentment in her table companion’s voice, just a matter of fact commentary. “You know, only the really important people in the crèche would get to have something like this.” She pointed at her plate. “So I guess it’s relative?”

Jess glanced up, a look of dark humor in her eyes. “You think?”

Dev wasn’t sure how to respond to that. She felt a little bit confused as those pale eyes watched her, almost glad when a throat clearing at her right hand side made them both look up. A woman was standing there, dressed as Jess was.

“Elaine.” Jess half turned. “What’s up?”

The woman cocked her head slightly. ‘You going to introduce me, Jess?”

Jess looked at her, then at Dev. “Sure.” She said. Her eyes went to Dev. “What do you want people to call you?”

Dev was caught flatfooted. “Excuse me?”

“You’re asking a bio alt what they want?” Elaine’s eyebrows hiked. “C’mon, Jess.”

Jess glanced at her. “This isn’t a pod tech.” She said. “I don’t invite them to lunch.” She turned back around. “What is it you want people here to call you? I know what your label is.” She said. “My name is Jesslyn Drake. But people call me Jess.” She paused. “When they don’t’ call me bastard, or jackass, or asshole.”

Elaine chuckled reflexively.

“Oh.” Dev nodded. “Okay, I get it..” She looked up at Elaine. “My designation is Biological Alternative, set 0202-164812, instance NM-Dev-1.” She said. “But you can call me Dev.”

Elaine stared at her. “That doesn’t sound like a regular bio alt set name.”

“It isn’t.” Dev agreed. “I’m a developmental special set.” She blinked placidly at the other woman. “Experimental.”

“Oh.” Elaine said. “Well, I’m Elaine.” She somewhat hesitantly extended a hand in greeting. “I think we’ll be working together.”

Dev clasped it and released.

“Elaine’s an agent, like I am.” Jess said. “She works with a tech named Brent. He’s over at that table afraid to come here and meet you.” She indicated a tall, blond haired man seated nearby.

“He’s not afraid.” Elaine frowned. “He’s just not comfortable with all of this. Shit, Jess, don't be more of an ass than you have to be, okay?”

Dev looked at Jess, seeing a clearly defined expression of skepticism there. The man Brent was dressed exactly like she herself was and as she watched he glanced over at them, then looked quickly away.

So was he doing what she would be? Did he think she wasn’t capable? Dev thought he probably didn't, for the same reason Jess didn't. She understood that, since she had yet to show any evidence of her skills, but it made her a little sad all the same.

“Me being an ass?” Jess said. “You were the one telling me to find a cat.” She looked pointedly at Elaine. “Let's just save it for later.”

“Fine.” Elaine lifted a hand and dropped it, turning and making her way back to the table where the tech was sitting and joining him.

Jess scooped up some of her mushrooms and ate them, then she looked over at Dev, who was looking back at her.

They both looked away, and Dev picked up her drink and took a long swallow of it.

**

Jess and Dev walked back to their quarters through very quiet corridors. “Everyone’s keeping their head down.” Jess commented.

“I see.” Dev murmured, after a slight pause .”They afraid the man with the gun is going to take them off?”

Muffling a snort, Jess stopped in mid stride and looked at her.

Dev stopped as well, and stood there, head tilted slightly in question.

“Did you…” Jess said, then paused, shaping the air with her hands. “Was that a joke?”

“Did you think it was funny?” Dev inquired.

“Yes, I did.”

“Then it was a joke.” The bio alt commented. “If you didn’t think so it would still have been a joke, but an unsuccessful one I wouldn’t use again.”

Jess’s lips twitched. “Did they program you for that?” She started walking again. “For jokes?”

“No.” Dev replied. “Most of us have a sense of humor. “ She followed Jess around the corner into the residential hall. “It varies.”

“I can see you have the dry variety.” Jess said. “Good. So do I. It’ll make it easier to work together.” She reached up and tightened the knot of hair at the back of her head. “I don’t like stand up yuck men.”

Dev’s ears perked up. She really didn’t know what that was, but it sounded like the agent had begun to accept her and that bode well for her not being immediately returned to the crèche. She had no illusions that she would be eventually, after this experiment was over, but the longer she stayed, the more experience she’d be able to get, and that might mean something later on for her.

If she didn’t get hurt doing this, as Doctor Dan had warned. She wondered if Jess had ever gotten hurt doing her job. It sounded dangerous, even more than the tasks she’d been programmed for.

There was a man standing in front of Jess’s door, one that she remembered from the communications hall.

“Hey Jason.” Jess greeted him. “Reports not ready yet.”

“I guessed.” He held his hand up, with had a small, gun like device in it. “Ready for this?”

Jess stopped, and looked at him. Dev thought she might be angry, and she wasn’t sure what was going on. But after a minute, the tall woman relaxed, and waved a hand at the plate on her door for it to open.

Dev started to walk around her, to go to the other side of the hall around the corner where her own door was.

"Wait."

Dev turned, to find both of them looking at her. "I was going to work on some sims." She said. "I found some in the catalog in that room."

"You can come in this way." Jess indicated her quarters. "I wanted to introduce you to Jason here anyway."

The man didn't like her. Dev could tell. But she nodded in agreement and followed them inside, standing quietly as Jess walked over to her workspace chair and then turned, releasing the catches on her jumpsuit and pulling it half down to expose her upper body before she sat down.

Dev blinked a few times as she found herself handling a slew of inputs all at once, some really unexpected. Jess's body was a rich, golden color and she could see a few faint scars, which answered her earlier question.

But the most striking thing was the intricate designs on her arms, starting at the tips of her shoulders and going down. There were black lines and color, and small dots in an uneven pattern between them, and she realized one whole limb was complete down to the wrist, and the other halfway.

Wow. She had nothing at all in programming for this. What was going on? She knew no one in the crèche had markings like that.

"Jason, this is Dev." Jess said, putting her forearms down on the chair and leaning back. "She's going to drive my bus for me."

The man looked at Dev. "Yeah?"

"Dev, this is Jason. He's also an agent." Jess said. "He's about to carve me for my last gig."

'Hello. It's nice to meet you." Dev addressed the man politely.

He stared at her. "Charmed." He said briefly, then turned his attention back to the gun like device, which he triggered, producing a vivid blue light at the tip. "Don't you have some cleaning to do or something?"

Jess abruptly lashed out with one leg, slamming her booted foot against the man's knee and sending him careening to the floor, juggling the gun frantically as he fell. "Don't be a jackass, Jason." She warned. "It's not her fault she's here. "

"Son of a bitch are you crazy!" Jason managed to get hold of the device and rolled over. "I could have shot the whole fucking room out!"

"We have plenty." Jess didn't look either alarmed or sorry. "Bain wants this project to succeed. I'm not going to be the one who prevents that, and if you have a brain cell left in your head you won't either."

Jason paused in the midst of getting to his knees and stared at her, his eyes narrowing as Jess's brows hiked meaningfully. "Oh"

"Sit." Jess waved Dev to one of the chairs near the workspace. "Not many people get to see one of us get marked."

Dev had absolutely no idea what was going on. "Okay." She managed to answer. "What does that mean?" She sat down and tried to assimilate everything that had just happened, but her thoughts wouldn't settle properly and she gave it up after a minute.

It did seem though, that Jess had developed discomfort when the other agent had said something incorrect to her.

Interesting.

Jason got up and pulled a chair over, settling himself next to where Jess was. "I get you." He said, making some adjustments. "It's just really damn hard." He looked over at Dev. "No offense meant, kid." He said. "I've just been at this a long time, and I've seen a lot of people kicked downstairs for your kind."

Dev still had no idea what was going on, or what downstairs was. “I’m sorry.” She replied. “I can tell you none of us wants to harm anyone.”

“Of course they don’t. They’ve got no more choice about being here than you and I did, Jase.” Jess said. “If you want to be mad, be mad at the bastards at the top. They made the decision.” She flexed her arm and turned it slightly. “Put it there.”

Jason grunted.

“Being marked.” Jess turned to Dev. “They don’t let us put patches on these suits anymore like in the old days. You could get a patch or a mark for all your achievements. We can’t do that now so we do this.” She pointed at her arm. “For every gig, for every mission, we tell the story here.”

Dev stared in fascination at the designs.

“Where it was, what it did… “ A high pitched buzz sounded and Jess licked her lips, setting her feet squarely on the floor as Jason leaned close with the device in his hand. “Who we lost.” She took a breath. “Who we killed.”

“Ready.” Jason braced the hand holding the gun with his other hand. He waited for Jess to nod, then he carefully pulled the trigger, and the blue light jumped from the gun to Jess’s skin, with a high keening sound and a faint sizzle.

Dev felt a shiver go down her spine. She could see Jess’s body stiffen and her eyes closed, though her breathing remained steady.

“Didn’t think I was going to get this mark.” Jess said after a minute or two.

“Yeah.” Jason murmured softly. “Lot of dots for this one.”

“Thirteen black. Don’t short em.” Jess said, in a clipped tone. “Twelve of them there and Joshua.”

“Hm.” Jason grunted.

Dev felt very out of depth. She could smell the faint scent of burned flesh, and she could see the muscles in Jess’s legs jumping and she realized whatever this was probably hurt a lot. There were a lot of marks on her arms, and the whole thing seemed just a little insane to her.

“Green or no?”

Jess was silent for a while. “ Can a complete failure be a green?” She asked. “No. Leave it clear.”

“Okay.” Jason made another adjustment. “Color.” He warned, leaning close again, and the high buzz returned.

“Joshua’s the reason you’re here. “ Jess looked over at Dev. “He was my partner. My tech.” She said. “The other side bought him and he led us into a trap and knifed me in the back.”

Dev’s eyes widened.

“Bastard.” Jason muttered.

“So you’re going to be my bus driver.” Jess said. “You’re never going to be my partner. You understand? No offense. You seem like a nice kid, but I'm not going to trust you at my back.” She looked over at Dev. “Assuming you can actually do the job.”

Dev lifted her head a little and their eyes met. “I do understand.” She said. “I’m really sorry that happened to you. It must have been terrible.” Her eyes never left Jess’s and as the silence lengthened, the buzz faded.

Finally Jason cleared his throat. “Sucks it took one of them to say that.” He said. “None of us did.”

Jess’s gaze dropped, and she sat there just breathing for a minute. “You done?” She said. “I’ve got weather to look at.”

Jason decommissioned the gun and clipped it to his jumpsuit, getting up from his chair and dusting his hands off. “Yeah.” He said. “Put some rub on it when you get a chance. I’m going to get some grub.” He turned and left, and the door slid shut behind him with a faint thump.

It was awkwardly quiet for a minute. “May I look at it?” Dev asked.

“Sure.” Jess murmured, sitting still and waiting for the pain to ease.

Dev got up and went to the chair Jason had used, settling down on it and studying the red raw design now carved in Jess's skin. "Wow."

"Stupid tradition." Jess sighed. "But once you start you can't stop it." She looked at her arm, then at Dev past it. "I always promised myself I'd retire out before I got both sleeves." She pushed herself to her feet. "Now I really do have weather to study. " She indicated the inner door between their quarters. "Get some rest. I'll call you in when it's time to talk about the mission."

"Okay." Dev got up and went to the door, then she turned. "Thanks for letting me help you." She said. "And thank you for showing me the dining hall."

Jess settled behind her desk and leaned on it, gazing at Dev thoughtfully. "You get it about the driver thing, right? I dont' really know what you are. I can't trust that."

Dev nodded. "We're used to being thought of as stupid and sometimes useless." She stated. "We always want to do good work though, and I hope I can for you"

Jess frowned a little. "You're not stupid. Not if you just said that." She admitted. "I just don't want you to be pissed off because I..." She paused. "Anyway. We'll see."

"Yes." The bio alt agreed. "We will. I'm going to go run the carrier sims now and be as prepared as I can."

"If nothing else, we'll learn something." Jess said, finally smiling a little. "You're interesting."

Dev paused with her hand on the touch-plate for the door. "I think you're interesting too." She replied, with a faint smile of her own, before she triggered the latch and went through it, letting it close behind her.

Jess sat back in her chair and drummed her fingers lightly on the arms. Then she exhaled and pulled the sheets Stephen had given her over, unfolding them and reaching out to touch the console pad. "Ouch." She grimaced, as she pulled at the newly raw skin on her arm. "Maybe it wasn't smart to do that when we're flying tonight."

She adjusted the light and studied the report, touching a finger on the dotted lines and sweeps, grimacing again as she analyzed the information. "Or maybe not."

**

Dev stood for a minute in her chamber, just listening to her own heartbeat slow and settle. Once it had, she went over and got a bottle of liquid from the dispenser, opening it and drinking it down in a draught.

Then she went and sat in her chair, trying to decide what to do. Jess had told her to get some rest, but Jess had also inferred that they might be going out on a mission tonight so she realized her tech skills would be put to a very real test very real soon.

She'd been in the sims for the carriers, of course. She'd known she would have to pilot them, that was part of the programming and she'd done a whole shift in the lab for that. But sims were sims, and she decided she'd set up a session and review everything just to be sure.

That decided, she went in the sanitary facility and used it, still bemused by the swirling water. Then she came back into the main part of the chamber and went over to the bed, sitting down on it curiously and then laying down on her back.

Very different from the crèche and it's snug, rotating pods that cradled you and rocked you through the night.

This was cool, though yielding, the surface conforming to her body in a comfortable way, but wide and spacious giving her room to spread out as much as she wanted.

The pillows were also mild and yielding, and they cradled her head, making it easy to relax. She did so for a few minutes, watching the lights adjust themselves as the pressure of the bed was detected and analyzed.

The illumination softened and darkened, and she found herself thinking about everything she'd seen in the long day.

Her leaving from the crèche. The arrival at Interforce. The killing of the director. Being given her things. Being given this space. Lunch.

Jess.

She thought about the design she'd seen cut into Jess's arm, and how sad it seemed to her that these people, these soldiers seemed to have so hard a life, that they had to carve their accomplishments into their own flesh and get no thanks otherwise.

And what had Jess meant when she said she hadn't had a choice to be here either? Dev looked at the faint glints of mica in the rough cut ceiling. That she didn't really understand, nor what she'd meant when she referred to Elaine's tech as an outsider.

What did that mean, really? And, what had Jason meant by knowing people who were kicked downstairs, as he had said, because of her kind?

Did he mean they'd lost their place here, because of bio alts? Dev frowned. What was downstairs? Could it really be that natural born people had been displaced like that? She'd always thought that bio alts did tasks no natural born would want to, and they would have gone on to do something more interesting or rewarding in its place.

Surely that was true. Surely they didn't just throw those natural born out. Dev got up and walked around, feeling a burst of nervous energy. That's how it was in the crèche. The natural born people did the important jobs, and the bio alts did the rest.

She climbed up the steps to the training area, and seated herself at the console.

But. She put her hands on the pads and keyed them. But here she was, doing a natural born person's job. This had been Joshua's job.

His job, and his rooms and Jess, his partner.

But she wasn't to be Jess's partner. Jess didn't want that. Joshua had betrayed her. She was just here to help.

She wanted to help. She wanted to do well for these people.

She wanted to do her best, certainly, for Jess who had defended her, and been nice to her, and who apparently wanted her to succeed.

Who found her interesting. Dev studied her reflection in the console.

Interesting.

**

Jess took a sip of her kack, her eyes flicking from one screen to the other studying her options. The weather had put a halt on an immediate leave and now it looked like she was going to have to wait for daylight to go.

Sucked. She scanned the metrics again. It really was a fairly simple plan. She'd target the laboratory she knew they had the new growth tech in, aiming for a supply station entrance halfway up the hill the place was built into.

No doubt she'd draw a crowd. They'd cut off trying to communicate with the two teams, hopefully giving the impression they' considered them destroyed and were no longer interested in them. Wouldn't be the first time, both sides knew it.

You cut your losses. Made no sense wasting precious resources chasing after a lost cause. Jess knew if she hadn't made her own way out in her last gig chances were no rescue would have been attempted for her.

She didn't resent that. It was just the way it was – they were valuable resources, sure, but they were, as she'd told Dev, expendable when there were other things at stake.

Her comm buzzed, and she tapped it. "Drake."

"We meeting?" Jason asked. "Weather tanked."

"Yeah. Bring Elaine over." Jess said. "We'll be plus eight to go, but might as well go over the outline."

“Be there.” Jason cut the comm off.

Jess leaned over and tapped another button. “Dev?” She waited. After a pause, she tapped again. “Dev?”

With a soft crackle the circuit opened “Yes.” The bio alt’s voice responded. “My apologies. I was investigating the wet space.”

“The what?” Jess stared in puzzlement at the comm..

“There is a space in the sanitary facility with a pipe over it.”

“Oh. The shower.” Jess said. “You were taking one.” She listened to the faint sound of breathing coming over the comm., as her new next door neighbor considered what she’d said. That was one thing she’d noticed about Dev – she waited to talk until she knew what she wanted to say.

“Yes.” Dev finally concluded. “If you mean, I went under the pipe and got very wet.” She added. “That was unusual.”

“You don’t have showers upside?” Jess found herself interested by this odd conversation.

“We do.” Dev said. “But they don’t involve getting wet.”

“Oh.’ Jess said. “Well, dry off and come over. We’re going to run the plan.”

“All right.” The bio alt replied. “Thank you.”

The comm cut off. Jess gazed at it in bemusement for a minute, then she went back to the console screen and started assembling the information she would need to lay out the statistics and the routes to her colleagues.

Two minutes, and a knock on the inner door sounded. Jess pressed the ingress key and the door slid open, revealing Dev’s slim figure. The bio alt’s hair was damp, slicked back off her forehead and giving her finely etched features a slightly tougher cast. “So water’s a novelty for ya, huh?”

Dev sat down in one of the chairs across from Jess’s workspace. “Running water, yes.” She agreed. “They made all the water in the crèche. They told us it was expensive. The natural borns had it, I think, in their quarters but we used flash rad to clean our skins.”

Jess leaned on her elbows. “Radiation?”

Dev nodded. “It would burn off our sleep clothes and the first layer or so of skin.” She said. “Effective way to get rid of dirt and any bacteria.” She inspected her hand. “I think I like water better.”

A soft chime came at the outer door. Jess pressed the release button, then sat back as Jason and Elaine entered. “C’mon in” She swiveled both displays around and slid them back so everyone could see them as they approached warily and took the seats next to Dev.

“Okay.” Jess sorted out the sheets. “Weather cranked us.”

“Heard that.” Jason said. “Shaking the roof upstairs.”

Jess nodded. “Big e-stat storm coming overhead. Met figures it’ll clear by oh six.” She touched a control, and displayed a map on the screen. “Here’s the frontal boundary.”

“Big one.” Elaine commented. “Wouldn’t want to be out in that. Is it going to reach the other side?”

“That’s our cover.” Jess ran the scan forward. “See that? It’s scheduled over the drop site just before twelve hundred. We come in behind it. “

Both Jason and Elaine nodded.

“Then we…” Jess motioned between herself and Dev. “Split off, and head for the front door of the lab there.” She pointed. “You two come around the side here, and tuck in behind the cliffs.”

“You’re not going to drop in there, Jess.” Jason said. “That’s suicide.”

Jess shook her head. “Not in my plans but I want them to think I am. “ She said. “I’ll take out the outer post here.. “She pointed at a lonely outcropping surrounded by sea. “With the guns and then come in at wave level. “

“Freak them out.” Elaine said. “And with the chop they can’t be sure you’re alone.”

Jess nodded.

“So then we wait for the plugs to rush off to grab you, and we go get Sandy and Mike.” Jason said. “We get out. You get out, you join us, we run for home.”

Jess nodded again. “Real basic. Nothing fancy. We just want to get them back.” She pushed two slips of film at them. “Here’s the plotting coordinates. If I were you, I’d wait until we’re underway to program em in.”

Both agents looked very uncomfortable. “Brent's gonna freak.”

Jess shrugged. “Fact is, Bain said he thought someone was still talking from inside.” She said. “You want to risk it?”

“Jess.” Elaine leaned back and crossed her legs at the ankles. “I was thinking about that. Doesn’t make sense they’d use the same vector twice. They don’t, y’know?”

Jess grunted.

“How do we know it’s not … I mean, maybe it was Bricker.” Jason said. “I remember taking classes with him a year ago or so – he didn’t seem like such a hothead jerk back then. I liked him.” He went on. “So maybe he was turned, and he turned Josh?”

“Jase’s right. He has changed… or he did change, anyway.” Elaine agreed. “When he was a group leader, I always thought you could trust him. Hell – he used to play slam ball with us late watch.”

It was tempting. Jess studied her colleagues, and the silently watching bio alt. Tempting to think it was all Bricker, and now that he was dead, they could relax and be safe again. “Josh liked Bricker.” She allowed. “He used to have dinner and drinks with him.”

Elaine eyed her. “Rumor said more.”

Jess put it all aside. “Maybe.” She lifted a hand. “But right now, we don’t’ have time to look at that. Let’s get the teams back, then we can regroup. If we’re lucky, you’re right, and it was him but if you don’t tell your techs, and the plan gets spilled we know two things – one, you were wrong and it wasn’t him, and two, there’s still someone out there but it's not Brent or Tucker.”

“Damn I hope it was.” Jason groused. “I hate walking around with clouds over my head, and we’ve got the new group coming in next month on top of it. That’s twelve more unknown vectors. “

Six new agents, six new techs, fresh from the field school. “I know.” Jess agreed. “But it’ll be good to get some of those empty bays back in action. I ‘m starting to feel like a really dying breed here.”

They were all silent after that.

“So, flight deck at oh four?” Jason finally said. “I’m going to get some bunk time. My head’s exploding.” He stood up, stretching his body out. “Meet you all for breakfast?”

Jess and Elaine nodded, and Elaine stood to join him in leaving. They stood in awkward silence, then they turned and went to the door, leaving Jess and Dev alone behind them.

Jess studied the door somberly for a moment, before she turned her attention back to the bio alt. “You ready to do this?” She asked bluntly.

Dev considered the question. “I have done all the reviews I can on the sims.” She said. “I am as prepared to execute your request as I can be, given the circumstances.”

“Sims aren’t the real thing.”

“I know.” Dev said. “I’ll do the best I can.”

They were both quiet for a minute. “So you figured out the shower, huh?” Jess said. “I never thought about that whole water thing upside. We have so much of it.” She paused. “Want to see a lot more than that shower?”

Dev’s eyes searched her face with interest. “Sure.”

“C’mon.” Jess got up. “It’s close to dark, but we can still see it.” She led the way out of her quarters and went along the corridor, turning left at the central corridor and heading down a dark gray painted hall.

They passed three section scans, then she turned right and went into a longer corridor with low, green tinted lights. It was empty except for the two of them, and as they continued, the air became a little thicker and wetter.

“We can only stay out a few minutes. Storm’s coming overhead.” Jess turned a final corner and faced a thick metal door, with a prominent palm scan. Letters stenciled in black on it were clearly visible.

“External Access. This is an airlock.” Dev read them. ‘What does that mean? In the creche, airlocks were dangerous places.”

“Not so bad here.” Jess grinned, and keyed the door. It opened with a grinding, sucking sound revealing a square metal box. She stepped inside, and waited as Dev joined her with a somewhat cautious look at the stark walls.

Then Jess keyed the outer door, and processed the lock. The inner door sealed, and then the outer released, with a pressure change that made their ears pop. At once, the box was filled with the intense smell of salt and a damp wind buffeted them with a roar.

Jess stepped forward onto a small rocky outcropping, and leaned her arms on the rough stone wall. After a moment’s hesitation, Dev joined her, the bio alt’s hair and her own lashed back by the ferocious wind.

Dev put her hands on the stone, the surface feeling cold and damp under her touch as the airlock door closed behind them.

It was strange. She was looking out over a wild, white ruffled surface under a cap of solid, multi layered dark and light gray, and in the distance she could hear a heavy, almost continuous rumble. “W.. .what is this?” She asked, raising her voice above the sound.

“It’s the ocean.” Jess replied. “This is what used to be called the Atlantic Ocean, matter of fact. “ She glanced around at the high cliffs, weather worn and stark. “It’s water.”

Dev looked out over the wild scene, breathing in the rich, mineral scented air. The water was only about a hundred feet below them, crashing against the wall of rock sending spray up so high it almost reached them.

It was amazing. Dev could only stare at it in wonder, it was so unlike anything she’d ever experienced or thought she would experience. “It’s big.”

Jess chuckled. “It’s very big.” She agreed. “We’ll be flying over it tomorrow. “ She touched the wall. “These cliffs this old place is tunneled into shows two sides. Backside's a wasteland. This side.. at least you get the sense the sea's alive.”

She looked down at the surging waves. “It’s our life now. We generate power by it, take food from it, and it’s why you have a water shower. We’ve got plenty of it. About the only thing in the world we have plenty of.”

Dev could feel the rumble move through her, and she looked out over the surface of the water, seeing a seething motion that seemed never ending. She edged forward and looked down over the wall, seeing the white foam at the base of the cliff washing over the rocks and rushing in and out of holes she caught a brief glimpse of.

They were standing on a small niche, with room for probably a dozen people on it. “What is this for?” She asked Jess. “This little place?”

“Just for us to look.” Jess answered. “To see storms coming in.” She pointed a a line of gray. “That’s what’s keeping us here tonight instead of going out. See those flashes?”

“Yes.”

“Electromagnetic surges. They’ll knock a carrier right out of the sky. Shorts the systems out.”

“Oh.” Dev could see the crackling bolts, and the flashes in the far off clouds. “That sounds difficult.”

“We have a cavern downstairs.” Jess said. “Sometimes we go down there, when it’s calmer, and swim.”

“Swim?”

“We jump in the water. In the ocean.”

Dev looked at her with unabashed wide eyed astonishment.

The rumble got a lot louder, and Jess turned and keyed the door. “Time to go in. Storms too close.” She waited for the panel to enter, then ducked inside and closed the door as soon as Dev cleared it. When it shut, the sudden lack of sound was almost ear ringing.

Dev ran her fingers through her hair, straightening the wind blown disarray. “That was amazing. Thank you for showing it to me.” She licked her lips a little. “It’s salty.”

“Yes.” Jess agreed. “Ocean’s full of salt. We scrub it to make it drinkable and then the salt’s used for cooking with the rest of the stuff they scrape out of it.”

They walked along in silence for a few minutes. “Do the colors mean something?” Dev asked as they crossed from the gray back into the dark blue, heading for the lighter blue of the residential corridor.

“Sort of. They say they used to all be the same color, and everyone spent all their time getting lost so they changed them up so at least you can see if you’re in ops.. that’s the blue tones, or med, that’s white, or security, that’s green and so on. There’s a chart in the docs in the system. You can look it up.”

Dev thought about that. “They did that upside too.” She said. “You could tell where you were, what level, and that kind of thing by the walls.” She paused. “But it wasn’t as big as this and there was nothing like what you just showed me. The only thing a little bit like that was the null grav gym.”

Jess keyed her door open. “The what?” She waved Dev forward.

“Null gravity gym. It was a big padded place they turned off grav in, and you got to play catch me, and ball, and do exercises.” Dev said. “It was in the top of the crèche, and it had a clear ceiling, You could float for a minute, sometimes, and just watch the stars.”

“Stars.” Jess paused in the center of her quarters. “I’ve read about those. They showed us vid in school.”

Dev stopped at the internal door between their quarters and looked back. “If you ever come to the crèche, I’ll show them to you.” She offered. “I think they’re really nice but not nearly as exciting as the ocean is.”

Jess met her eyes, then looked away with the faintest of smiles. “Get some rest.” She ordered. “The alarm will go off at 0300. Then we’ll get to see if Bricker and Bain were right, and you’re worth something to the job or not.”

Dev nodded, then passed through into her own bunk, letting the door shut behind her.

Jess looked at the door briefly. Then she started towards her workspace, but midway there changed her mind and went back to her bed instead. She lay down on it and put her hands behind her head, looking up at the mica infested ceiling of the chamber.

“Stars.” She murmured. “Huh.”

**

Dev went to the wardrobe module and examined the drawers again. In the crèche, she’d slept in the soft paper garments they all changed into before getting into the sleep pods, which would be sucked off and recycled the following morning.

Here she wasn't really sure what to do. After a few moments thought, she stripped out of the jumpsuit and hung it up, leaving her in her underwear. Then she put on a light undershirt she'd found on the shelves, that came down to her mid thigh, and had half sleeves.

That seemed all right. She went over and pulled the covers down on the bed, climbing into it and pulling them back over her. The surface of the bed conformed to her at once, and the lights dimmed, and she felt the covers warm to her skin.

She was tired. With the time alteration and the early start to her day, the tension and the activity had kept her on edge since they'd left the crèche and now she was glad to relax her body, and know she had some time to rest before her first big trial.

It was exhausting, she'd discovered, to be in such a strange place, with all strange people, all disliking her for various different reasons.

No one really wanted her to be there. She was a little sad about that, because having a placement here had been so exciting for her, despite how hard and strange the programming had been. She had been looking forward to being able to use that training, and it made her feel bad to know that so many people here were against that.

Only the man with the gun seemed to be for it, and Doctor Dan. The agents didn't seem to trust her, and the other techs definitely didn't want her around.

Then there was Jess.

Dev thought about Jess. She wasn't really sure what Jess's view on her was. She'd gotten the impression, in fact, Jess had said outright that she was working with her just because the ma with the gun wanted her to.

She had said, also, that she didn't consider Dev a real part of her team, just a driver.

It seemed quite clear.

But really, Jess had been the only one in the place so far who had a friendly word for her, and who had offered to help her find her way.

Was that because the man with the gun wanted it that way? Dev rolled onto her side and settled her head comfortably on the pillow. If so, she was glad. At least there was someone who was willing to talk to her like she was a real person.

She wanted to do well for Jess. She'd gone through the sim a dozen times, and hoped it would be enough to let her drive the carrier for real.

She trusted her programming. She only hoped Jess would come to trust her.

**

The alarm bonged softly at 0300. Jess blinked, as the lights inside adjusted and produced a quiet glow that gently illuminated her quarters. With automatic motions, she got out of bed and shook herself, letting the last shreds of sleep fall away.

Wisps of her last dream faded with them and she didn't' try to recall what it was. There was an aching tension in her shoulders that meant it was a bad one and she was just glad it hadn't gone on long enough to wake her screaming.

She retrieved a mug of kack from the dispenser and opened it, taking a long swallow as she walked into the sanitary unit as the lights helpfully came up inside. She used the facility, then she started the shower running, pausing before she entered to go back into the main area and trigger comms to the overhead speaker on listen.

The familiar drone of the ops center filled the air and she listened for a minute, hearing nothing alarming, and then went back and took off her sleepwear and stepped into the steaming water.

It felt good and she stood for a bit, letting the water pound against her. She pulled in a breath full of steam, the flat metallic scent of the water so very familiar to her filling her lungs. She took a handful of scrub and burnished her skin with it, then used another handful and washed her hair.

Old custom. Most people in the world now used dry scrub or didn't bother. The rain came every day, and everyone got caught out in it. To deliberately wet yourself was something that had come to be seen as wasteful and strange, but here in the citadel they all did.

They had the hydro power to run the desals, and the scrub was made from throwaway elements, so why not? Jess rinsed her hair out again, and stood for another moment, letting the hot water relax her muscles. It was also one of the marks of Interforce, that neatly cropped, clean shaven look that was a long ago holdover from the national forces they'd all descended from.

She got out and shut the water down, then toweled herself dry and made her way through the main chamber to the dressing station, popping it open and taking out a set of underwear and putting them on. Then she opened the second part of her cabinet and removed an insertion suit, slipping into it and snapping the catches on.

Unlike the jumpsuit they all typically wore in the facility, this was different. It was far heavier and had lightweight body armor built into it protecting her most vital areas. There were integrated comms and leads for the carrier systems and buckles and clips for her weapons.

She picked up her boots and carried them to the workstation, leaning a finger on the comms. "Dev?"

"Yes." The answer came back immediately.

"Ready?" Jess asked.

"Yes."

"C'mon in here." Jess released the button and sat down to pull her boots on. A moment later the inner door opened and her tech entered. She briefly scanned her slight form, noting she had found and put on the carrier ops rig and was holding her own boots in her hand. "Sit."

Dev did, putting down one boot and putting on the other.

"You sleep okay?" Jess asked. "I can imagine most of this is pretty strange."

Dev glanced up at her. "Really well, thank you." She said. "It's very comfortable." She put on her other boot. "I really like the wet thing. It makes my skin feel good."

"The shower?" Jess smiled briefly. "Yeah, I like it too." She stood up, and after Dev did also, she scrutinized the bio alt's gear with a critical eye. "They give you programming for this?" She pointed at the suit.

"Yes." Dev said. "But also, there are some things that are left to natural sense." She said. "Like putting underwear on, and that sort of thing. We don't need programming for that." She paused. "Or sneezing, or using the lavatory."

Jess started chuckling. "You are really different from the rest of the bio's we have here." She admitted. "Are there many like you topside?"

Dev straightened her cuff a little. "I'm the only one they've produced in my set so far." She said. "So I guess no."

"Ah." Jess pulled her hair back in a tail and quickly braided it, then tucked it into her collar. "So you're one of a kind, eh?"

"Yes."

Well, that was interesting. Jess climbed the steps up to her weapons locker. "Let me just get rigged, and we'll grab some chow." She opened up the case and took out the stun knives, sliding them into their sheaths and added her sidearm into it's holster.

Her heavy weapons were in the carrier, but she took the time to clip on a utility flash and a multi-tool then she trotted down the steps and waved Dev towards the door. "Let's go, kid." She said. "Time to make the doughnuts."

Dev followed her willingly, but had a slightly perplexed expression on her face. "What's a doughnut?" She asked. "And how do you make them?"

"They're mythological." Jess said.

“Oh.”

“I hear they tasted good though.”

“I see.”

**

Dev had to stop a moment just to stare when they entered the carrier hanger. It was a huge cavern, larger than any space she’d ever seen inside before, and it was full of parked vehicles, most huddling in the dark.

Three were lit, however, and several bio alt mechanics were moving around them with pads and tools. Jess headed towards the one furthest on the left and she quickly trotted to catch up with her as Elaine and Jason split off and went to their own crafts.

Overhead were giant panels in the roof, on tracks that apparently opened to let the carriers out. The whole place smelled of organics and synth oil, and echoed with the sounds of latches engaging and bangs of tools.

Dev’s eyes took in the carrier Jess was nearing. Her programming kicked in, and the outline of the squat, powerful vehicle hit familiar chords as information about it poured in. The outside color was mottled gray, except for the identification code stenciled outside the hatch, and Jess’s last name printed underneath it.

Jess palmed the hatch lock and ducked inside as it opened and Dev followed her, trying to take everything in as quickly as she could.

Programming gave her the inside before she saw it, and she nodded as she moved past the strapped down bucket seat Jess would ride in and went up into the nose of the carrier, where a second station was waiting for her.

The inside of the carrier was packed with gear. Mostly electronic, monitoring and scanning systems, gyros, and positioning rigs. To one side a rack was lashed that held long muzzled laser rifles and one heavy projectile cannon, and the drop pack with it’s jet systems.

Dev went to the pilot’s seat and settled into it, feeling the gimbals shift as it took her weight. She took a breath and looked around at the console, comforted when a mental image of the sim settled over the reality of the controls and they started making sense to her.

“Run the checklist.” Jess’s voice was cool and a little distracted. “I assume you know how?”

“Yes.” Dev flexed her hands, and settled back into the seat, waiting a moment until the programming kicked in and her fingers reached out to start the sequence. ‘Systems coming live.” She warned, as the console came to life and in rapid succession, the equipment packs to her right and left followed.

Jess slowly sat down and watched in bemusement as the carrier came alive around her, as the slim hand of the bio alt went through touches and settings as though she’d done it many times before.

Dev activated the leads and hooked them into her suit, sliding the comm rig over her head and tucking the ear cups into place. She flicked her eyes to the registration number and then keyed in a command. “Carrier BR27006 systems check.”

“Stand by.” A mechanical voice answered. “Stand by BR27006.”

“Standing by.” Dev said. She looked at the console readouts, and pulled a pad over, keying in the various settings and supplies they reported. She saw an incoming request, and reviewed it. “They are asking to setup an intercom.”

“Go ahead.” Jess said. “That’s Jason. It’s so we can talk to each other.”

“Intercom set to channel 4500, sideband 2.” Dev spoke into the comms. “Read back?”

“Confirmed.” A male voice answered. “Channel 4500, sideband 2. Brent out.”

Jess quickly checked the heavy arms, then she reached over and punched the door seal, closing out the sounds of the carrier bay. At once, the internal sounds of the vehicle, the click and whir of the life support, and the low hum of the pre start engines became obvious.

She could see Dev making adjustments, and she pulled her own pad over, and scanned the system readouts. After a moment, she looked at the back of the pilot's chair and let out a small, surprised breath. "Damn."

"BR27006, systems check complete." A voice called quietly in Dev's ear. "Stand by for switch to internal systems."

"Standing by." Dev watched the readouts, as the umbilicals were removed and they were on internal power. She could see the spool ups for the two big engines and the launch jets and she triggered the restraint system that closed around her holding her snugly to her seat.

Her feet in the boots found the side jet controls, the chair gimbals moving to adjust for her height. Now that the internal systems were online, whispered voices started in her ear as systems came up to flight ready and reported to her. "I think we're set." She reported to Jess. "Every thing's online and green."

Jess was seated in her chair, with her arms folded. "You actually know how to do this." Her voice was tinged with disbelief.

Dev turned in her seat and looked back at Jess. "Apparently so."

"Unreal." Jess settled a comm set over her own head and triggered it. "Blue group 1, Blue group controller."

"One, Tac 1."

"One, Tac 2."

The answers came back in clipped tones. "Report ready." Jess said. "We are ready and standing by to launch."

Bare hesitation. "Tac 1 ready." Jason answered. "Standing by."

"Tac 2 ready' Elaine followed a beat later. "Standing by."

"Ask control to open the gates." Jess told Dev. "We'll launch first, you all follow. When we get to the first set of coordinates, I'll split right you split left. Copy?"

"Understood." Jason reported.

"Gotcha." Elaine said.

"Control, this is BR27006. Requesting access for flight please." Dev spoke into the comms.

Even through the hull of the carrier, they could hear the roof opening, the huge metal panels grinding apart and allowing a thunder of water into the bay, drops falling and slamming into the carrier roof with a muted roar.

Dev settled herself and put her hands on the engine throttle controls, her mind going over her next few steps. She was glad she had the programming so solid for this, everything seemed familiar to her and the readouts all clicked in her mind.

"BR27006 this is control." The voice said. "Access is granted. Launch when ready."

"Go." Jess said. "Let's get this show on the road."

Dev took a deep breath, and let it out, then she thumbed the launch jet controls and felt the carrier shift under her. In the next moment, they were rising past the carriers on either side, and she gently puffed the side jets to position them under the wide opening.

It was like the sim, and not. The rumbling and the sensation was the same, but there was a spatial difference she realized immediately and she gave the launch jets a little more power to get them up and out of the cavern.

Below her, she spotted the two other carriers lifting to follow, and then she was above the hatches and into the steady rain still falling around them. She shifted sideways again, and rotated the carrier 360 degrees on the horizon, looking at the endless expanse of craggy lifeless land and then the equally endless expanse of ocean.

The two other carriers emerged from the cavern, and hovered, as the big panels slid shut. Dev programmed into the coordinates Jess had given her, and then she turned. "Ready to fly."

Jess was still watching her, with her arms crossed, and a bemused smile on her face. “Let’s go, then.” She said. “So far, you’re doing fine.”

Dev smiled back, then she turned and settled herself again. She opened the controls for the propulsion engines and triggered them, waiting for them to engage forward motion before she shut down the launch jets and they started forward.

The rumble of the carrier grew and the engines spooled up, increasing their speed as they left the cliffs behind and headed out over open water. It was very dark, but the multi band sensors in her forward display let Dev see in front of her as though it were daylight.

She increased the speed, and then settled down to watch the readouts, tweaking the trim on the carrier until the outer rumble slowed, then faded, as they went through the speed of sound.

“Jess.” The intercom crackled.

“Yes, Jason?” Jess leaned back in her chair.

“You driving that thing?”

Jess chuckled. “Nope. I’m sitting in the back, about to start checking my guns.”

“Shit.”

Dev glanced behind her. “I’m sorry if I’m causing him disturbance.” She returned her attention to the readouts, making a slight adjustment to their trim.

“That was a compliment. Don’t’ worry about it.” Jess said. “Okay, I’m going to check out the weapons systems. Don’t make any loud noise. I’ve got a jumpy trigger finger and I don’t want to shoot Jason’s butt from under him.”

Dev’s eyes widened a little, and she turned around again to look at Jess.

Jess grinned, and winked. “Keep your eyes on the road, kid. We’re going to have us some fun.”

**

The long trip had given Dev ample opportunity to explore all the controls on the carrier and she was now reasonably comfortable with them, settled back in her chair as the water skimmed under them for mile after mile of ruffled white gray surface.

Jess had tuned the weapons systems that were rooted in her console, laser cannons mounted on all sides of the carrier along with two racks of flash bombs in eject tubes. Now she was working with the pad at her station, keying in trims on the cannons and keeping an eye on their progress.

She hadn’t spoken much. Dev occasionally glanced back at her, noting the absorbed expression as s she went about her tasks. “Sixty minutes to edge of the storm.” She said, as Jess looked up and met her eyes.

“Good.” Jess said. “Okay, here’s the plan.” She got up and came over to where Dev was sitting, kneeling at her side with her pad in her hand. “This is the layout of the base.” She leaned her forearm on the arm of Dev’s chair and indicated a wiremap diagram.

Dev looked at it attentively. There was a triangular block in the center, with a tracing over it outlining entrances and a landing field. “Okay.”

“We go past the Gibraltar outpost.” Jess pointed at the wedge. “That’s where they should pick us up and start chasing us from.” She moved the pad image along and pointed at a set of scattered islands. “That’s the Spanish Archipelago where most of the experimentation happens, and this is the control center at Andorra.” She indicated another large wedge. “That’s our target.”

Dev nodded.

“The service port those other teams were going for is here.” Jess swiped at the pad, enlarging the wedge and pointing out a ruggedly cut square depression just below the summit, obviously a landing pad. “They’re pinned down here.” She swiveled the diagram and pointed to an uneven overhang in a narrow part of a V shaped crack in the rock.

“Okay.” Dev agreed.

“So the tricky part is, we need to keep this thing in one piece while they chase us.” Jess said. “It’s got halfway decent shielding but it won’t take more than a couple direct hits, and being blown to molecules would ruin my day.”

“Yes.” Dev nodded. “Mine too.”

“So you need to let them get close enough to think they’re going to catch us, but not close enough for them to nail us. “ Jess said. “You can use these ridges here, and the edge of the cliffs - they have to think we’re going for the service port.”

“Okay.”

“So then we are.” Jess said. “You’re going to put me down in that entrance and I’m going to leave them a calling card just for what they did to me the last time.”

Dev looked at her. “I don’t remember you going over that in the plan.”

Jess smiled. “What I didn’t tell everyone they can’t tell anyone else.” She said. “If Bain’s right, and there’s another leak inside Interforce, then they’ll expect me to just try and draw them off from the others, which means, they won’t really chase me. “

“Okay.” Dev nodded slowly.

“So then I can get into the service port, and give them something to really worry about. That will draw them off.”

“But they’ll come after you.”

“You’ll have to draw them off, then come back and pick me up.” Jess agreed. “It’ll be tight.”

“I’m sorry, you did realize I’ve never actually done this before.” Dev reminded her. “That wasn’t anything I ever even sim’d.”

Jess studied her face, at fairly close range. “So we’ll find out for sure if you’ve got the chops for it. Otherwise, chances are we’ll both croak.”

Dev studied her somberly. ‘That seems like a non optimal plan.” She commented. “Are you sure you want to do it?”

Jess felt a prickle of surprise. One thing Joshua had never done was question her. Techs didn’t. They weren’t the strategic part of the deal. What did this bio alt know about risk anyway? She looked back at Dev, taking a breath to tell her off when she was caught by the expression on her face.

Serious. Intent.

Concerned.

She re-sounded the question in her head. “Why wouldn’t I want to do it?” She countered.

“Well.” Dev glanced at her consoles, then back at jess. “If something happens and it doesn’t work, then both the other teams, and two with us, and you and I might not return. Does this achieve your goals?”

Jess revised her anger. “I’m gambling on the fact that they're more interested in me than the others. If I focus them on me, the rest of the teams have a much better chance of getting out of here in one piece.”

Dev considered that, and they sat in silence studying each other. “I will do the best I can to do what you ask then.” She finally said. “It would be a good thing if we all got out in one piece.” She swiveled around and put a hand to one ear. “BR27006.”

“Long range scan, one inbound.” The soft speech sounded in her ear.

“What is it?” Jess asked, since she’d left her comm-set back on her station.

“They say they are picking up a single signal inbound to us.” Dev said. “Directly ahead.”

“Interesting.” Jess scuttled back to her station and slid into her chair, swinging the comm-set up and onto her head. She pulled the pad around and started tapping on it, her eyes flicking to the various screens and readouts on her own console.

Dev focused on the air ahead of them, still full of rain, and wisps of cloud they were traveling through. She adjusted her scans and after a minute, they picked up the inbound signal also, a quick pan showing no identifying squirts that would mark them friend or otherwise.

It was coming fast, though. The comp quickly tabulated a vector and she heard Jess behind her starting to activate the weapons systems.

Her harness snugged down and the inside lights, already fairly dim, went to ice blue. She saw two panels come active and she adjusted the power leads from the engines as they shunted energy to the weapons systems Jess was now spooling up.

Dev took hold of the throttles and keyed off auto gen, holding the course by hand as she adjusted the side jets. The incoming object was heading right for them, and now the scan was warning distance. “Five minutes out.”

“Do you have an ident?”

“No.” Dev flexed her hands on the throttles. “Do you want me to evade it?”

“Hang on.” Jess got her hands into the triggering gloves and activated the targeting system. At once, she had a heads up display of what Dev was seeing through the front windows, and side panels that showed her the sensors on the outside of the carrier. “Let it come close enough for visual, then turn to port and come up over it.”

“Okay.” Dev reviewed what she’d have to do, and nodded to herself. She put the scan up on one monitor and watched it, seeing the blip getting larger and larger on the display.

“Tac 1, Tac2.” Jess’s voice sounded over the intercom. “We’re going to engage the incoming. Stand clear of my zenith please.”

“Done.”

“Clear.”

The male voices answering almost sounded alike, except one was a little deeper than the other. Dev had officially met the other two techs at breakfast in the dining hall and their reaction to her had been so unfriendly that Jess had felt she needed to say something to them about it.

Dev wasn’t sure that was a good thing. She understood why they felt the way they did. Certainly, she thought the two men and also the other agents had resented Jess’s words. But she had to admit to herself she had gotten a certain odd sensation when it had happened that she still hadn't’ figured out.

“Okay, here it comes.” Jess said. “Get ready.”

“Ready.” Dev replied. She focused her attention on the forward window, trading the scans for real time. Ahead of her, she could see the heavy cloud bank they were flying under and she searched the edges of it for the first sight of the oncoming craft.

A faint flicker, then there it was. “Visual.” Dev said. “Evading.” She took the craft into a bowing turn to the left, then hit the bottom jets and the starboard side ones, boosting the carrier up and over the intruder.

“Circle back.” Jess yelled.

Dev held the turn, then rotated the throttles and blended the jets to bring the carrier around in a tight turn, half on it’s side . She spotted the craft and dropped down to come alongside it, close enough now to see it clearly. “It’s another one of these.” She said in surprise.

“Fuckers.” Jess slid around in her station. “Tac 1, Tac 2 loose empty, probably rigged. I’m going to take it out clear standby.”

“Clear!”

“Clear!”

“Hold her steady.” Jess told Dev, as she brought the guns to bear and and fired at point blank range. As a stitching of fire creased the other carrier a bright pinprick of fire erupted near the engines. “Crap! Take her up! Hurry!”

Dev reacted instantly, kicking in the bottom jets and hauling the throttles up at full power, booting the starboard thrusters and peeling the carrier off at a high G high speed arc that took them up into the clouds.

An explosion behind them rocked the air, rumbling through the carrier walls as they punched through the lower cloud layer, and they were between that and the upper one. Dev hit the scan and located the other two carriers, and completed the drop, pitching down through the clouds again and sending out a location burst ahead of them on shortwave before she hauled the carrier into a tight turn to bring them back on course.

Her heart was hammering, a little. She was almost at the point where she was overrunning the programming, the sims not quite up to replicating the events she found herself a part of.
"Okay."

"Erf."

Dev glanced quickly back over her shoulder, spotting Jess righting herself in her chair. "Are you all right?"

"Peachy." Jess put her comm-set back on. "Tac 1, Tac 2. Stable?"

"Stable, confirmed kill." Jason answered. "Nice. Sent a squirt."

"Stable." Elaine echoed. "Close in scan showed that to be BR24004."

Jess exhaled. "Crap."

"Got that." Jason replied. "So we know."

"Damn it." Jess muttered, clicking off comm and staring at the readouts. "Damn it, damn it. They're probably both gone. This is a goose chase. That was one of the two carriers that we're after."

Dev adjusted her controls again and put the carrier back on auto nav. She half turned again in her seat and looked back at Jess. "I'm sorry, but does that mean the people we're going to try and retrieve are not as expected?"

Jess gazed quietly into nothing for a moment. "They're probably either dead or wish they were." She said. "It's hard to get into one of these carriers if the people inside it don't' want you to." She glanced at the hatch. "There's an integrity sensor and when it's breached the gun systems implode."

"Oh."

"That carrier looked untouched." Jess felt sad. "So they must have been let in, to tamper with it, and given codes."

"Oh." Dev's voice took on a completely different tone. "You're… " She paused. "We're not supposed to do that." She corrected herself. 'Programming told me."

"No, Dev. We're not supposed to do that." Jess sighed.

"So are we continuing on this course?" Dev asked after a long moment's silence.

Jess sat back in her seat. "Let me think about that for a bit, kid." She let her head rest against the back of the chair. "Just keep us on track for now."

Dev turned back around and ran her eye over her settings, then she peered out the forward window, seeing the bulky outline of the clouds overhead in the eerie glow of the infrared. She checked the clock, and snugged her straps a bit tighter, wishing she had a drink of water somewhere around.

She heard Jess unstrapping and moving around, but she kept her eyes forward, watching the horizon for the first sign of land, wondering how this latest development was going to change the plan.

After about five minutes, Jess appeared at her elbow, handing over a sealed vacuum container and opening one of her own. "If it were two carriers I just blew up, we'd have turned back already."

Dev examined the container, and opened it, finding the cold, slightly fizzy kack beverage inside. She took a sip of it, wondering if Jess had somehow heard what she was thinking.

"But there's still a team there." Jess went on. "And I can't just go back and leave them and not know."

"Okay." Dev nodded. "I'm sorry something happened to that other one. I hope it isn't as bad as you think it is." She lifted the container. "Thank you for the drink. I needed one."

Their eyes met briefly. "There's a dispenser there, behind the scan console. It's tucked in back, you can barely see it." Jess said. "Sorry. Should have told you when we came in. It's not standard." She was perched on the edge of the console, running the edge of her finger against the container.

Dev wasn't sure what to do. She sipped her drink, watching her readouts and from the corner of her eye, watching the silent figure at her left hand side.

"Anyway." Jess straightened abruptly. "So maybe we won't drop. At this point, I don't know what to expect when we get there." She went back to her station and sat down, setting the container in a swinging holder as she went back to looking at scan.

Dev put her own cup down and ran over the engine settings, making sure the power levels were where they needed to be and everything looked normal.

Normal. Dev had to rub the bridge of her nose for a moment. Normal? She had gone from her classes in the crèche to driving a half strange transport into a big fight in just a sun's complete turn. Her life could not possibly have changed more than it had in the last day.

Could not possibly.

"Thirty minutes to the edge of the storm. " She told Jess.

Jess put her pad away and drained her drink. She got up and went to the drop pack, checking the harness carefully and running the device through its diagnostic checks. Little more than a set of small, tightly controlled air jets it was designed to let a person wearing it fall out of the lower hatch of a carrier and land without killing themselves.

Or that was the theory anyway. Jess had several long healed bone breaks from using the thing, but it was safer and more controlled than either gliders or chutes and in an area like they were going into, full of cliffs and rocks, at least it would give her a chance at an upright landing.

She opened the harness up and got it clipped, ready for her to step into if the time came. Then she set up one of the big laser rifles in it's holder on one side, and a grenade launcher on the other, balancing out the weight.

She made sure they were secured, then she sat back down in her seat and powered up the weapons systems again.

So what was the plan now? Jess glanced up at the pilots seat. Joshua would have asked a dozen times already, nervously messing with switches and toggles up there. In contrast, Dev was quietly running her checks, and getting ready to take the ship off auto nav, her eyes never ceasing to move over the readouts watching them closely.

Very surprisingly competent. Jess was uncomfortably stunned at the level of knowledge the crèche had given this kid in a week, aware of just how long it would have taken a natural born person to get to this level.

On the one hand, at least she knew the kid probably wasn't going to drive the bus into a cliff. At least, not more so than any of the other techs. On the other hand, if they could do this with just one week's lead time…

Holy shit. Maybe that's what Bain really wanted. Get rid of all the troublesome, stubborn artifacts in the company and replace them with cute, competent, smart kids.

Who he could trust.

Who he could order by the dozens if he wanted and not have to pay the family tender rights.

Jess stared at the back of Dev's head. Should she let that happen? "Did you say you were the only one of you?" She asked, suddenly.

Dev turned and looked back. “Yes.” She said. “I always sort of envied my crechemates who were part of a set group. They always had people to talk to.”

Jess managed a brief smile. No, there would be no instant conversion. Even bio alts took the same years to grow up and mature as natural born did. So even if Dev did work out, it would be… “How old are you?”

Dev’s nose wrinkled a little. “Seventeen and a half standard years.” She admitted. “We’re not supposed to be assigned before eighteen, but this was a special request.”

A kid indeed. Jess did the math. Even if it did work out, she’d be either retired to a watchman’s role, or dead by then. So what the hell. “I wont’ tell anyone.” She said. “Let’s get in there, and see what we see. Play it by ear. I’d like to find out at least what happened to our four.”

Dev nodded. “I”ll do my best.”

“I bet you will.”

**

They were moments from the edge of the storm, and Dev throttled back to match the carrier’s speed with with the energy shot edge of clouds she could now clearly see on the horizon. She checked the positioning estimate and saw the edge of the Gibraltar outpost on the far position on the grid.

That was where Jess said they would start chasing them. She rechecked the sensors, moving from one view to another until she was sure they had a good view all around the shuttle so she could see things coming at them.

The scan would tell her positioning, but she knew enough about the systems to know that sometimes they weren’t one hundred percent correct. It was good to be able to see for yourself too. The sims did that - more than once she’d requested a perimeter view and found obstacles, or once even a stalled shuttle that the scan hadn’t reported.

So she checked and rechecked, feeling a nervous ball start to form in her stomach as they crept closer.

This was hard. Dev wasn’t sure she was up to this task, it’s demands overrunning the amount of programming she had for it. She knew what to do, but she also knew things would start happening so fast she would have no time to think about it.

“Okay.” Jess exhaled, bringing her systems live. “Let’s get ready to run the gauntlet, kid.”

Dev had no idea what a gauntlet was or why they would want to run one, but she settled her hands on the controls, put her boots on the thruster pedals and hit the toggle that would flood her comms with all the inputs of the carrier.

Instantly, the sound of the wind outside trickled in, and she could hear the thunder and crackle of the storm. The screens over her seat came alive with views around the carrier and she focused on the forward screen, where she knew the storm would roll over their target any minute.

Behind it, they were hidden. There was so much disruption in the atmosphere in the leading edge no scans could see past it. They were coming in hard behind it, the two other carriers to their left and right, a few thousand feet to their rear.

Dev’s heart started beating faster. She felt uncomfortable, her mouth was dry, and her hands felt shaky. Her forward display was showing the nearby flashes and behind her, she heard Jess hitting contacts, making a strange low noise as she did so.

Disconcerting.

“Dev?”

“Yes?”

“Good luck.” Jess said, in a quiet tone. “Just go with it.”

Dev had no idea what that meant. “Okay.” She agreed. “Storm is over Gibraltar, standby by for clearance.”

“Here we go.” Jess brought the targeting systems online and started hunting. “Tac 1, Tac 2. Soon as we clear for scan, split left. We meet at the drop zone. Look for the remaining carrier, and report.”

“Understood.” Jason said. “Meet you on the flip side.”

“Go.” Elaine added. “Luck.”

“Thanks.” Jess said, clicking off just as the storm cleared the rocky promontory and her scan came alive with signals. “They can see us.”

Dev sorted the incoming signals, almost feeling the scans bounce off the hull of the carrier as the storm rolled over the big rock and exposed it’s raw, rugged flank to them. She could see lights peppered across it’s surface, and then a beacon flared out, heading towards them.

Instinctively, she pitched the carrier forward and nosed down, and the beacon flashed past them. Dev saw lights start to flash on the rock face and then scan told her multiple targets were moving towards them and she hauled the throttles up and hit the engines to full.

Two dart shaped forms came whipping towards them. Dev pitched the carrier to bring the nose right between the attackers, trying not to flinch as a barrage of laser fire came right at them.

A bare second later, return fire flashed past in her peripheral vision and the two darts split to either side, and she arched between them, seeing another line of darts now heading their way.

“Draw them to the right.” Jess said. “Get behind the rock then go down to the deck. The waves’ll confuse em.”

Dev waited for the line to come into range, then she pitched down, then hard right as a hail of hard point missiles rattled against the hull.

“Bastards.” Jess twitched her fingers, keeping on scope as the carrier turned half on it’s side, and the projectiles thumped against the well shielded bottom. The gyros kept pace with the motion though and she let loose a burst of laser pulses that streaked against the gray sky and wrote a stitching of fire across one of the darts.

It blossomed into fire and the machine headed for the water, a small ball heading the other direction marking the pilot’s ejection.

Jess tracked the ball, and squeezed off a shot just as her world turned up side down as the carrier did, before it just as quickly rolled around right side up and then she was under at least five G’s as they went into a steep climb.

Targets, targets. Warning bells chimed in her ears and she focused on her task, firing long, ripping bursts at the dozens now of ships heading toward them.

Laser fire was everywhere, blossoming to the right and to the left, and blanking scan briefly as the carrier dodged the shots.

She was heartened, by the reaction. The defenders hadn’t been there waiting for her, she’d had a good ten minutes inbound before they reacted. That could only be a good sign. She now capped off the comms, putting the intercom between her and the other two carriers on battle silence., knowing they would be doing the same. “Go go go.”

Dev didn’t take a second to look back. She was fully engaged in figuring out how to get out of the way of the dozens of ships chasing them, and keeping the carrier in constant erratic motion to dodge the bolts headed their way.

It was scary. She tried to keep them all in view, her heart thumping hard, seeing a group of six heading her way that triggered, suddenly a burst of programming. Something told her about that group, and about that formation and as she pitched away from them she saw them split apart.

She knew, somehow, that they were going to encircle her. She focused on the six, and saw them curving around, and she saw the two heading for the waves to cut off an escape that way. She rolled the carrier and dodged a blinding flash of laser fire then she caught sight of three of the darts closing in on her.

A blast hit them on the left side. She felt the shudder and two red alerts started flashing on the board. Another flash went to port side, and then she twisted the throttles, kicking the side thrusters hard as she slid under one of the darts and the screens momentarily blacked out, as the rumble of counter fire hit at such close quarters it nearly fried the scans.

Another alarm went off as she turned in the other direction, then she pitched the nose down and skimmed past one of the lower guards so close the dart peeled off and dropped into a spiral to avoid hitting them.

Fire erupted all around them. Dev was totally unsure if it was against them or from them, the flares were so vivid it was causing sparkles in her own eyes. She pushed the throttles forward and dove for the waves, seeing them white and stark against the rock as the gray light grew around them.

She saw one of the darts cross her path, and she turned the carrier onto it's side as the dart fired at point blank range, their bottom armor rumbling as it absorbed the energy, and the vessel shuddered again as their own guns cut loose.

There was an explosion so close to them they lurched sideways in mid flight, and she righted their flying angle and looked frantically around. For a moment, they were in the clear and she saw a ledge projecting out from the big rock and she aimed for it, intending to duck under it and curve along the rock.

She could see a sudden flare of lights along the granite surface, and scan erupted as the darts who had been diving at them diverted and streaked for the wall to get between her and it.

She heard Jess laugh behind her, but she wasn't really sure why. She dodged a spinning dart heading for the waves and reached the ledge moments before the rest of them, turning alongside it and increasing speed as she felt Jess let loose with the guns in a long, continuous, rumbling barrage.

The rumble was replaced with a larger one and all of a sudden the darts were heading away from her, and the rock and she had a clear shot around the edge of the promontory.

"Faster." Jess commented. "Got a boom coming behind us."

A what? Dev obediently pushed the throttles forward and kept as close to the rock as she could, sensing a motion in the air behind them. She checked the rear sensors and her eyes nearly came out of her head when she saw a fireball exploding out from under the ledge.

She hauled up on the controls and shoved the throttles forward again to full speed, hearing the imminent collision alerts and feeling the buffeting as the advance wave of the explosion caught them and she felt the carrier start to tumble.

She went with the motion shoving hard on the side thrusters to keep them away from the rocks as she fought to regain control over the carrier. The two big engines flared, and she was almost deaf from the alarms and the sound of impacts against the hull.

No control. She abruptly cut the engines and felt the carrier drop out of the rampaging explosion and plummet for the surface of the water as the energy flared over their heads.

"Dev?"

"Yes?"

"Didn't mean to show you the ocean this soon." Jess's voice sounded concerned.

"Oh."

Dev was aware of the approaching surface, and she flared the side and bottom jets, evening out the flight of the carrier before she cut the mains in again so close to the waves they washed the bottom hull.

Then they were past Gibraltar, and in free air again. Dev gained altitude and started running checks, watching the scan reports for attackers. "Where are they?"

"Keep moving!" Jess called out. "Head for Alterra."

Dev started to respond to all the alarms, seeing clear scan for the moment. She shut off all the emergency alerts, starting some of the programs that would repair what could be repaired in flight. The systems started shunting power, whispers in her ear reporting damage and status.

They had taken damage in the rear shielding, and three of the external sensors were gone giving her little view on the port side. The forward sensors cleared after a repair, and she looked out to see a gray lit day and a stretch of ruffled white gray water with a few lumps of island rising in the mist.

Her heartbeat settled a little, as she realized she'd gotten through her very first air battle. "Wow."

She heard Jess release her harness behind her and after a moment, she felt a hand on her shoulder. With a start, she half turned and looked up, blinking a little sweat out of her eyes. "Yes?"

Jess smiled at her. "Good job."

Dev smiled tentatively back.

Jess reset some triggers and then retrieved another two of the drink containers, handing one over to Dev before she returned to her own chair.

Dev set the container into it's swivel and wiped her damp hair back off her brow. She could imagine she still felt the pressure against her shoulder of Jess's fingers and gave herself a moment, just a small one, to savor this bit of accomplishment.

Then she went back to the boards, continuing the process of resetting alarms and assessing damage. They were running at top speed a thousand feet over the waves and she could see fog rising from the water everywhere, swirling behind them as their exhaust stirred it.

It was eerie, and a little beautiful.

"They'll be waiting for us at Alterra." Jess said. "We need to make this fast. I'm feeding you up the coordinates to the science center. Head right for it." She keyed something into her pad. "Make em believe we're going to ram this thing right into entrance."

"Okay." Dev said. "Are we actually going to do that?"

"No, Dev. Dyings not on my schedule today." Jess chuckled a little. "Just make them think we are. Then go somewhere else."

Go somewhere else. Dev turned and shook her head a little. She saw the coordinates plot on her navigation grid and she flexed her hands, putting them back on the controls and taking off the auto nav.

At the edge of the grid she could see the Alterra escarpment, and as she did, she saw a set of blinking lights erupt from it. "Is that them?"

"Yes," Jess slammed back into her seat and pulled her controls around. "Looks like they spotted us."

The lights multiplied and doubled, tripled, filling the screen with alerts and causing the scan to erupt. "There's a lot of them."

"Yup."

Dev could see them coming in from all directions. "This is going to be difficult."

"Only hard things are worth doing, kid." Jess said. "Remember that."

Dev stared at the oncoming armada. "Okay." She shifted her hands on the controls. "I will try to remember that."

"Good." Jess tightened her harness and took a deep breath. She got herself set and made live the guns, checking the power reserves and finding them acceptable.

She hoped her diversion would let Elaine and Jason check the place where they'd last seen the other two teams. She had no idea what they would find given the carrier she'd blown up. But they knew where to look and they knew what to do with what they found.

She checked the time, and checked her plan grid. Then she started the targeting systems and let the targets flood her consciousness.

There were a lot. She lined up the first six and launched a blast on alternating forward guns, glad the carrier's weapon systems had a slightly longer range than their enemy's. She could see them forming into attack circles and one of them dove right for them.

In a heartbeat, they were in the center of a circle of death. The enemy ships matched sync with them and started firing, and Jess fired back, then found herself inverting as the carrier did a barrel roll and the lasers rotated with the ship, nailing at least part of all of the enemy fighters.

Then they were through that bunch and going nose on to a second, when two of that group dove right at them.

Jess fired the forward guns and as they flashed by she grabbed a breath as she inverted again and went under heavy G as the carrier turned on it's tail and her fire went right up the tailpipes of the retreating enemy ships and blew them out of the sky.

Holy crap.

Still upside down, Jess found herself launching a plasma bomb towards a cluster of fighters and then just before she started getting lightheaded they were right way up and she was holding her triggers down on the forward guns as they went full speed through enemy lines.

Dev was concentrating as hard as she could. She was aware of the strain on the engines under her control, but she used all the power she had to keep the carrier on a constantly shifting course as the air around her was filled with enemy fire.

Some was hitting the carrier. She had alarms going off again. The forward screen was almost constantly whitewashed with their own return guns as Jess blasted a path for them through the enemy ships.

The carrier was larger than the defenders, and better armored. The defenders were more agile and faster.

Dev spotted the entrance to the science center, a flat platform halfway up the escarpment with thick barricades in front of it. The door looked like it was big, and metal, and pretty much the same as the ones in the Interforce facility.

She spotted another wheel of figures fit themselves around her and she did another barrel roll, then her eyes widened as she came out of the inversion right into the path of a larger, more well armored craft.

She could see the laser cannons on top of it so she sent the carrier almost straight down, flinching a little as two of the enemy crashed into each other over her head. She pulled up in a high G arc with all her engines firing, gritting her teeth against the pressure as she came up just under the bigger craft, hearing Jess let loose with the upper guns on it.

'Nice!" Jess yelled.

Dev managed a brief grin as she dove for the waves again, seeing huge breaking waves below her. She could feel the impacts on the hull of fire and a quick glance at the monitors showed a dozen darts coming after her all shooting continuously.

Alarms blared.

Dev aimed right for the sea, hearing the mounting damage in her comm sat. She knew she had to get out of range of them before the lasers blew the carrier apart.

Jess was firing the rear guns. "Not much juice left!" She yelled.

Dev pulled the nose up just as they reached sea level as a huge breaker rolled up right into her path. She shot down the center of it, taking the carrier right through the huge phosphorescent tube of water as Jess let out a shout of surprise.

They shot out the other end of the tube and Dev blinked as the salt wash cleared and they were moments away from the escarpment.

She heard a huge disruption behind her. But there was no time to wonder what it was as she fought to control her craft and get the nose up before they went headlong into the rock face.

By a whisper they didn't. She shot up the face of the cliff as Jess launched plasma bombs in a thumping salvo against it. She held the carrier in it's straight up climb until they shot up over the top of it and right into the cloud layer just above.

A blue light was flashing hard on the comms console. Dev didn't have time to look at it though. She arched the carrier over as they reached an altitude almost too high for the jets and curved back over into level flight.

Her heart was absolutely racing. She could feel shivers going up and down her spine and she was alternately feeling flushed and chilled, panting through her open mouth as she caught her breath.

"Keep going!" Jess yelled. "Go go go! They got them! We did it!!"

Dev stared in confusion at the console. "What?"

"The light." Jess pointed. "That's an ultraviolet squirt from Jason. They got them. Get out of here! We did it!"

Dev looked around, and checked the scan, and found only fading targets, blips they were leaving behind as they raced between the cloud layers back in the direction they came. "W.. why aren't they chasing us" She asked. "Where did they go?"

Jess laughed. "Don't look a gift horse in the ass, Dev. Just fly."

Dev wiped her brow and let out a long exhale, chills still running up and down her spine. "Wow." She said. "That was crazy."

Jess chuckled again.

"But I liked it." Dev said, unexpectedly. "I really did." She half turned in her chair and looked at Jess. "It was fun."

Jess peered at her from behind her targeting console, seeing the intense sparkle in her pilot's eyes. "Hm.' She grunted softly. "We may just have to keep you."

"Excuse me?" Dev leaned towards her. "Did you say something?"

Jess smiled. "Take us home, Dev." She said. "Before this thing falls apart." She leaned back as the battered craft rumbled through the thick, moist air. "There's a lot more work to do."

**

They were the last ship back. Dev held the carrier, limping in on one engine, steady as she watched the recovered vessel with it's four passengers and the two that had gone with them sink through the wide opening into the landing bay.

It was still raining. But it was a steady unrelenting drizzle and the winds had died down, allowing Dev to relax as she waited.

Jess was in her seat, tapping furiously on her consoles and pad, occasionally chuckling to herself. She seemed to be in a very good mood, and Dev cautiously evaluated the idea that she'd done okay in their mission.

Her first one. She had, at least, brought them both back in one piece if the carrier wasn't, and since they'd gotten the other teams back, she figured the whole thing might have been something of a success.

Not too bad, for someone who had only driven a sim before now. Dev glanced at her reflection in the curved forward shield, noting her sweat dampened hair. She raked it back and settled her hands on the controls again, the feeling of the throttles against her palms starting to become comfortably familiar.

She moved the carrier forward, tilting the nose down a little with a boost on the landing jets to give her a good view of the bay. She could see clear airspace and she leveled the craft, then increased the lower jets and cut off her main engines.

The carrier drifted downward, clearing the bay opening and settling lower and lower into the vast cavern. "BR27006" She spoke softly into the comms "Requesting landing pad."

The comm crackled immediately. "BR27006, landing pad 82 cleared for your approach."

Dev located the spot, marked with big, easily read numbers and she adjusted the side jets to move them over, hovering above the numbers before she cut power to the landing jets and they settled slowly into place.

There was a team waiting. She recognized a group of Ceebees, in pale orange jumpsuits with kits and hoses in their hands and as soon as she cut power to the drive systems, they bolted forward towards the carrier.

Two sprayed the outside down with something. "What is that?"

"Sealant." Jess said, still slouched in her seat. "In case we popped a line. Don't want to blast anyone with anything." She now had her hands folded over her stomach and was just relaxing. "When they make the hookup, send the logs and the flight recorder detail over to storage."

Dev nodded. "Yes." She had been waiting, in fact, for specifically that. She saw a light come on midway up the console, and ran her fingers over the keys, accepting the connection and setting up the sync.

Another light, and she shut down internal power, and they went into pitch darkness for a few seconds before the external connection kicked in and the lights came back on, along with internal ventilation now being supplied from the dock.

It felt good, the air was cool and fresh and not full of half baked sealant. Dev blinked a little, and unbuckled her harness as she turned her seat around and watched the webbing retract.

"So." Jess regarded her. "NM-Dev-1, you can pilot a carrier."

"Yes." Dev smiled. "Apparently so."

"Where'd you pick up all the upside down stuff?" Jess asked. "I'm betting the other side's never seen one of these do that before cause I sure haven't."

Upside down? Dev frowned a little, and her head tilted to one side. "You mean this?" She lifted one hand and tilted it back and forth.

"I mean when you were flying with the bottom of this thing pointed skyward." Jess explained.

"Oh." Dev nodded. "In space… "She pointed upward. "In the crèche, you get to train in a null grav sim for some of this. It's all.. um." She considered. "There's no right or wrong side up in space. You learn in all dimensions."

Jess studied her face intently for a long moment. "Interesting." She said, finally. "Well, I'll tell you what, Dev. You did as well or better as anyone I've ever seen driving this bus. "

"Are you surprised?"

"Yes." Jess nodded.

"Me too." Dev replied, with an almost impish grin. "Sims are one thing, but real is different. This was very difficult." She said. "Mostly because I didn't have any programming on what to do. They don't give you programs to know what to do when you are flying at a mountain with twenty planes chasing you and shooting at you."

"Ah." Jess murmured. "So you just did that on instinct."

Dev considered that carefully. "I'm not sure what that means."

"You didn't think about what to do." Jess clarified. "You just reacted. You just did it."

Dev considered again, then nodded. She half turned as the comm crackled, reaching over to accept a key.

"BR27006, you are cleared for exit. Systems stable, please release locks and proceed to debrief." A stolid male voice intoned. "Agent Drake, Mr Bain's compliments."

“Hah.” Jess stood up and stretched. “C’mon. Let’s get the brain hosing out of the way and go get a drink. We earned it.” She waved Dev forward, and keyed the hatch, waiting a moment as it unsealed and popped outward, swinging clear to let them out of the craft.

She stepped out and down to the ground, as two bio alt techs edged past her, carrying toolkits. She waited for Dev to follow her, not missing the looks of the other bio alts as she left the carrier past them.

Mixture of envy and awe. Jess was intrigued, but she put it aside as she turned to regard her craft. Always a little battered by weather and battle, this time it looked like the carrier had been driven right through that big storm front and then right into the side of the mountain they were currently standing inside. “Shitcakes.”

Dev turned and looked, her eyes getting big and round. “Wow.”

Every inch of the craft was scored by fire, it’s outside a dark and creased dappled gray. One of the external engine pods was sliced through, dripping lurid green fluid on the ground. There was a huge rent right along the side, it’s end just shy of the curve of the nose where Dev had been seated.

A man came up next to Jess, dressed in a deep orange suit. “Holy shit, Drake. What the hell did you do to that thing?”

Jess glanced at him, bemused. “You should see what the other guy looks like.” She said. “Sorry, Clint. Looks like a total overhaul.”

The man snorted, then seemed to notice Dev for the first time. “Who’s this?”

“This is Dev.” Jess supplied. “She’s my p.. pilot.” She felt her tongue stutter, and felt a pang. “Wait till you see the logs.”

Clint was regarding Dev thoughtfully. “Oh, yeah. I heard about that.” He said. “Nice to meet you.” He extended a hand. “Hope you don’t do this every time. Too much work.”

Dev politely shook his hand. “I’ll try not to.” She said. “They’re very sturdy pieces of equipment.”

Clint beamed.

Jess sighed. “The way to his heart is through a hydraulic tube c’mon.” She touched Dev’s sleeve. “They’re waiting for us in debrief.”

They walked along the marked floor, as techs and support people swarmed around them, and the other three carriers who had just come in. The rest of the crews had already gone down the tunnel, so Jess wasted no more time and turned off the rocky floor into a tall, scan equipped deep blue hallway.

She felt the tickle as she passed through, and saw Dev blink a little. “You feel that?”

Dev looked at her. “Yes. The scan, you mean?”

“Yeah.” Jess nodded. “That’s all security. You have to be coded to go through. If you’re not, you get enough of a blast to take you out when you’re inside. Some places, like central command, you get more than that.”

“Oh.”

“I”ll show you the grid when we get back to quarters. We’re coded everywhere, but not everyone is. Good to know if you’re walking with someone outside ops.”

“I see.”

Jess led the way towards a closed automatic door, and put her hand on the pad outside it. “Drake, J, and NM-Dev-1 for debrief.”

The pad glowed, then the door opened, and they went in. “Gotta show you the rec, and your rad area too.” Jess commented, as they went through another door and into a larger room, this one half full of people. “But we’ll get a drink first.”

Dev was content to follow along, listening to Jess's ramblings. She considered them, cautiously optimistic that they seemed to be trending towards a tendency to let her stay, at least for a little while.

She recognized Stephen Bock in the room, and the four agents they'd gone with, and four people she didn't know, along with the man with the gun, Bain. She stopped as Jess did, and she watched Jess spread her arms out as they all started making noises at her.

Very strange. But Jess looked pleased, so she supposed it was all right. She followed Jess over to two open chairs and they sat down next to each other. She looked over at the man wit the gun, surprised to find him smiling at her.

She smiled back.

"Well." Bain leaned back. "Welcome back, you four." He looked at the four people Dev didn't know. "None the worse for wear I see."

"Was a little tough sir." Sandy Tucker responded. "Me and Nappy tried to make our own diversion with our boat, but they didn't buy it. We thought we were going to have to try and climb out when all of a sudden they all took off."

'Right." Jason said. "By the time we crested over the ridge just east of them, Jess, the guards all hauled ass and it was easy peasy getting to them and getting out. They didn't even leave a comms watch." He glanced at Dev then back at Jess. "What the hell did you do to draw them off?"

'We can roll the flight recorder." Jess said. "Faster that way than for me to tell it." She eyed Sandy. "I guess you know I blew your boat up."

Sandy nodded. "Jase said." She looked at the tall, very muscular man next to her. "Mike figured that might happen. We didn't really have any way of broadcasting it wasn't rigged, or that you'd believe it if we did."

The tall man next to Sandy grunted. "Fuckers. They knew we were coming , Jess." He looked across the table. "We came in polar, and we just cleared Gibraltar and they were on us. Chased us to the ridge and we got under cover – blasted the ones who had the guts to come at us, but we were stuck there."

"Saw you on scan." Jason said. "It was a bad plan to start with."

Both Mike and Sandy looked uncomfortable. "Well, you made your view clear." Mike said, stiffly.

Bain had been watching and listening, and now he cleared his throat. "He was right." He said, in a mild tone. "It was a damn fool idea, and now we had to put three teams at risk just to get us back to square one."

Mike looked sullenly at him.

"What about you?" Sandy suddenly asked, looking at Jess. "I thought you were out. Didn't you stand on your pride about that?" She pointed at Dev. "Now you're here? It's here? What's the deal?"

Bain cleared his throat again. "Agent Drake was thoughtful enough to agree to my request that she remain with us." He said. "I'm quite gratified. " He looked at Jess. "And how is the experiment going, Agent Drake?"

Jess remained expressionless. "I'll let the flight recorder speak for itself." She remarked. "But I'll be more than glad to continue with it." She folded her hands on the table. "I like the results so far."

Dev's ears perked. That sounded like a positive thing, since she strongly suspected she was the experiment in question.

"Hmm. Indeed." Bain's eyes twinkled a little. "Then by all means, let's see this recorder." He nodded at Stephen, who was sitting in silence, just watching everyone. "Mr. Bock. Please proceed."

Stephen got up and went to the console, triggering the big display in the back of the room. The panels slid open, and he adjusted the room lights, then keyed in the recording that Dev had sent from the carrier. "Here we go, sir."

He sat down as the scene recorder rolled, presenting a view from all the carrier's sensors overlaid to produce an almost three dimensional presentation. One one corner was a mission clock, and on the other a base readout of the carrier's systems.

They heard Dev's voice quietly asking for flight access, then the recorder started forward.

"Go to time lock 1140 loc if you want to see the other carrier blown out." Jess said. "And 1150 loc if you want to see the exciting stuff."

Bock looked at Bain, who nodded. He got up and keyed in the change, and suddenly the carrier was accelerating towards the hulk of Gibraltar and the defender's beacons flared.

It didn't really take that long. Dev was a little surprised at how fast it all went once it started. When she'd been doing it, it seemed a lot longer. She relived the dives and rolls, nodding a little as the carrier wove it's way through the enemy, rolling over and over as it darted between defenders and through arcs of fire.

"Holy shit." Sandy said, after a few minutes utter silence.

Jess sat back in her seat and smiled. She could see Bain's face, and even his craggy old eyes were wide and astonished, as they blasted past Gibraltar and she laid a line of fire inside their control center. Then they were past, and she could feel her heart start accelerating as she relived their one team attack on the heavily defended science center.

"Oh my go… whoa!" Jason yelped, as the carrier dove for the waves.

Diving, diving, the alarms going off, redlining the carrier with all that evident on the screen as they pulled out and into that damn rolling wave at the very last minute, the enemy behind them splashing into the water unable to stop.

Wild.

Then she sat back, remembering the incredible pull of gravity on her body and the ache still in her arms as she kept firing, all the way up the escarpment and over the top into the clouds in one long, screaming, rumbling run that ended in gray silence and the bleeting of overworked systems.

"Holy shit." Sandy said, again.

"That's about it." Jess said, in as normal a voice as she could muster. "The rest you know."

The lights came up a little as Stephen cut the replay off, and they all turned around and stared at the two women seated at the end of the table.

Even Bain, his customary dismissive, offhand facade dropped like a rock off the cliff, his jaw hanging slightly open.

Jess smiled briefly. "Can we get the one by ones done? I owe my pilot here a drink." She jerked her head in Dev's direction. "And as a matter of fact, I think you all do too."

Dev was absolutely not sure what response would be appropriate, so she decided not to have any at all. She remained silent, her hands folded on the table, a mild look on her face as the rest of the group stared at her.

"Not bad for her first flight, huh?" Jess finally said.

Bain relaxed into his seat, and exhaled. "In-deed."

**

Dev was content to stick to Jess's side as they all entered a wide, low room with comfortable looking chairs. She took a seat next to Jess as she listened to the rest of them chatter, glad to be able to participate in what was evidently a positive experience.

The other agents and techs ignored her. That was all right, from her perspective. She was satisfied that Jess and the man with the gun were happy with her and she was looking forward to the moment when she could go and get in the wet thing and maybe have a chance to read a page or two of her book.

She wondered if she could find Doctor Dan, and ask him what he thought about the mission. She knew a lot of the programming she'd been given was his, and she was curious if it had turned out as he'd expected.

"Dev?"

Dev looked up. "Yes?" She reached up in reflex and took the glass she was being handed, her eyes darting to Jess's face in question. "Thank you."

"You ever had booze?" Jess inquired as she watched her sip at the contents.

Dev blinked and moved the glass away. The drink was a very strange mixture of fruits and something that fizzed and something else that burned as she swallowed. "If that's what this is, then definitely not."

Jess chuckled.

"So, how far are you going to take this thing?" Sandy asked, indicating Dev. "Obviously you're sucking up to Bain but for how long?"

"Are you really that much of an asshole?" Jess responded.

"Takes one to know one." Sandy shrugged.

"Then I'm going to take this all the way." Jess steadily met her gaze. "Dev can go as far as she's able in this place as far as I'm concerned." She leaned back in her chair and extended her long legs out. "And at least I'm not sucking up to someone who got his brains blown out for being a moron like you were."

"Hey c'mon." Jason gave them both a look. "We just had a successful mission here. Let's not act like jerks."

"That was Bricker's idea!" Mike pointed at Dev.

"She." Jess corrected him. "Was Bricker's idea. But no one here can say why." She took a swallow of her drink. "Bain's reason for wanting her here might be a whole other thing."

"Bricker just didn't buy into your bullshit mystique." Sandy was unrepentant. "At least I don't pretend to like you, Jess, or kiss your ass for any reason unlike everyone else apparently."

Dev was listening, her head swiveling to regard each speaker. At this last, she turned and looked at Jess, then scanning down her long form to her seat, then back up to her face. Her brow creased in confusion. "You have a lot of unusual customs." She commented mildly. "Programming definitely didn't cover that one."

Jess started laughing, and Jason did too, and after a long, frozen moment the rest of them reluctantly started to chuckle.

"Shit, it.. " Mike caught Jess's sharp eye. "She's got a sense of fucking humor. " He grudgingly conceded.

"Look." Jess said. "She's a one off. Just go with the program." She leaned her arm on the chair arm next to Dev's. "So much shit's going down right now who knows how it's all going to end up. "

"One off?" Mike asked warily.

"I'm an experimental set." Dev spoke directly to him. "I don't have crèche mates."

All of the agents in the group seemed to relax just a little.

"There isn't a dozen of her back there waiting to take over." Jess clarified. "So chill out. Go yell at Bain if you want to for her being here. It's not her fault."

"But you agreed to it." Sandy said. "Talks cheap, huh? What'd Bain offer you, a roll in the sack?"

Jess stood up abruptly, putting her glass down and freeing her hands.

"Jess, chill." Jason scrambled to his feet.

"Yeah, bring it." Sandy beat him and tossed her glass. "I was damn glad you quit, you little shiftface. Now you come back and bring this with you?" She pointed at Dev. "Fuck you, Drake!"

“Hey!” Mike got up and grabbed her the same time Jason grabbed Jess. “Cut it the fuck out, Sandy!” He shook her. “They just saved our asses. Have some honor.”

Sandy glared at him, then she looked at Jess, who was standing absolutely still, her eyes icy and locked onto her. “Honor my ass. You did it to score points.”

“No.” Jason still had hold of Jess. “We told her you weren't worth risking it for, you sorry piece of shit. But she's a Drake and it didn't matter. So like he said, sit down.”

Elaine had come up next to Jason silent, but explicit in support.

Sandy shook Mike's hands of her and went back to her seat, pickig up her glass and ignoring the rest of them.

Jess felt the flashes behind her eyes fade, and she moved back away from Jason, resuming her seat next to Dev. “Fucker.”

Jason and Elaine sat back down and picked their drinks up. “So.” Jason turned to Elaine. “How's the seaweed harvest going?”

Conversation resumed.

Dev took a drink from her glass. She was not at all sure if she liked it, but everyone else seemed to so she was willing to give it a try, and it gave her something to do while the natural borns argued.

She'd seen that happen before. Bio alts were just supposed to pretend they hadn't seen or heard anything.

It was very strange and a little difficult being here with all the other people, but at least they were yelling at each other and not at her.

The outer door opened and Stephen Bock came in. He stopped to grab a drink from the tray that had been set up near the grouping of chairs they were in, and sat down in an empty one. “So.” He looked at them. “You all done sniping at Jess and being rude to her tech?”

“Fuck you Stephen.” Sandy said.

‘You want to be put on report for that?” Stephen asked. “I had to put up with your attitude when I was an agent, Sandra. I don’t have to now.”

“You don’t have the balls.”

“I do.” Stephen clicked his comm-set. “Please send a recorder down here from ops.” He said. “I have a disciplinary action to execute.”

Sandy stared at him. “You bastard.”

“Guess it’s different now that your sugar daddy got his head blown off, huh?” Jason produced a brief smile. “We all know that wasn’t his ass you were kissing.”

“You all can go to hell.” Sandy got up, and her partner Nappy did too. He hadn’t said a word the entire time they’d been in the room, and followed her in equal silence as she left the lounge.

“We’re going to go get cleaned up.” Mike also stood and motioned to his partner. “C’mon, Chris..” He glanced at Jess. “Thanks, Jess. All bullshit aside.” He extended his big, muscled hand. “You put it out there for us.”

Jess returned the clasp, then released it. “Anytime.” She leaned back in her chair and drained her cup, motioning to the bio alt server to replenish it.

“Anyway.” Stephen looked tired. He looked over at Jess, who was sitting next to him. “Bain wants to see you in a bout an hour.” He said. “We’ve gotten some intelligence he want to review with you.”

Jess nodded. “I’m going to go grab some grub then.” She stood up. “Interested, Dev?”

“Yes.” Dev responded immediately. “That would be nice.” She put her cup down on the tray and stepped aside, as Jess came around her chair and headed for the door.

“We’ll go too.” Jason stood up. “Been a long time since breakfast. Stephen? You up for chow? Been a damn long day.”

“Sure, why not.”

They walked together through the hallways towards the dining hall, as Stephen came along with them. Dev stuck close to Jess, but then, out of the corner of her eye she saw Doctor Dan come out of a doorway and spot her.

His eyes lit up. He crossed the hallway and intercepted them, the group slowing as he approached and watching him warily. “Congratulations.” He nodded at them, then turned to Dev. “Excuse us a moment. I would like to speak to Dev.”

The group moved on, leaving them behind. Dev did however, catch Jess looking back at her, the tall woman’s eyebrows slightly lifted. “I’ll be right there.” She said, with a little half wave.

Jess waved back, and pointed at the dining hall then ducked inside.

Dev turned back around. “Hello, Doctor Dan.”

“Hello, Dev.” Doctor Dan leaned forward and gave her a hug. “I just wanted to take a minute to congratulate you for your work today.”

Dev smiled. “It was difficult.”

“I just bet it was.” Doctor Dan chuckled. “I saw the recorder. You did an amazing job for your first flight.” He put both hands on her shoulders. “Really good, Dev. Everyone thinks so.”

Dev glanced at the now vanished group. “I don’t’ think everyone does, Doctor Dan, but the person I was the pilot for was very pleased with me, I believe.”

Doctor Dan’s gray eyes warmed as he looked at her. “Jess is very pleased with you.” He said. “And she’s got a good reason to be. You achieved a very significant thing together.” He glanced casually around, but they were alone in the hall. “I’ll be going back to the crèche tomorrow, Dev.”

“I won’t be?” Dev felt a little, excited thump in her chest.

“No, you’re staying here.” He squeezed her shoulders. “Do your best.” He told her. “You can trust Jess Drake, and you can trust Alex Bain.”

Dev nodded. “You trust them.”

“I would trust Alex with my life, and have.” Doctor Dan said, in a serious tone. “And you can too, but you can also trust Jess, and I hope she comes to trust you.”

Dev hesitated, then she nodded again. “I hope she does.” She said. “I want to do good work.” She watched Doctor Dan’s face, as he smiled gently. “People here sometimes aren’t very nice. I think they do not want me to be here.”

“I know.” Doctor Dan. “Be strong, Dev. In the end, people who try to hurt people like you, end up only hurting themselves. “ He let his hands drop. “I have sent you my personal comms link to your quarters. Use it if you need to. If you just want to talk or tell me something, do it.”

Dev smiled. “I will.” She said. “Thank you for everything, Doctor Dan. I’ll do my best here.”

“I know you will.” Doctor Dan gave her another hug. “Go get some food. Is that okay for you so far?”

“It’s fine.” Dev said. “Will you come eat with us?”

He shook his head. “I think I will make your new colleagues very uncomfortable.” He patted her back. “I’ll be by to say goodbye before I leave. Go on now.”

Dev clasped his hand and released it, then she turned and headed for the dining hall, pausing as the scan picked up her badge and opened the door as she approached.

Once it closed, she took a breath and released it.

Then she looked around and spotted Jess, who was standing in the line. She quickly went over to join her, coming to stand next to her in front of the food dispenser.

“Your buddy give you a pat on the back?” Jess asked.

“Doctor Dan? Yes. He’s going home tomorrow.” Dev replied. “He wanted to tell me that, and compliment me on my work.”

Jess punched in two sets of codes. “So he was saying goodbye?”

“Something like that, yes.” Dev smiled briefly. “So I suppose I’m staying.”

“Oh yeah, you’re staying.” Jess pushed a tray at her. “Later on I’ll show you around the place the right way.” She picked up the tray and headed for a large table where the others were sitting. She took a seat and Dev took one beside her.

‘Lot of people coming in.” Jason said, glancing around. “All the prep people for the new class.” He forked up some of his fish. “Thought for a few days they’d cancel it.”

“Yeah.” Elaine agreed. “Brent, don’t you know one of the newbies?” She looked at the tech, a man of middling height and very black hair. “I thought you said you did”

Brent nodded. “Cousin of mine.” He admitted. “I tried to talk him out of it but the jackass didn’t listen.”

Dev listened politely, as she chewed. The tray held some different things than last time, a crispy cake she liked very much, some chewy protein she guessed was probably fish, and some things in hard shells, which tasted salty.

“So. Um. Dev.”

Dev swallowed and looked up at Elaine, with a start of surprise. “Yes?”

The agent leaned against the table. “I’ve always wanted to ask this. What the hell is the collar for?”

“Oh.” Dev put her fork down. “It’s a programming interface.” She said. “It gets installed right after you mostly finish growing, when you start to get skills.”

“Ah huh.” Elaine said. “So, it’s a plug?”

“Not really.” Dev unsealed the neck of her suit and peeled it down low enough to expose the collar. “There are sockets that the programming system connects to but then there are leads go up through the back of your neck here..” She touched the back of her head. “And into your cortex.”

“They put wires in your brain?” Elaine said, after a pause.

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “It’s how they give us programs.”

“How do they do that?” Jason asked, curiously.

“I don’t know. I’m not a programmer.” Dev smiled briefly. “It’s a special skill, not many natural born can do it. “

“Natural born.” Jess looked at her. “Is that what you call us?”

“Yes.”

“Weird.” Jason shook his head.

They all went back to eating. Dev closed the collar on her suit and took a sip of the pale fizzy drink, which she was getting to like, and she felt okay about getting the questions since at least they were asking and not just talking at her like they were before.

Good sign, she supposed.

“What do you suppose Bain wants?” Jason asked Jess. “That guy scares me. Don’t care who knows it.”

Jess shrugged. “Can’t be too bad. We all made it.” She said. “Besides, one of the things I noticed going in was that we surprised them.”

Elaine was nodding, her mouth full.

“Felt like that to us too.” Jason said. “I expected we’d get ambushed… hell, I told Elaine we were probably flying into a net coming around the side of that ridge they were hiding under but it took them time to react and I figured they didn’t know we were coming. “

“Which is strange.” Elaine said. “Because you know we don’t usually leave our kind there in their clutches if we can help it. If it had been me, I’d have expected us even if we did cut off comms.”

Jess grunted. “Point.”

“Yeah.” Jason frowned. “Hell, though, I’m not going to look a gift horse in the ass.”

Dev made a mental note to access her pad when she got back to her quarters and start looking up some of the odd verbal utterances she'd heard so far from Jess and her other colleagues. She'd heard that thing about the horse twice now, so she figured it had to mean something pretty important,

"So who else is coming in the class?" Elaine asked. "Twelve for us and?" She looked at Jess. "Any idea?"

Jess scraped the last of the fish from her plate. "Repair chiefs, some security, and from what I hear, a dozen of the biological guys for downstairs."

"Huh."

"There are some pilots and mechanics coming from the crèche." Dev offered. "They were staging them when I left." She added. "They were talking about new vehicles."

"Ah." Jason was listening to her. "Finally! They've been rebuilding those carriers since I was a baby."

"Last year?" Elaine elbowed him.

"Shut up." Jason elbowed her back.

"Good to see a new bus if it's true." Brent allowed. "So many things are falling off mine I was afraid I'd tank someone on the deck when we took off."

"Yeah, if they give them to us, not the newbies." Tucker spoke up for the first time. "Member what they said the last time, that they had to get the good stuff cause they didn't know better. We could handle all the crap."

"Well." Jess rested her elbows on the table and cradled her mug in her hands. "Anyone tries to pull that bullshit line on me I just point them at her." She pointed at Dev. "They didn't come any newer than she did this morning."

Tucker and Brent gave Dev a grudging nod. "Yeah that's true I guess." Tucker said. "Sides what your rig looked like when you got back I figure they'd got to build it up from base steel anyhow."

They finished lunch and filtered out the door, most heading for the residential quarters on the next ring of hallways outward. Dev walked quietly along at Jess's side, as it got quieter and quieter when the two other teams peeled off to their rooms.

Jess and Dev's quarters were, Dev realized, at the end of the half ring hall. Right across from them was the entrance to the ops center, it's outline grid a sedate blue unlike the raw red of the previous day.

She paused as she went past Jess's door towards her own, to absorb the idea that this place was, now, for her, a home.

For now long? She didn't know. But she had passed the first test of this new assignment and earned herself a continued presence with the possibility of a longer term stay.

"Hey, Dev?"

Dev turned, to find Jess in her doorway. "Yes?"

"Change then come over. I want you to come see Bain with me."

Ah. Hm. The man with the gun. "Okay." Dev agreed.

Jess came over and leaned against the wall, folding her arms across her chest. "Don't let the jackassery get to you."

Dev looked at her, blinking a few times. "Is that… supposed to refer to the rude attitude?"

Jess nodded. "We're all pretty hard on each other. Sandy and I never got along."

"No problem." Dev said.

"Does it bother you?" Jess asked, in a quiet tone.

"Does it bother you?" Dev returned the question.

The tall, dark haired woman studied her in silence for a long moment. "Hmp." She finally grunted. "Damn good question." She turned and headed back to her door. "Very damn good question."

Dev waited until the door closed, then she turned and went to her own quarters, scanning through and letting the heavy panel slid shut behind her. She stopped and looked around, taking in the room with a fresh set of eyes.

On the workspace, there was a packet, and some covered pads, delivered when she was on the mission, apparently. So this, for now, was home. She bypassed the table and headed for the sanitary space, already looking forward to the wet thing, and fresh clothes, and the tour Jess had promised her for later.

Today had, after all, turned out to be a really, really, really good day.

**

Dev looked up as she heard a buzz at the door. She got up and went to it, triggering the latch and stepped back as the door slid open and Jess entered. She was dressed in one of the more casual jumpsuits, with fewer pockets and softer fabric.

Dev had realized that there were a few different kinds of garb. One was this type, and she was wearing the same now too, and another was the kind she had worn to pilot the carrier which was a heavier fabric, with clips and embedded links for the carrier's systems to plug into.

She liked the lighter one. It was very comfortable. She'd made a note to ask Jess about the sleeping clothes though. "Hello."

"Ready?" Jess's eyes swept briefly over the interior. She spotted the packet on the workspace and walked over to it. "You open this?"

"No." Dev said. "I didn't know what it was."

Jess worked the clamp and opened the padded envelope. "C'mere." She shook out the contents into her hand then turned as Dev approached. "Last bit of archaic crap we use." She reached up and took hold of Dev's jumpsuit collar.

Dev stood stock still, not really sure what was going on. She could feel the warmth of Jess's fingers against her skin , though, and she decided it felt nice.

"There." Jess let her hands fall, producing a brief smile as Dev gave her a questioning look. "It's like the one I have." She touched the insignia on her collar. "Except the bottom enamel strips are green instead of black."

"Oh." Dev reached up to feel the item now fastened to her suit. "Thank you."

"It doesn't mean anything except that you're one of us." Jess said. "I guess when we coded you in as ops tech, it triggered the whole process so that included this." She picked up a few other items that had dropped out of the packet. "This is your chit card."

Dev studied it. "Okay."

"When you go on missions, you get credits." Jess explained. "You can take this and go to the exchange, and trade the credits for stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Stuff. You know, like…" Jess paused. "Well, I guess you probably don't know. Never mind, I'll take you there and show you. It's easier than explaining."

"Okay." Dev replied amiably.

"You can also use it at dinner for drinks or extras, which I'll show you today too." Jess concluded. "And this pad template – you can specify what you want in here and supply will take care of it for you. Like something other than crackers for the dispenser or a different temperature profile."

"Okay." Dev said.

“You can put the card in your ident pack.” Jess said. “Okay? So let’s go talk to Bain. I want to get your status clarified before I have to go and have back alley fights with everyone I work with.” She turned and led the way to the door.

What did that mean? Dev wondered. She followed Jess through the hallways, passing the ops center and continuing around the curve into a gray shaded hallway she hadn’t been in yet. This one had two scans, which she felt as an itchy tingle as they went through.

At the end of the hallway was a shielded door, guarded by two big security officers. They regarded her and Jess as they approached, and only at the very end did they move aside and key the door open.

Jess ignored them. “Thank you.” Dev murmured as she went by, seeing a pair of pale blue eyes half hidden in a blast helmet regarding her before the man turned and face forward again.

They walked into a small outer office, and the door behind them closed. Jess stood quietly before the inner door, looking around a little as a soft sets of bings and clicks sounded, then the inner door opened.

“Ah.” Bain was seated behind a big desk, watching as they entered. “ Right on time, Drake. And I see you brought your charming companion with you.” He got up and came around the desk, extended his hand to Dev. “Hello, my dear. You are very welcome to this meeting.”

Dev politely shook his hand. “Thank you, sir.”

“You did some excellent work.” Bain told her. “Extraordinary, for your first flight, hm?

“I did the best I could.” Dev smiled. “I’m very glad it all worked out correctly.”

“Yes.” Bain went back behind the desk and gestured for them to sit down in the two chairs in front of it. “Well, Drake, looks like your plan succeeded.” He steepled his fingers. “Hm? All of you returned and I’ve gotten some intelligence here that indicates you left some.. hm… consternation shall we say behind you?” He pushed a folder across the desk.

Jess took it, and flipped through the plastic like sheets inside. “Ah.” She grunted. “So that’s what that ledge was.”

“Hm. Yes.” Bain nodded. “Plasma station. Took out quite a quarter of the mountain face when it exploded. I daresay you left your mark.”

Wow. Jess sounded the word silently in her head. She selected a grainy picture and passed it to Dev. “Big boom.”

Dev studied the picture. For a moment, it was a blank, then suddenly the memory flashes popped in, and she recalled the high speed dive past the cliff. She tried to tie in that memory with the picture, which showed a huge hole where the ledge had been.

“Well done.” Bain said. “I would guess you’ve set them back quite a bit, Drake. Sure you didn't make any more friends on that side though.”

“Mm.” Jess grunted. “Wasn’t the lab they had the new growth experiment in though.”

“Ah, no.” Bain agreed. “That’s what I wanted to discuss with you. That needs to be addressed. I want you to do it.”

Jess closed the folder. “Two days ago I wasn’t even cleared for active duty.” She said. “One day ago I was being processed out.”

“And?” Bain cocked his head at her.

“There’s probably a better choice than me to take on a new mission.”

“I disagree.” Bain shook his head. “I realize you were involved in several very stressful incidents, but given the resources we have right now, I cannot recommend another in your place.” He watched her expression. “Besides, your wish to leave us was all based around the presence of your new associate here, and I believe you have, as they say, gotten over that.”

Jess pondered this. “Yeah, now both her and I are taking crap from every direction because of it.”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed.” Jess said. “This started off as a hair brained scheme by Bricker. Everyone knew it. Now everyone needs to know what the deal is.”

“Hm.” Bain tapped his fingertips against his lips. “My view is, yes, it was a hair brained scheme that unlikely as it was, worked.” He said. “The people up at LifeSource took him seriously, and gave our friend here what skills they could in so short a time, and this morning it was amply demonstrated that their cobbled together effort performed as well as any of our training programs could.”

“That’s true.” Jess agreed.

“Hm. Well then.” Bain “I have decided to inform everyone that Bricker was making that request on my orders.” He said. “I never mind taking credit for someone else's insane ideas so long as they prove out, hm?”

“I see.” Jess said, slowly.

‘So then this becomes my idea, and my plan.” Bain gave Dev a s mile. “Since it has already proven to be a success. We will instruct LIfeSource to continue on developing this program, and will hopefully be able to use it’s results in the future.”

Dev shifted a little. “Excuse me, sir.” She said. “Is it really a good idea to presume success based on so limited an evidence?”

Both Jess and Bain stared at her.

“Do you doubt your abilities, my young friend?” Bain asked.

“Yes.” Dev said. “I haven't’ seen that much of them. “ She explained. “I trust the programming they gave me, but you are risking a lot on untested skills.”

Jess half turned in her seat so she was facing Dev. “You don’t want to stay here?”

Dev met her eyes. “I do.” She said. “But I don’t want to disappoint you.”

Jess felt the lengthening silence as she studied the young, intense face next to her. Finally she took a breath. “I’ll take my chances.” She said, shifting to look back at Bain, who was watching them both with an expression of bemused interest. “If you do this, you need to do it all the way. Give her full status. Let everyone know. Then they’ll stop taking shots at her.”

Bain tapped his fingertips together again. “Agent Drake.” He said. “I certainly can send any amount of directives but I think it will take more than that for your new comrade to be accepted.” He gave her a meaningful look, one scrubby gray eyebrow hiking up.

Jess looked away, then back at him. “You do your part, I’ll do mine.”

Bain smiled. “Deal.” He said. “Now, about that mission?”

Jess settled back in her seat. “We can’t do a frontal assault again. They’ll be keyed to it. I’ll need to insert.”

Bain nodded.

“Send me all the intel.” Jess finally said. “I’ll work up something.”

“Splendid.” The old man gave her a fond look. “Now, for a more pleasant subject. In recognition of your performance in this morning’s rescue I have added a senior level achievement to your records.” He said. “In fact, you will now take the number one agent slot. I hope this doesn't cause you any difficulties.”

Jess’s eyebrows rose. “Only with everyone else's egos.”

He chuckled “And I have advanced a benefit and comfort package to your colleague.” Bain pointed a forefinger at Dev. “Since I know she came from the crèche with very little. Enjoy it, my dear.”

Dev had no idea what he was talking about, but it sounded good. “Thank you sir.” She said. “I will continue trying to do my best.”

Bain leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “Thank you.” He said. “People, we were in a serious crisis point yesterday. I’m glad we made our way through it, but we’re not out of the

woods yet. Intelligence showed us that in this case, Agent Drake, there was no leak of information regarding your attack."

"Not that I could tell, no." Jess agreed. "But does that mean we snuffed the leak, or they're just in hiding, biding their time?"

Bain inclined his head.

"The key is, who turned Joshua." Jess continued. "Was it someone on the outside or someone on the inside." She looked Bain in the eye. "I don't think Bricker had the brains for it."

Bain smiled faintly. "He was my nephew."

Only years of field service let Jess remain in her chair and not roll onto the floor. She knew her eyes had widened and she clamped her jaw to keep it from dropping.

"My sister's son." Bain went on, in a reflective tone. "She gave him over when he was five. I never thought he really did have the brains for it either, but he made it through the course." He sniffed. "I agree with you, Drake. I don't think he was the leak, and he wasn't the one who turned tech Joshua."

"So that person's still here, if it was an inside job."

"You think it was."

Jess gazed at him. "I spent almost every waking moment with him for nine years on the outside of this facility. No one outside got close to him."

"Hm."

"But inside?" Jess went on. "That was different."

Bain sighed. "I have security doing an investigation on it." He admitted. "Very low key." He turned to Dev. "You will let us know, won't you my dear, if anyone asks you to do something against us?"

"Yes." Dev answered immediately. "That's wrong."

"Is that what your programming tells you?" He cocked his head slightly.

Dev thought about that for a minute. "They gave me the rules." She said, after a bit. "But this .. I think that's an in here thing." She touched her chest. "It feels wrong."

"Hm." Bain nodded in approval. "Very good." He focused back on Jess. "Be on your way, Drake. I'm sure you have things to settle. I'll have intelligence send you an info pack, and will expect your review in the very near term."

Jess nodded and stood. "Thanks." She said. "I'll let you know what I think."

Bain chuckled. "Of that I have no doubt." He sat back as they left, resting his elbows on the chair arm and twiddled his thumbs. "DJ?"

Doctor Dan came out from behind the big console behind them and came around to sit in the chair his bio alt had so recently vacated. "Well?"

"Damn fine job." Bain told him straightforwardly. "Now, tell me the truth. This wasn't a last minute rush thing."

The scientist shook his head. "No." He said. "I'd been planning to introduce the idea to you, so I'd done the prep with Dev." He added. "The last set of tech skills, yes, that was a rush. We had to write that on the fly, but I had the schema outlines already done."

Bain nodded. "I think she'll do well She has an interesting mix of intelligence and given knowledge."

"She's a good design." Doctor Dan agreed. "She won't turn, by the way. They'll have to kill her first. The one thing about the way I engineered her logic structure that wasn't entirely logical."

"You understand that at a gut level." Bain smiled faintly at him.

"Yes." He smiled just as faintly back. "I'll miss Dev. I really enjoyed watching her progress."

‘I’m sure she’ll be fine with Drake.” Bain stood up. “She’s already taken up a protective stance over your protégé as well as having been sufficiently distracted to allow her to get past that recent disaster.”

“She’s good people.” Doctor Dan said, as he joined Bain and they both disappeared behind the console, through a hidden door and into a quiet hallway. “I think Dev will do very well with her.”

“Hm.” Bain eyed him. “Sure you don’t want a job?”

Doctor Dan smiled a little. “I have a job.”

Bain snorted.

**

“So I suppose I really am staying.” Dev said, as they walked along the corridor. “That was a very interesting meeting.”

“I told you that you were staying.” Jess chuckled. “Yeah, it was.” She admitted. “We’ll have to go back and see what kind of swag we got. I’m glad he put you in for something.” She stepped into the lift, and waited for Dev to join her. “Let’s start at the top, and work our way down.”

“I’m not sure what that means.” Dev confessed. “But it sounds nice.”

“Here’s the roof.” Jess led the way out of the lift to a huge open space, with solid glass covering all of it. Overhead the thick, dark clouds were drifting, and once they’d cleared the lift encasement they could see all around them out to the horizon.

Dev turned around in a circle, looking at the vast, open barrenness on one side, and then out across what was now becoming a familiar venue of open ocean.

“When the new class comes in, we’ll all gather here for the induction ceremony.” Jess told her. “With any luck I’ll get you started on the right foot with them and we can work from there.”

“It’s difficult isn’t it?” Dev said. “

“Hm.” Jess looked at her. “Would it be easier for you if you stayed down with the rest of the bios?”

Dev put her hands behind her back. “Of course it would”

“Do you want to do that?”

“No.” Dev replied without hesitation.

Jess smiled. “Good.” She waved her hand. “Let’s go. I’ll show you the gym and the rad facility, that’s on the next floor, and then we can go past the reference center and stop in at the exchange.”

“For the stuff?”

“Yeah, we’ll get some stuff. “

**

They had, in fact, gotten stuff. Dev sat cross legged on her bed, surveying the items around her with a sense of bemusement. She had learned a lot of new concepts including what rad was and why it was important to her, what the concept of luxury was, and the answer to the mystery of what to sleep in.

It was a little overwhelming. Dev looked around her living space. Now not only did she have this place but she had another place, sort of like the little cubicle in the crèche, where she could study and do research while she was getting her required dose of sun replacement.

She had more space to herself here than anyone topside, even the most important people. It was amazing and a little strange, and it felt a little uncomfortable to think about having all this when the rest of her kind didn't.

But she had no intention of trading them for it.

Now, this stuff. Dev sorted among the items. The exchange was full of stuff that Jess had called luxuries, items that were not given to them, but must be earned. This included stuff from topside, she was surprised to see and she’d gotten a package of the little sweet puffs they’d eaten on rare occasions in the crèche.

You could also get things to wear, and Jess had told her it was easy to see the most successful agents and techs because they didn't wear jumpsuits in off-time – they wore some of the things you could get in the exchange or – this was very interesting – things they bartered for in the living spaces outside.

For now, Dev had gotten a few pairs of soft short leggings and sleeveless shirts to sleep in, as that's what Jess told her she used. She set those aside and the puffs, and pulled over the box she'd found when she'd gotten back.

That was from the man with the gun, Jess had told her. The box was full of things like insulated drink containers and a pack she could take on the carrier with her with compartments to carry things in. It had straps and hooks that would fasten to the console near her seat.

It was nice. She liked it. There was also a folding tool she could use to get into hatches, that also had a knife in it – she'd seen Jess carry one and a thing to wear that was thick and heavy and had a hood that was very warm when she put it on.

A jacket, Jess had called it, for when they were outside and had to leave the carrier.

Very interesting.

Next, she removed a sanitary kit she could take in the carrier also. It had wipes and little bottles of something you could put on your skin and mouth rinse. She could, Jess had told her, order more for it when she'd used it all.

Also very interesting.

Dev got up and found places for all her new stuff, in the drawers of the big cabinet mostly. Once that was done, she picked up her book from her workspace and climbed up into the relaxing area and sat down on the couch.

She had some time before Jess came back and she settled back in the couch, opening the book and reading from where she'd left off.

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Jess finished requesting data, then she logged off the intel system and sat down at the small desk, using a stylus to make a few notes on the folder she was carrying. She wrote in silence for a few minutes, then glanced up as the door behind her opened.

Shit. She cursed silently. "Hello Jared."

The tall, spare medical director came over and sat in the seat next to her. "How long did you figure on ignoring the request to med?"

"I've been busy." Jess said, continuing to scribble. "Besides, what would be the point? Bain put me back into service. He ranks you."

"Yeah and I heard what he does to people who disagree with him." Jared spared a brief smile. "I wouldn't have said no to him either. But you still have a hold on your chart – want to spend ten minutes with me and get it cleared legit?"

Jess checked the time on the console. "If its only ten minutes, sure." She finished writing and stood up. "I've got an appointment to get to."

She followed Jared down the hall, out of the gray section into the white, passing suite after suite of examination and operation rooms most fortunately now not in use. She'd spent her time in those rooms and like any other agent hated the place.

Jared led her into a small exam room, the one she knew was right next to his offices. She sealed and put the folder down on the desk and lay down on the exam table, feeling the warmth and tickle of the diagnostic systems.

"You look like you're feeling better." Jared commented, from behind the console. "Your back still giving you problems?"

"No." Jess shook her head. "A little tender, that's all." She clarified. "Still a little heat sensitive."

Jared nodded. "Hold still."

Jess felt the scan focus on her head and she closed her eyes.

“How’s your sleeping?”

“Okay the last few days.” Jess cracked one eyeball open cautiously, then opened them both as the scan faded. “Been too busy to think about it.”

“Hm. That’s what I thought.” Jared came from around the console and appeared next to her. “I can still see adherence in there. You could have gotten into trouble going out.”

Jess lifted a hand and wiggled it’s fingers. “The only thing I exercised yesterday were these. “ She said. “I shot the hell out of everything while sitting on my ass.”

Jared snorted, then chuckled a little. “I heard. About that, and about your new pilot.” He studied Jess’s face. “How’s that going?”

“She’s fine.” His erstwhile patient said. “Pretty good pilot. Not a bad personality. “

“For a bio alt, you mean.”

“For anyone. She’s a nice kid. We’re getting along pretty well.” Jess responded. “Bain’s just sending orders down to make her permanent.”

“I saw. I got them.” Jared said. “I want to see her too, to get a baseline. You think that’s going to work? Most people I talked to didn’t.”

Jess half shrugged. “Most people you’ve talked to haven’t worked with her. They think bios are walking jelly bag brains. Dev isn’t. She’s not one of us, but she’s not one of them either.”

“Huh. You sure that’s not just wishful thinking?”

“Talk to her and form your own opinion.” Jess said. “Done now? I’ve got places to go and people to see.”

Jared leaned against the table. “I’m done. You look like you’re finally on the right track again, Jess. You had me worried there for a few weeks. Maybe everything going to shit was good for you.”

Jess smiled wryly. “Kicked my head out of my ass, you mean.” She interpreted. ‘Yeah, maybe. At least I’m not upchucking all night from nightmares.”

“No you aren’t.” He turned off the scanner. “Your body weight's stopped dropping. I’m going to release you officially so they don’t have to keep overriding me from ops.” He said, in a droll tone. “Nice to know just exactly how much authority I really have.”

Jess sat up and swung her long legs off the table. “Don’t feel bad, Jared. Bain steam rolled over pretty much everything but then – he’s the old man.”

“Yes, he is.” The medico agreed. “A lot of people got the shit scared out of them by him. No one expected … I mean, you hear the stories and all that, but no one thought he’d just come in here and start shooting.”

“No.” Jess retrieved her folder. “But he did.”

“What I’m wondering now is – will he stay here, or is he going to pick someone to replace Bricker?” Jared watched her face closely. “What do you think?”

Jess shrugged both shoulders. “I’m just an agent. I try to think as little as possible.” She turned and headed for the door.

“Senior agent, now.”

Jess looked back over her shoulder and grinned, then she went through the door and was gone.

**

The dining hall was almost empty when Jess and Dev entered it. None of the other agents or techs were there, just a few console operators from the ops center nearby, and alone in the corner, Stephen Bock.

Jess gave him a casual wave as she took a seat at a small table and motioned Dev to do the same. “So here’s how this works.” She said. “That screen shows you what’s available tonight. You tap on what you want, and they deliver it.”

“I see.” Dev regarded the screen. “Why do they do that, if they make you go pick it up the rest of the time?”

“Tradition.” Jess said. “There are some things we do… just because that’s the way we’ve always done them and no one wants to change it because it meant something way back when.” She keyed something into the pad. “I’ll throw a few credits at this.”

Dev studied her choices, and made her selection, picking things at random from each section because she still had little knowledge of what the items were. Then she folded her hands on the table and regarded her table mate. “Is it something like these?” She touched the insignia at her neck.

“Something like that.” Jess agreed. “You’ll see more of the traditional stuff when we attend the incoming ceremony for the new class.” She smiled. “I remember when it was me up there. I”d never seen any place like this before.”

Dev pondered that. “We have… I guess it’s sort of like that when we graduate from basic learning.” She said. “We all come into a big room, and they take record of all our designations and where we would be going for advanced classes.”

“Yeah.” Jess nodded. “I had that in school.”

“Then they took us all to medical and had our collars installed.” Dev touched her throat. “They said we were all grown up then.”

Jess leaned her chin on her fist. “So… they don’t do that special programming with you until you’re older?” She looked up as a bio alt wait servant approached, with a tray. “Thanks.”

The man placed the drink she’d ordered on the table, and then, with the barest hesitation, put a second one in front of Dev.

“Thank you.” Dev looked up at him.

The man nodded, then he straightened and went back into the preparation area.

Jess snorted and shook her head. “Does that again and I'm going to rank him.” She muttered.

“That’s a Ceebee 245.” Dev commented. “They do that – the serving thing, up in the crèche too, for the natural borns in the fancy places.”

“They do?”

“Yes.” Dev said. “They don’t give us any programming until we graduate basic. They teach us the regular way before that. Reading, and writing, and basic skills.”

“Huh.” Jess sipped her drink. “I guess that’s not too different from how I grew up. I was in pre school until I was five, and they gave us the aptitude battery.” She said. “Then they sent me to the academy, on my sixth birthday.”

Dev took a sip of the glass she’d been given finding a medium fizzy beverage with a taste that reminded her of the soy nuts that had sometimes been served in the crèche. “What is this?”

“Beer.” Jess said. “Like it?”

Dev tasted it again. “I think so.” She said, after a pause. “So what did they teach you at the academy? Is that where all of the people here went?”

“What did they teach me.” Jess mused. “I hardly remember. Like you said, reading and writing I suppose. Some math, geography. History. How we got to be in the situation we’re in, that sort of thing, for classes.” She paused, as the server came back and put down their plates. “Then at… I guess around age ten they start teaching us the business.” She lifted her hand and made a circle over her head, encompassing the structure around them.

“So, you knew you wanted to do this?” Dev cut a bit of the fish on her plate and put it in her mouth.

“Wasn’t given a choice.” Jess was plowing through her meal.

Dev stopped chewing. “Really?”

Jess looked up at her. “Really.” She washed her mouthful down with a swallow of the beer. “Didn’t really want a choice, that’s what the battery is for. My family’s been doing this for ever, so when I tested high it was a foregone conclusion that I’d go, and I’d graduate, and I’d come to a place like this and do what we do.”

“Wow.” Dev took another sip of the fizzy beverage. “So all the other people we work with, the ones we went on the mission with, they all did that too?”

“Not exactly. The agents, me, and Elaine, Jason, Sandy… we all did. So did Stephen over there, and the guy who got his head taken off. Anyone who wears the black bars like I do. They do the whole course, from childhood.” Jess explained. “The techs, like Brent, come in around your age. They get schooled on the outside, and if they pass the tests and the background checks and the psych, they get admitted.” She forked up some of the fish and ate it. “Damn, that’s good.”

“Oh.” Dev was also enjoying the taste. “So that’s why I heard someone call them outsiders?”

“Yes.” Jess nodded. “They come to what we call field school. During that, they get matched to an agent, and then sent out as a team usually with a couple others to someplace like this.”

None of this had been in the programming, Dev realized. Only the rules and regulations of Interforce, and the technical knowledge she’d need to do the job.

“There are always more techs than agents.” Jess said, after a short silence. “We get in the way of blasters more often.” She gave Dev a wry wink. “But we can choose to leave. I almost did the other day.”

“Yes.” Dev murmured. “I’m really glad you didn’t.”

Jess paused in mid chew, as she met the serious, earnest eyes gazing at her. After a moment she hastily swallowed. “Yeah, I’m kinda glad too. “ She said. “It’s gotten a lot more interesting here lately.”

Her table mate looked a touch puzzled, but then smiled.

They both looked up, a little startled, as they heard a throat being cleared nearby. Stephen Bock was standing by their table, his hands in the pockets of his jumpsuit.

“Stephen.” Jess motioned to a seat. “Join us.”

“No, just stopping to offer my congratulations.” Stephen said. “I saw your ranking change. Well deserved, Jess.”

“Thanks.” Jess accepted the words with a brief nod.

“And congratulations to you too.” Stephen turned to Dev. “The system recorded your permanent assignment here. So welcome.”

Dev had put her utensils down when he’d started speaking and now she nodded. “Thank you.” She said, politely. “I’m glad I was able to contribute to good results.”

“Well, you did a good job, and I hope we can trust you to keep Jess’s ass out of the fire again in the future.” Stephen said.

Dev looked at him, then she glanced at Jess, as one eyebrow hiked up. “They didn’t cover that in the programming either.” She apologized. “I’m not really sure what to do with your ass.”

Jess hastily swallowed what was in her mouth and clapped her hand over it, snorting and then dissolving into laughter.

Stephen covered his eyes, and sat down in the seat abruptly.

Dev regarded them with mild amusement until they recovered their composure. “Sorry about that.” She apologized. “I don’t really understand some of the things you say sometimes. I have a few I need to look up in the reference library later on.”

“What he meant was.” Jess cleared her throat and wiped a tear from her eye. “He expects you to keep me out of trouble.”

Dev pondered that, taking a sip of her beer. “Isn’t our job to get into trouble?”

Stephen started chuckling again. “You really do have a sense of humor.” He complimented her. “But I think Jess would have said, your job is to cause trouble.” He rubbed his eyes. “Ah well, it’s been a day.” He let his hands rest on his knees. “Recap tomorrow, Jess?”

“See you in ops.” Jess agreed, giving him a nod as he got up and headed for the door to the hall. After the door closed behind him, she looked back at Dev. “You can just ask if you don’t understand what the hell I’m saying, y’know.”

Dev smiled as she finished up her meal. “I will next time.” She said. “Sometimes I can guess what it is by the conversation around it, but all the stuff about horses and asses and things confuses me. “

Jess chuckled again. “You’re so damn funny.”

“Is it? I mean.. am I?” Dev put her utensils down. “I wasn’t trying to be that time.” She paused, and looked up as the server came back again, putting down a final set of plates. They contained a square of dark brown substance, which she studied as the man removed the other plates. “Thank you.”

“Ahhh. “ Jess pulled over her own plate. “Now that’s a rare treat. I didn’t think they were doing these until the induction ceremony.”

“They were testing them, ma’am.” The server replied quietly. “We were instructed to give them to all the patrons here tonight.” He turned and disappeared again.

“Hey, wait.” Jess called after him. “Bring us over some kack, then. These don’t go with beer.” She broke off a corner of the substance and popped it into her mouth. “Mm.”

Dev tentatively did the same, mouthing the substance as her eyes opened wide. “Oh.” She blinked. “Wow. What is that?”

“It’s called a brownie.” Jess was busy with her own. “I guess because it’s brown.” She regarded the item. “One of the very few things from the old times they can still make, though I think they make it now with rice flour from the paddy caverns and gulls eggs.” She looked up. “Like it?”

“Yes.” Dev answered immediately. “It’s really nice.”

Jess looked up, then looked around carefully. ‘Want to see if we can steal whatever’s left back there?’”

Dev looked up from her plate. “I thought I was supposed to keep you out of trouble?”

Jess just grinned at her.

**

Dev curled up on her side, pulling the light cover over her and settling her head onto the cool pillow. The lights were already dim in her quarters and she exhaled, as a moderate quiet descended over the room and she took a breath of air that still held a hint of plastic from the unpacking of all her stuff.

She could hear various soft noises, of course, doors opening, and the far off sound of the air circulators and machinery. Noises like that had been a part of her existence since she could remember, though, so she found them soothing more than disturbing and after a minute, they faded back and she was able to ignore them.

Closer at hand, though, now she could hear faint sounds next door, beyond the inner panel that separated her room from Jess’s. Motion, as though the agent was pacing. The sound of the dispenser opening and closing.

Voices. Dev listened, and thought she caught Jason’s low, male tones, then a definite echo that was Jess’s laugh.

She liked that sound. Jess didn’t laugh often, but when she did it made her face relax and brighten and her eyes sparkle and Dev was glad to see that because she knew she’d caused it herself a few times and Jess seemed to appreciate the humor when she had.

Very good. Dev stretched and exhaled, finding herself very happy.

It felt good to lie there quietly, after the very long, very active day. Her body was tired but there was so much to think about she didn't really want to just go to sleep right away.

Jess had shown here where the flight log was in the computer, so she could look over it and she decided she would tomorrow to see what she'd done, and what improvements she could make. Then there was the carrier to go inspect, and Jess said she'd take her to the systems workshop and show her where she could build the modules they would use.

And Jess was working on a new mission for them, so maybe she'd find out about that tomorrow too, and there was the gym to explore, and…

Phew. Dev smiled into the darkness. So busy, but that was good.

She was wearing her new sleeping clothes, finding them really comfortable and light, and her whole body now cozy and warm in the big bed. She could feel sleep slowly coming over her despite her best intentions and though there was more to think about she let her eyes close.

She was just drifting off when the door buzzer chimed, a soft light coming on next to the inner portal as her eyes popped wide open again.

Quickly, she got out of bed and went over to it, putting her palm against the scan plate and blinking a little as it slid open and the brighter light of Jess's quarters flooded in. "Oh, hello."

"Whoops." Jess was holding something in her hand, her body outlined against the light. "My bad. Didn't know you were sacked out. "

"Only just." Dev said. "Is there something wrong? Do we need to do something?"

"No." Jess leaned against the doorway. "I won a flask off Jason on a bet on our rescue. Thought I would share a glass with you since we both were part of it."

"Oh!" Dev smiled, and took a step back. "That would be very nice."

Jess took that as an invitation and crossed over to the worktable, taking a seat in one of the chairs and setting what she was carrying on the table. She had two small cups in her other hand and she put them down as well, the items softly scraping and clunking against the hard surface.

Dev sat down in the other chair, and waited, watching her. Jess was wearing the same short outfit she was, and the low lights outlined her tall form with an interesting mix of points and shadows. The red mark, from the burning had gained a black bumpy outline and Dev wondered if there would be one for the thing they'd done that day.

Then she figured she could just ask, and she did.

"Hhm." Jess was pouring a measure of the liquid in the big bottle into the cups. "Not usually for a rescue, no." She said. "That gets a different reward." She indicated the thick jacket hanging outside the gray cabinet. "That, or my promotion, that kind of thing. Missions are planned. They're." She pondered. "Attacks, not defenses."

"I see." Dev took the cup when it was handed to her. "What is this?"

'This comes from topside." Jess said. "Matter of fact, it comes from the other side's topside. It's honey mead." She held it up to the light, displaying a rich, golden color. "From their Ag station. They've still got bees there. We lost all ours."

Dev sniffed it. "How interesting." She said. "We learned about bees in the crèche, but I've never seen them. They just used artificial pollination in the gardens there."

"Hold that out." Jess said, and then, when she had, touched her own cup to the one in the bio alt's hand. "To this experiment, however far it goes." Then she brought the cup to her lips and sipped the contents. "Welcome, Dev."

'Thank you." Dev copied her, finding the liquid thick and rich, and sweet, burning very gently as it went down her throat into her belly. It almost made her shiver. "Wow."

Jess cupped her hands around her glass and smiled. "What do you think of it?"

Dev took another sip, pausing to think. “It’s very different.” She said. “It feels like it’s staying on my tongue a long time after I drink it.”

“Uh huh.” Jess studied her, intrigued and a little surprised at the supple power of her new pilots body, now relatively exposed in the light clothing. Her arms and legs were firm with muscle and she had visible definition under her light golden skin.

Jess hadn’t expected that, but then, she had to admit she never really had thought about it too much before either.

Bio Alts in the citadel were just window dressing. Jess had no idea if any of them even had names. She certainly never bothered to look at them with their clothing off.

But this one, now.

This one interested her. She watched Dev cautiously swallow another mouthful, and after a brief pause, lick her lips, an approving expression on her face. “Like it?”

Those clear, pale eyes lifted and met hers. “It has alcohol in it?”

“Yes.” Jess chuckled briefly. “Our one remaining vice.”

Dev nodded. “In the crèche, too.” She admitted. “Doctor Dan gave me some before I left, but it was really different from this.” She said. “I like this, and the stuff we had at dinner.”

“Yeah, the beer’s not bad.” Jess leaned against the workspace table. “You get to taste some really weird stuff on the outside. You’ll see.”

Dev looked up at that, and grinned. “I will.” She said. “I’m glad. We heard stories about downside from some of the people that came to the crèche, but it sounded so strange we didn’t believe most of it.”

Jess grinned back. She was getting used to seeing the collar, she realized, the faint glowing traces not really seeming out of place around Dev’s neck. The metal itself was very thin and flexed a little as Dev moved and she wondered if it was ever uncomfortable.

What would it feel like? She only just stopped herself from reaching out to touch the thing, and supposed Dev didn’t pay much attention to it. Guess you could get used to pretty much anything, she decided. “Does that bother you?”

“Huh?” Dev looked around, then at her. “What?”

“The collar.” Now, Jess surrendered to curiosity and lifted her hand up, touching it with her fingertips. “Does it pinch, or whatever?” She could feel the almost smooth surface shift a little, as Dev swallowed.

“No.” Dev cleared her throat, glancing aside with a touch of embarrassment in her expression. “ Don’t think much about it usually.”

Jess lowered her hand. “It feels warm.”

“Body heat.” The bio alt explained briefly. “When I got it put on at first it used to… “ She paused. “I felt it, sometimes. But now I don’t.” She looked up at met Jess’s eyes. “When you get programmed, the sensors come down over your head and clip into the slots here.” She touched the collar herself. “Then they tell you to go down, and when you come back up, there’s a bunch of new knowledge there.”’

“Huh.” Jess rested her chin on her hand. “Do you know ahead of time what you’re getting?”

“Sometimes.”

“Did you ever get something you didn’t like?”

Dev considered that soberly. Had she? “I don’t think so.”

Jess grunted softly. “I can remember some classes I wish I hadn’t been forced to take.” She admitted, “You’re lucky.”

Dev looked thoughtful for a long moment, then she smiled. “Yes, I am.” She glanced away and then back again. “Are we going to go outside soon? For this mission thing?”

‘Yes.” Jess replied. “I just haven’t planned out when and where yet. But it’ll be soon. They want this taken care of before it can take hold.” She added. “So get some rest tonight. We might be on the move after they get me the weather and mechanical status tomorrow and then the timing and sleep gets pretty random.”

Dev nodded. “Night and day didn’t mean much in the crèche. At end of schedule, you just reported to your sleep pod, and stayed in it until the cycle completed. She looked around the room. “I like it better here. You don’t know what might happen.”

“You like that?”

“I think it’s really interesting.” Dev replied. “Everything’s new and different.”

Jess leaned her elbows on her knees, and studied her cup. “I never thought about it like that.” She admitted. “Every day is different here, in a way.” She exhaled. “So I better let you get some rest and go sack out myself.”

“Thank you for the drink.” Dev finished hers. “It was very nice of you.”

Jess met her eyes, and smiled. “Ah.” She stood up. “Dangerous for me to drink it all myself. I end up walking into walls and singing.” She took Dev’s cup and the bottle. “I’m glad it worked out this morning, Dev.”

“Me too.” Dev smiled back, letting her elbow rest on the back of the chair she was sitting in. “You know, it’s the one thing we bio alts all really want. To find a place we can belong, and to do good work.”

Jess raised the bottle, and then she turned and approached the door. It slid open as she neared, and then closed behind her.

Dev sat there for a while, absorbing the sweet taste on her tongue, and replaying Jess’s words in her head. She decided she liked the agent a lot, appreciating her straightforward ways and her quirky sense of humor.

And she had been, except for Doctor Dan, the kindest person Dev had met so far anywhere, almost treating her just like another natural born sometimes. It was nice, and it made her feel really good and with an abrupt suddenness, she realized no matter what difficulties they would face, she wanted to be here, and not go back to the crèche.

Even if it was hard. It was good not to have proctors all around her, or the sameness of classes, or being treated like just one face among many.

It was good to have interesting people around her, even if some of them were rude. It was good to be able to do hard, and difficult things.

Abruptly, the door between her quarters and Jess’s opened, making her blink as the tall, dark haired woman leaned into the opening. “Hello.” She murmured, half sitting up and peering through the shadows.

“Door’s not locked.” Jess outlined the obvious. “So just don’t scare yourself if you walk by and it opens.” She ducked back away and the door closed again, leaving the room once more in quiet peace.

Dev studied the door, quite surprised. She could see the scan pad light was now a calm green instead of the red it had been before, and she wondered what that was supposed to mean. She diligently searched her programming, but there were no references to anything like that in there.

Figures. Dev got up and went behind her workspace, sitting down and pulling her pad over to her, logging in with a thumb press and calling up the rulebook of the citadel, which had provided her with a lot of useful information so far.

After a few minutes reading, she pushed the pad back, unsatisfied. There was nothing in the book about doors, or quarters, or anything like that. Dev rested her chin on her hand and frowned a little. Then she sighed and got up, returning to her bed and snuggling back under the covers.

Maybe it didn’t mean anything. Maybe it was just Jess’s way of saying she was happy with having Dev on her team.

Maybe she'd just gotten tired of ringing the bell. Dev woudln't have thought of going into Jess's quarters on her own herself – bio alts were always on the locked side of the door, after all. You found that out pretty fast in the creche.

Dev let her eyes close again, this time, fading into sleep before she really had a chance to think about anything else.

**

Jess set the bottle down in her cabinet, and put the glasses on the tray underneath. She studied it for a moment, and then she turned and wandered over to her bed, dropping down onto it and looking up at the ceiling.

She was tired. It felt good to be tired, in the way that you got when you'd expended energy in doing something worthwhile rather than just hung around the citadel kicking yourself.

Body tired, instead of mind tired. She stretched and settled herself, squirming around and getting under the covers as the lights dimmed down around her, as her eyes caught the soft glow of the light across the room.

What, she pondered, would her new pilot think about the door? Would she understand why Jess had turned off the security between them? Probably not. She smiled wryly. Hell, she really didn't understand why she'd done it, except that she'd realized she had found a little bit of sympathy in her for Dev, who had been thrown into her world with only the barest of preparation for it.

She'd always been a sucker for the underdog, and Dev had risen to the challenge, with a calm courage that surprised and charmed her, and made her want to do what she could to keep the kid on the right track.

Everyone had thought Dev was going to be at best an embarrassment and at worst, a mortal danger to the people she was here to work with. It made her feel good to know she'd had a part in having the bio alt prove otherwise.

Jess wanted her to succeed. She smiled into the darkness. She did, and in the silence of her own conscience she could admit that she did and it had nothing to do with what Bain wanted either. It felt good to have something to focus on that kept her interested.

Dev interested her. She suspected she would go in interesting her. She also suspected they could achieve good things together, and be successful. Jess rolled over onto her side and wrapped her arms around her pillow.

She felt her body relax, and she spent a few minutes going over the day in her mind, before the pictures slowly faded into her dreams and she was out, her breathing slowing and evening, a smile still on her face.

**

The alarm brought Dev standing up in an instant, her heart thundering, as she looked around her in shocked bewilderment. The lights had snapped on in her quarters, and she could hear noises outside, but in this very moment she had no idea what to do.

The alarm was a low, unnerving howl, growing to a climax and then falling again, setting her nape hairs on edge as the screen above her workstation lit up showing a grid of the citadel with lots of flashing red points.

Something was wrong. After a second of indecision, she bolted for the door between her and Jess's quarters reaching it just as it popped open, revealing the dark haired woman halfway through getting into her jumpsuit. "Oh!"

"Get kitted up." Jess said. "We're under attack."

Dev scooted over to the dressing case and started getting out of her sleep ware, glad of the clear direction. She hesitated, and then grabbed the suit she used in the carrier, jumping into it and sliding the catches closed with one hand as she grabbed her boots with the other.

"Where are they??" Jess's voice bellowed from the next room. "Airborne?!"

Dev got her boots on and grabbed her pilots kit, shaking her head to clear it as she headed again for the door that had stayed wide open.

Jess was fastening her sidearm, her head bent towards the comms unit on her workspace. "The dock? The shuttle dock?"

"That's right!" A voice answered. "Stupid bastards are pounding the landing pad, shuttle's in there - was about to leave!"

"What the hell?" Jess grabbed her heavy rifle. "C'mon, Dev." She said. "Stay close to me out of the way. Not sure if we need to launch or not."

"Yes." Dev was, again, very glad for the clear direction. "I'm ready."

Jess looked at her, then smiled briefly. "Yes, you are." She said. "Good choice on the suit." She turned back towards the door. "Central, live fire in the halls - coming down."

"Watch out! We heard fire in the outer ring! They may have penetrated!" The voice came back. "Ops to all details – stand by! Stand by we may have enemy in the complex!"

"Shit." Jess slammed her comm helmet on her head and headed for the door. "Put your hat on, kid. You see anyone pointing anything at you dive for the floor."

"Yes.." Dev put on her own unit, clicking into the comm stream and hearing an eruption of voices as she settled the earpiece in. She got right behind Jess and stuck with her as they went out the door in the front of Jess's quarters, and entered the hall.

Lights were flashing a deep, warning red. The entryway to central ops was likewise lit up and down the curved hall there came the sound of heavy, running footsteps.

"Go in that entryway, put your back to it." Jess stepped out into the hallway and blocked the way into ops, swinging her heavy rifle up and into position as a group of dark clad bodies came barreling around the curve at her.

Dev did as she was told, hitting the wall with her back just as she heard Jess release the safety mechanism on the big weapon she was holding.

"Halt!" Jess let out a powerful bellow.

"Whoa whoa!" The man in the lead put the brakes on and held a hand up. "Security! Hey! We're friendly!"

Dev quickly poked her head out from behind the steel entranceway and saw six men in heavy armor ramble to a halt and duck for cover, despite the fact they were far more heavily armed and outnumbered the lone agent holding the hall against them.

She could see their widened eyes and had to wonder.

Jess kept them hopping for a second, then she shifted the muzzle of the heavy gun. "What's the scoop? Nothings down here. You guarding ops?"

"Affirm." The man in front said.

"Right." Jess surged into motion. "C'mon, Dev."

Dev followed her down the hall and past the security guards, as they rapidly came past them and took up station at the entrance to the command center. "They were scared of you." She commented to Jess, as they sped through the central hall.

"Sure." Jess was turning her head from side to side, her hands shifting on the gun. "I'm an ops agent. We're nuts and they know it."

"I see."

Jess heard the sound of live fire percussion up ahead and she slowed a little, hugging the wall. "Actually, what they really know is that if I think they've turned, or working against the best interests of the organization in my estimation I'll blow them apart."

"Oh."

"They have to wait for permission to blow me apart."

“Oh.” Dev’s vocal inflection changed completely.

“Stay behind me.” Jess flattened herself against the wall. She could hear the explosions and she sidled forwards and reached the curve, ducking down and snaking her head around the edge to see what lay past it.

The hall, surprisingly, was clear, but she saw flashes past the next set of doors. “Okay, c’mon.” She straightened and moved along the hall, coming around the bend and seeing Jason and Brent crouching just out of the line of sight. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Jason glanced past her, then back down the hall as Jess and Dev joined them. “Fucking mess. I swear this place is going to shit.”

“What’s up?” Jess touched her ear. “Don’t hear crap on com.” She said. “Anyone know what the deal is?”

“Shuttle landed. Next thing we knew we had inbound, and a big bang on the dock.” Jason said, in clipped tones. “Heard blaster fire in the out-hall. They blew the cams so no one can see what the hell’s going on.”

“Let’s go. Next door.” Jess pointed, then she led the way forward, with Jason right at her side.

Brent and Dev followed along. Dev noticed Brent was also carrying his pilots’ gear and he, like her, didn’t have a weapon. She hadn’t seen any of the techs carry a gun, and she figured that was why she had no programming at all about them.

She knew what they were, of course. She’d seen pictures of them. But she’d never encountered anyone with them in the crèche; even the security proctors who were in charge of keeping order didn’t carry anything more than a shock stick.

The sounds of the explosions got abruptly louder, and then they heard yells.

Jess started running and they came around the corner in time to see the outer doors explode inwards, with a percussive shock that nearly knocked them off their feet. “Breach! Breach!” Jess yelled into her com. “Seal the ring! They blew the outer door!”

Dev heard a deep rumbling sound that rattled her bones and as she glanced behind her she saw huge portals sliding shut blocking off any escape back down the corridor. As they closed she felt the air compress around her, and then they were in two sets of curved hallway blocked off from anything other than whatever was making so much noise up ahead.

“Down!” Jason bellowed, and they all fell flat on their stomachs as fire came down the hall, slamming into the wall behind where they’d just been standing.

Jason and Jess started firing back, spraying the opening with heavy blasts as they spotted friendly fire from inside the alcove shooting back at the blasted outer door. “We have enemy action on the dock.” Jess called into the com. “We’re moving in. Stand by to vent on my mark.”

“Standing by. Shuttle crew sealed their flight deck, ops.” The com came back. “They took some heavy damage.”

“Roger that.” Jess started swarming forward across the ground, firing as she moved. Jason angled after her getting a slightly different line of fire and crossing hers as they covered the opening and prevented anything from emerging from it. “Too bad. They could just lift and end our problem.”

Dev clipped her gear to her suit and copied Jess’s motions. She tried to keep behind the two ops agents as best she could, without bumping into the stolidly crawling Brent.

She felt a little helpless, and looking at her fellow tech, she thought maybe he did too, since he looked like he was in a very bad mood and he flinched every time the weapons made a loud noise.

He glanced at her. “Don’t like being a target.” He muttered. “Sucks.”

Dev nodded in sympathetic agreement. “It would be better to be flying.”

For a moment, Brent stared blankly at her, then faintly, his lips twisted into a reluctant smile. “Yeah.”

“Movement!” Jess aimed down a line, and blasted a red flare towards the smoking entrance, as Jason rolled to one side and took his own aim, hopping sideways at the very last moment as a blue blast scored the ground where he’d just been lying. “Watch it!”

“Same you!” Jason saw a round blob travel inside and caught it with his blaster, sending a wave of energy through the hall along with a booming roar. “Trigger bomb! Watch your eyes!”

Then all at once a lot of things happened. The opening they were moving towards filled with big, blocky figures and Jess and Jason hauled up onto their knees, blasting away as fast they could as the intruders blasted back at them.

Fire landed all around them and Dev rolled over and hugged the wall, ducking her head as a bolt hit the surface just over her so close she felt the heat against her shoulder blades.

“Duck!” Jess yelled, as she removed something from her belt and threw it, then went flat to the ground and covered her head.

A guttural yell was heard, then a moment later a deep, violet flash flooded the hall, followed by a ripping sound and a huge, ear rending thump.

“Clear!” Jason yelled a half second later, and the two agents scrambled to their feet and bolted forward, with their techs a couple steps behind them. The opening was now empty, and the steel stained a deep, smoky black and they ran through a field of energy that made them all twitch.

It was almost painful. Dev almost cried out. But it faded as they jumped over the still bodies on the ground and they were in the outer entry.

It was almost unrecognizable. The door to the shuttle bay had been blown apart, and the console Dev had first seen as she entered was nothing but shards. As they crossed the threshold there was movement to their left and Jess turned and aimed in a motion so fast and smooth it seemed there was no thought at all involved.

Her eyes tracked and targeted the motion and just as quickly, she turned her weapon aside and then turned 360, checking for other intruders as she trusted her senses in marking the threat as a friendly.

The motion continued though, and through the haze and smoke a figure appeared with a blaster in hand and joined them. “Thanks for not blasting me, Drake. Would have been a pity after all that.”

“Doctor Dan.” Dev blurted, in deep surprise.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan tipped the blaster muzzle up and let it rest against his collarbone. “Haven’t had to do that in a good long while.” He observed the destruction, and the scattered bodies on the outside, as well as the pile of silent figures on the inside. . “Nice grenade hit.” He complimented Jess.

“Thanks.” Jess regarded him in bemusement. “Was that you laying down fire from the back there?”

“Mmhm.” Doctor Dan produced a brief smile. “Certainly got the old blood pumping, I’ll admit.”

“What the hell happened?” Jason asked, as both he edged out into the pad, and swept the area. Overhead, the sound of a carrier engine was heard, and they looked up to see four of the big vehicles hovering. “Are we clear?”

“Affirm, ground ops.” The com crackled. “We’re clear air side. BR76004, BR76003, remain in formation until released. BR75003, BR74034, return to base.”

“BR74034, clear.”

“BR75003, clear.”

Two of the carriers split off and disappeared, while the remaining to started a slow circling patrol over the shuttle bay.

“We’re clear ground side.” Jess reported. “Six down need a cleanup. Drake 11 on com.”

“Affirm, will send, thanks Drake.”

Brent was kneeling beside one of the intruders and he kicked them over with his boot. “Stormers.” He glanced up. “They get dropped? Where’s the log?”

Dev slowly looked around at the destruction, and then at Doctor Dan, who was standing easily with the gun resting against his shoulder, as natural with it as Jess had been. He turned his head and looked back at her, his gentle smile appearing.

“You all right, Dev?” He asked. “Terrible way to wake up, isn’t it?”

“Different.” Dev acknowledge. “I took no harm.” She added. “Did you?”

“No.” Doctor Dan shook his head. “Despite me being far too old to be messing with these things, I managed not to crack anything besides a smile this time.”

Jess came back in from the pad, shaking her head. “What the hell was that all about?” She wondered. ‘This is the most heavily defended part of the citadel and they know it. What were they after?”

Doctor Dan cleared his throat. “Me, probably.” He said, in a diffident tone. “I was scheduled to board the shuttle to leave.” He peered outside. “I heard the engines overhead and got back inside just as they came down right on top of the pad.”

“You?” Jess stared at him.

“Mm.” Doctor Dan thumbed the safety back on the gun in his hand. “Apparently I’ve made a breakthrough they don’t want continued.” He said. “Somewhat the same as the vegetation advance you will likely be trying to circumvent on that side, Agent Drake.”

“Breakthrough.” Jess turned and looked at Dev, then back at the doctor, her eyebrows lifting.

Doctor Dan shrugged modestly. “I was listed on the passenger manifest.” He indicated the grounded shuttle. “I should be flattered. They sent a six man team in. I suppose they were supposed to get me between when I left the citadel door and before I cleared the hatch.”

“And then what?”’

“Well, either kill me or take me.” Doctor Dan said, dryly. “They had their own bio alt program, you know. Never got very far though. They just have some very basic models.” He smiled again. “The one thing I suspect they didn’t expect is that I’d know who they were and start shooting at them.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to wait for you to leave here?” Jason asked.

“Interforce is the last stop on this shuttle run. It goes right up to the station after that. They could try to blow the shuttle up out of the sky, but it would go up and into space before they probably caught her.” Doctor Dan said. “But it sure was audacious.”

“That’s damn sure.” Jess ran a hand through her hair, and grimaced a trifle. “Well, glad they got skunked anyway.”

Now, the room was starting to fill with people. Dev kept to one side, as technicians poured in and Stephen Bock arrived at a run, puling up to a halt next to their little group. “Came in at sea level.” He said. “They were up and over the ridge before the systems caught them and in there.” He looked at the bay. “They dropped a team and went topside. Too fast, and too high for us to follow.”

“Huh.” Jess grunted. “Told you they’d get an advantage going half space with those damn things.” She said. “We can’t chase them.”

‘Wasn’t my decision.” Stephen said, shortly. “Everyone clear?”

Jason looked around. “Looks like.”

It was then that Bock noticed Doctor Dan standing there. “Mr. Bain was asking for you.”

“I bet he was.” Kurok handed over his blaster to one of the security men, who took it gingerly. “Well, it appears I’m stuck here for a while longer.” He patted Dev on the shoulder. “Let me go see what the old man wants.”

He turned and left the outer lock, passing through the inner corridors and disappearing as the rest of them watched him go.

“You said he was a scientist?” Jason asked, quizzically.

“He is a scientist.” Dev said. “He programmed me.” She added, after a brief pause.

“Huh.” Jess’s brows twitched. “That might explain a few things.”

“What?” Jason looked at her.

“Never mind.” Jess exhaled. “Well, they got us good, that’s for sure. Never had the guts to go for our bay before.”

“You pissed them off.”

A cleanup team was removing the enemy bodies, zipping them into bags and latching the bags to the weight carrier they’d brought with them. Technicians were moving aside the destroyed console, and someone else was erecting a set of temporary lights in the corner.

A squad of security showed up, with a portable blast barrier they started to set up to close the gaping hole in the wall

Stephen shook his head. “That was ballsy.” He regarded the outer door. “We’ll need to keep the inside seal on until they get that rebuilt.” He glanced at Jess. “You think it’s their way of sending a message back for what you did?”

Jess shrugged. “Stupid if it was. Besides, you heard Kurok. He thinks they were after him.” She said. “And I wouldn’t say he’s wrong.” She added. “C’mon Dev. Let’s go get breakfast now that all the fun’s over.”

“That was fun?” Dev straightened out her jumpsuit, twisted askew from her crawling on the floor. “I think I liked being chased by all those planes better.”

Brent snorted. “Score.”

“Yeah, well, let’s get chow before the old man blows up.” Jason joined them “Not gonna be a happy day.”

**

Dev entered her rad station, her book tucked under her arm as she paused to review the space in front of her.

She liked it. The room was low ceilinged, and cozy, with translucent couches and chairs and towards the back, what Jess had explained to her was a meditation space that was lit in a soft blue light and had a padded floor to sit on.

She put her book down on the table and went to the small closet in the wall. She removed her boots and her jumpsuit, and put them inside, feeling the faint movement of air against her bare skin as she went to the control panel.

She put her palm on it. After a second, it chimed. “Name.” A soft voice asked.

Dev studied it for a minute. “Dev.” She pronounced.

The system digested that. “NM-Dev-1?”

“Yes.”

“This system will code your presence recording you as “Dev”.” The voice said. “Stand by for scan please.”

Dev waited, and felt the tickle over her skin as the system reviewed her body. This felt totally normal to her, and she remained still, breathing easily. “This is my first experience.” She said, after a pause.

“Acknowledged.” The voice answered. “This session will consist of one standard hour. Advise this system if you experience any difficulty, or if discomfort results.”

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “Thank you.”

Talking to machines was often easier than talking to people. Dev felt the light change, and she felt faint warmth on her skin as the rad came on and bathed her. There was something in the quality

of it that made her smile and she walked into the space with the chairs and picked her book up, sitting down on one of the couches and leaning back.

Jess was working on the mission plan, and she suggested that Dev get her rad in and that she'd come get her when she was ready to go over what they were going to do. That seemed like a good idea to her, and now she was content to relax in the light, enjoying the warmth and the soft sound of the machinery around her.

In the crèche, there never was an issue about getting sunlight. It came and went constantly, and you could always count on catching some in the dining hall, or the gym, or just in the halls while you were waiting for a class.

And, of course, in the sleep pods as they rotated up along the rim of the crèche they were exposed to the sun as the covers turned translucent and so, she'd never had to think about it before.

Here, she did. Dev stretched her legs out on the couch. She wondered what people outside the citadel did, and made a mental note to ask Jess about it later.

She set her book down and folded her hands over her bare stomach, thinking about the attack they'd suffered in the morning. It had been scary for her. She had felt a little like she and Brent were more of a hindrance than a help and it bothered her a lot that there hadn't been anything she could do to assist Jess at all.

If they had been ordered to launch – then there would have been good work for her. But they had bypassed the hangar deck when they went into the last curve and then all she and Brent could do is stay on the ground and hope they didn't get blasted.

Brent had even talked to her about it. Commiserated with her. Dev had felt sort of good about that, since it was the first time the tech had even spoken to her outside ship com. She'd even walked back to the dining hall at his side and it hadn't really felt uncomfortable.

That was nice. She didn't want the others to feel bad all the time around her. Dev studied the calm, dim room. She would finish her rad, she decided, and then maybe go do some work in the gym. Maybe by then, Jess would have her plan all worked out.

**

Jess slowly sat down at her desk, grimacing a little as her back protested. The spot where she'd been stabbed had ended up slamming against a door handle in all the tumult and she'd felt a sharp spear of pain that at the time, she'd ignored.

Now, it was throbbing, and the jolts of pain were going up her spine and through her neck and giving her a banging headache.

She should go to med. Jess glowered at the screen in front of her, and rested her forearms on the desk, debating the issue with herself in silence.

If she went to med, she'd be stuck there. They'd ground her again. Jess studied her twined fingers. Before she hadn't really cared that much, after Joshua she'd been more than glad not to be under any pressure either to take a new partner on or go out in the field.

It had been all right, to her, to step down after she'd gotten back from the failed mission, spending her time either curled up in bed convalescing or out on the ledge, just watching the sea. It had been a long time – hell, it had been since her entrance into field school since she'd taken a break and just let life run past her for a while.

Now? Jess exhaled slowly. Now, after Bain showed up, and she'd gotten promoted, going off line wasn't really her first option. Bain wanted her to take care of this problem, and she had a feeling if she did, there might be more in it for her than he was letting on.

Now things were exciting and good things were happening. Bricker was gone and she saw an opportunity for her to really get herself ahead.

And then there was Dev. Jess pondered her new pilot. Dev the surprisingly skilled. Dev the surprisingly courageous. If she went off line, Bain would surely put her in team with someone else, so as not to lose those significant skills and then what?

Would any of the other agents treat Dev the way she had? No one really liked the idea of the bio alt, especially now that she'd proven herself more than useful. They'd probably find away to get her into an 'incident'.

She didn't want anything bad to happen to Dev. Jess relaxed a little, and felt the pain ease. She wanted to keep on working with Dev and have her be part of the success she could feel out there ahead of them, just outside her reach.

So going to med was out. Jess very slowly sat back. Then she got to her feet and went over to the big cabinet, opening it up and fishing inside her gear pack for one of the packets of analgesic she'd stored in there. She got one out and opened it, then swallowed the tabs down with a quick, dry gulp.

"Now what?" She mused. The idea of sitting at her desk made her grimace, so she went over and picked up the info pad, carrying it with her as she slowly climbed the steps up into her relaxation area and adjusted the flexible couch, stretching out on it on her stomach and setting the pad on the shelf at the head of it so she could see the screen.

It wasn't entirely comfortable, but it wasn't entirely uncomfortable and she'd gotten used to the position as her back had started to heal once they'd let her out of the hospital. She settled herself and keyed the pad controls; calling up the mission plan she'd started to work on.

It would be a tough run. She studied the layout of the laboratory. There would be no getting in there any easy way, especially after their attack yesterday. She could see the bounce backs showing multiple layers of scan and as they themselves would be, figured the lab and all the outer defenses would be on a very heightened alert.

So.

Jess studied the intel report on the lab. Approach from the air wouldn't work. She zoomed in on the facility, realizing after a minute that the latest sim scans were based on digital input that probably came from her carrier.

From their carrier. She watched the replay, remembering that long dive and the feel of heavy G's on her as Dev made the old bus stand up and really shake its booty.

Jess smiled, and then went back to studying the screen.

The lab was buried into granite promontory. The defenses were hardened, and she watched the scan as a transport arrived, going through several layers of security before it was allowed to dock on an isolated landing pad, the muzzles of heavy blasters visible surrounding it.

She watched as guards came out and inspected the transports manifest, and then, the pilot was remanded back inside and a troop of unfriendlies came out to offload whatever the contents or people were.

No easy way in that route.

Jess studied the promontory. If the facility was anything like the one she was in, though, there were infrastructure components she might be able to take advantage of. She knew that they had to generate power and feed themselves not too differently than Interforce did, that the granite cliffs likely held the caverns full of phosphorescent organisms, the ultraviolet lit growing platforms, the captive fisheries, the rakers of seaweed or else some form of equivalent technology to let them feed themselves and create the power needed to run the scientific technology.

She tapped a request into the pad and waited for a response, her body slowly relaxing as the pain medication took effect. As she tapped on the edge of the shelf her mind drifted, and she found herself wondering what Dev was up to.

That puzzled her. Why would she care? Why should she care? Jess frowned, but nevertheless, she keyed over to the locater and tapped in Dev's name. After a brief pause, the locater came back with a coordinate, and she grunted, satisfied her pilot had taken her advice and gone to rad.

Hm.

The thought of the warm glow suddenly sidetracked her, and after a pause, she got up off the couch and took the pad with her, easing down the steps and crossing over to where she'd left her indoor boots.

Putting them on, she went to the door and through it, heading for the rad area through sparsely populated halls. Why not get a dose of rad herself? It had been several days, after all, and she could just as well go over the plans flat on her stomach in her dose room where at least she'd get something useful out of her time while she waited for the intel to come back.

The drugs had made the pain bearable. It remained as a dull throbbing, but at a level where she could put it aside, and it didn't affect her moving and walking. Even her headache had faded a little and she sighed in relief as she passed through the central corridor and turned right down into rec.

A good portion of the citadel was at the attack site, either cleaning up, or taking readings, making reports, developing plans to prevent it from happening again and there was no one there to see her arrive at her door, putting her palm on the lock and passing inside.

Once the door shut, she paused, and stood there thinking.

Time was of essence. Jess reasoned. Why not get even more done at the same time? She walked over to the com and typed in a code. After she heard a faint buzz, she leaned closer. "Dev?"

There was a brief pause, and then the buzz stopped. "Yes?" Dev's voice came back. "I'm here in the sun space, as you suggested."

Jess nodded to herself. "I'm in mine." She said. "Mind if I join you? I want to go over the plan."

There was another brief pause. "I don't mind." Dev responded. "That would be nice. It's sort of making me want to go to sleep in here."

"Yeah. It does that." Jess said. "Be there in a sec." She released the com and turned, leaving her space and walking the short distance down the corridor to the one assigned to her pilot. She put her palm on the lock and the door opened, letting her inside.

She paused in the antechamber, setting her pad down and glanced into the main section. Dev was relaxing on one of the couches and for a moment Jess felt a little lightheaded and short of breath. "Damn drugs." She muttered. "How do you like this?" She added, in a louder voice.

"It's nice." Dev responded. "It feels nice, though it's different than being in the real sun."

'Is it?" Jess stripped out of her jumpsuit and inhaled sharply, as an injudicious motion sent a bolt of pain through her shoulder. She waited for the pain to ease, and then she folded the suit up and put it on a shelf, and added her boots to it. "What's the sun like?"

"Well." Dev turned her head as Jess entered, and their eyes met. "It's.. um.. a lot brighter for one thing." She said, after a pause to clear her throat. "When it comes into the crèche, all the regular lights go off, and it's just… it's different."

"Mm." Jess eased slowly down on the chair next to the lounge Dev was on. "So it's.. I remember reading that it was yellow."

Dev shook her head briefly. "In space, it's white." She said. "It feels good." She looked up at the ceiling. "This feels good too, but not the same way." She looked back over at Jess. "It's too dark to read from." She held up her book.

Jess let herself be distracted. "What is that?" She pointed at it.

"It's a book." Dev said, with a touch of hesitation. "You have them here, right?"

"We have them, but.. they're on plas." Jess peered at it. "Can I see it?"

Dev passed it over to her. "One of my teachers gave it to me."

Jess put her pad down and touched the book, opening it and running her fingertips over it. The pages were thin, and an odd scent came off them as she peered at the writing. It was, as Dev had said, too dim to really read it, but she could make sense of the words if she concentrated on them.

Dev sat quietly, watching her. Jess's head was bent over the book as it was cradled in her hands, one elbow leaning on the chair arm with her legs tucked up half under her.

The brown sigils were very visible on her arms, but now that Dev could see all of her, she could see the scars there too scattered over her skin and she thought about how much all of that must have hurt.

Jess was tall, and she had long bones. She had wide shoulders but you could see a lot of her skeleton under her skin though there tough sinew there too. There was one long scar from her right knee to her ankle on the inside of her leg that made Dev grimace just to see it.

She had gotten badly hurt only once. She'd been in the null grav gym and there had been a malfunction, and she'd fallen two stories on top of one of the agility systems and broken her leg.

The pain had been incredible. She'd been very glad she'd passed out and woken up in the medical center, her leg already set and muzzy with painkilling drugs. "I've read it a hundred times." Dev said, into the silence that had built around them. "I find something new every time."

Jess looked up from the book and smiled. "I haven't read one of these since I was very small." She handed the book back. "And I've never read this one." She glanced at the cover. "Lord of the Rings."

"Would you like to borrow it?" Dev asked. "It's really a good story."

"Later." Jess agreed. "I'd love to." She shifted and reached for the pad, halting in mid motion and closing her eyes, then opening them and exhaling. "Don't think I'm going to get a chance to read it in the next couple days." She lifted the pad and triggered it. "Here's the deal."

Dev put the book down and leaned on the arm of the lounge she was on, studying the pad. After a moment though, she looked up at Jess's face, surprised to see some tension there. One long hand was tangled in her hair holding her head up, as the other tapped the pad, and there was an awkwardness about her posture.

"So, this is what we're gonna do, if the intel comes back." Jess said. "This is the edge of the Greenland islands. That's' where the fishing fleets work out of."

"I see." Dev murmured.

"Tough place, but.. " Jess tapped the screen. "I've got some remote family here, and we can cross over into enemy territory here, in this little group where they all trade together."

Dev nodded. "How does that assist us?"

"These boats, they trade with the bad guys." Jess drew a line on the screen. "I'm going to get taken on board as a mate, and get into the lab that way, when they go to trade fish to them."

Dev considered that. "I see."

"What I'll need you to do is hide out there, and keep com open, then come get my ass out of there after I finish the job." Jess said. "Got it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Depends." Jess said. "If I can steal the tech, I will. If not, I'll destroy it." She studied the pad, and then looked up her pilot. "I'd rather steal it. Then we get the benefit."

"This sounds difficult." Dev commented. "What if they find out who you are? Will they be angry?" She watched Jess shift a little; setting the pad down and leaning back in the chair, as the warm, purple light bathed her.

"Chances are, they will find out, and sure, they'll be angry." Jess said. "That's part of the game." She studied her pilot. Dev was stretched out on the couch, but there was a furrow in her brow and she looked a little perturbed. "But the goal is to get this job done. It's important to us, because if they take this technology forward, they could start reclaiming land and that means these skirmishes we do might turn into something a lot bloodier."

Dev's head cocked to one side a bit.

“There aren’t enough of us left to have a war, Dev.” Jess said, after a long silence between them. “But livable land means more people and more resources, and then they will have enough bodies to have a war with and we won’t.”

“This is going to sound kind of foolish.. or maybe ignorant.” Dev said, slowly. “But wouldn’t it be more productive to cooperate and assist everyone in making progress?”

Jess smiled faintly. “Yes, it would” She said. “But that’s not how we’re wired, Dev. “

“I see.” The bio alt considered the statement. “I will do my best to assist in the plan and achieve good results then.” She said. “I hope you will achieve your goals safely.”

Jess sighed. “Yeah, me too.” She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “We’ll have to do some trading in the islands and I’ll need to put together a cover.” She mused. “And make sure we can cover up that necklace of yours. That won’t work out there.”

‘Are there bio alts on the outside?” Dev asked.

Jess shook her head. “In the citadels, and in the admin centers, yes. But not in the outlands. They don’t even know what a bio alt is. I said cover it so they don’t cut your head off and try to steal it.”

Dev’s pale eyes widened.

Jess chuckled wryly. “Don’t worry. They can’t break into a carrier. Yet.” She leaned back again, the pain having subsided into a mere dull throb again. “I think this is going to work, Dev. We’ve never hit them this way before, and I’ve got a lot of chances to back out if it looks like it’s going to crash and burn.”

“Have you ever done that?”

Jess looked over to find those interesting green eyes watching her, the faintest of smiles on Dev’s face. “Done what, back out?”

“Yes.”

“No.” Jess grinned, rakishly.

“I didn’t think so.” Dev grinned back. “I’ll do my best to take care of your ass, then.”

They both chuckled, and their eyes met, and after a moment, Jess looked down at her pad, and smiled. “I definitely feel safer now.” She commented, lifting up her hand and rubbing her face a little. “Rad makes you warm, huh?”

Dev considered that. “Yes, it does, now that you mention it.”

Jess looked up again and they studied each other briefly. “Ah, yeah. Okay, so uh.. “ Jess eased back into her couch. “What was that you said about the book?”

**

Dev entered the gym feeling happy. The big facility was nearly empty, and she went over to the changing area, finding the cabinet with her name on it and changing into the short jumper and shoes she found inside.

She wasn’t really sure why she was happy, but the rad session had been enjoyable, and she’d appreciated the fact that Jess had stopped to let her see the plan and talk to her about it. It was very different than the rescue, and it had a lot of sneaky bits to it she found really interesting.

Jess had a clever mind. She reminded Dev just a little of some of her favorite teachers in the crèche, who were always pushing her to look at things from different angles, so she could make good choices and not stick to one data source.

Jess seemed to like angles, too, and when she was being extra clever, she tended to smile a lot.

She liked that smile. Dev closed the cabinet and entered the exercise area, remembering what that looked like and feeling her face echo it as she crossed into the big space and paused to study it.

The gym was multi leveled, and had different sections intended for different purposes, including a climbing obstacle course, a running space, a load bearing area and, to her surprise since she hadn’t seen it when Jess showed her the gym, a huge tank of water.

As she watched, a tall man she didn't know went over to the tank, and jumped into it, disappearing and then surfacing and starting to move along the top of the water using his arms and legs. "Wow." Dev muttered to herself. "What's that all about?"

"Huh?"

Dev turned to find Brent there, his body covered in sweat and a towel wrapped around his neck. "I've never seen anything like that before." She pointed at the tank.

Brent looked. "Oh. The pool" He said. "Yeah, it's all right. If you like that sorta thing." He regarded the man in the tank. "I'm not much for swimming I sink like a rock." He glanced at her. "You?"

Dev shook her head. "I've never done anything like that. Water was very precious in the crèche."

"Huh." The tech grunted. "You should ask Jess to teach you. She's a fish. She and some of the others go down into the tunnels and swim in the ocean down there. Crazy nuts."

Dev sorted through that. "I might ask." She said. "I like the shower thing in our quarters." She said. "Jess mentioned something about the water in the bottom of the citadel – she took me out to see the ocean before and I can't really imagine going into that. It looked dangerous."

Brent snorted. "It is dangerous but what the hell difference does that make to us? " He said. "Everything we do is dangerous. Hell, Jess threw an antipersonnel mine in the damn hallway this morning. If it'd been keyed wrong, we'd all be dead."

"The purple thing?"

Brent nodded. "Keyed to our scan. But they get it wrong sometimes." He explained. "That's why it killed those goons. They aren't us."

Us. Dev thought about that word. "Yes." She said. "I'm glad it worked out."

Brent continued on his way to the changing room, and Dev turned and headed into the gym, looking around at the different things she could choose to do. She was drawn towards the tank, though, and she walked over to it, kneeling at the side of it and putting her hand into the water curiously. The man who had been in it was gone, and now the surface was still, and quiet.

It was pleasant. Neither warm nor cold, and she tried to imagine being completely immersed in it.

She couldn't, but she really wanted to, so without any further thought she jumped into the pool headfirst.

It was, without doubt, the weirdest feeling she'd ever had, as the water closed over her and she was caught in a swirl of it surrounding her, pushing and bubbling around her as she popped to the surface, her head breaking out of the liquid as she instinctively took a breath.

So weird. So strange. Instinctively, Dev moved her arms as she started sinking under again, pushing against the water to keep her head up in the air. She could feel the resistance against her motion, and she cupped her hands, moving her legs as well.

Experimentally, she stopped moving. Sure enough, she immediately sank under the surface; glad she'd taken a breath before her head went under. She opened her eyes, and felt the water sting against them, but also found to her delight that she could see after a fashion.

Then her chest started hurting, so she pushed with her hands again, and got back to the surface of the water, spluttering a little and shaking her head as she blinked the water out of her eyes.

"Hey!" Brent rushed over. "Are you nuts?" He went to his knees at the edge of the tank and held his hand out. "Here! Grab on!"

"I'm all right." Dev waved her hands around to keep afloat. "I just wanted to see what this was like." She pushed the water away from her and moved over to where Brent was kneeling. "It's nice."

"You are crazy." Brent said. "They picked the right one of you to match with Jess. She's crazy too." He sat down on the concrete floor as Dev got close enough to grab the edge of the tank. "You coulda hit your head and drowned."

Dev put both hands on the edge of the tank, holding herself still as her body drifted in the water. It reminded her a little of being in null grav, but it felt completely different and of course it was a lot wetter. "Well, you said it didn't really matter, didn't you?" She said. "That we all do dangerous things all the time?" She looked up at him and grinned.

With a shake of his head, Brent stood up. "Well, be careful. Last thing we need is for one of us to go and get hurt. There aren't many of us left." He studied her for a moment more, and then he retreated back toward the dressing room, his head still shaking gently as he walked.

Us. Dev exhaled slowly. It seemed that Brent, at least, had decided to accept her presence and that felt very nice. She was glad. She released the edge of the tank and moved her hands around again, leaning forward and stroking forward in a somewhat awkward motion.

It did move her, though, and she kept at it for a few minutes, until she became a little more accustomed to it, edging forward not exactly gracefully but at least with some good effect.

The water itself felt wonderful. She could feel it moving against her skin, and it smelled like the shower did, rich and wet and interesting. With a good deal of effort, she finally reached the far end of the tank, and discovered it wasn't as deep there and she could actually stand with her feet on the bottom and have her head stick up from the surface.

That was even better. She could fully appreciate the nice way the pressure of the water moved against her without having to worry about inadvertently breathing in the liquid. She knew the man who she'd seen in the tank was doing something different, and decided she would look up this whole swimming thing when she got back to her quarters to see if the systems had any information on it.

She bobbed there for a minute or so more, then she found the steps that led out of the tank and climbed up them, emerging up onto the concrete and feeling an immediate chill as the air hit her. She heard footsteps approaching and turned, to find Sandy and her partner approaching. "Hello."

Sandy ignored her and just walked past. Nappy gave her a brief nod, lifting one hand in a faint wave as he followed her.

Dev regarded them in mild curiosity.

"Don't pay any attention to her."

Dev turned to find Jason standing there. "Oh, hello." She said. "I wasn't really."

The tall, muscular agent had just finished his exercise, and he, like Brent had been, was covered in sweat. "Jess around?"

Dev shook her head.

Jason studied her. "What the hell happened to you?"

"I jumped in there." Dev pointed at the tank. "I liked it." She ran her fingers through her wet hair. "I think I should probably go put on a dry shirt though and continue my work." She gently circled him and headed for the dressing space.

"Hey." Jason jogged after her and caught up. "So what kind of gym work do you do up in space?"

"Well." Dev took a towel from a shelf as they passed and dried her face off with it. "It's not like this. You do running, or walking, jumping, picking things up.. things like that, but they adjust the grav so it's harder."

"Huh?" Jason frowned. "What do you mean?"

They were passing the sets of pull up bars and hanging swings and Dev paused, then she went over to the bars and glanced up at them, drying her hands and putting the towel down. "Like this." She jumped a little, and caught the bar, adjusting her hold and then pausing a moment before she pulled herself up so that her chin was even with the bar.

"Okay, so we do that too." Jason had his arms folded, and was watching her.

"Then we do this." Dev hoisted herself up, pressing her body up over the bar, and then carefully lifting herself up into a handstand. She held the position briefly, and then she let her body fall

over, swinging under the bar and then releasing it as she came up again, turning in mid air and catching it again and pressing herself back up into a handstand.

"Ah." Jason muttered.

Dev lowered herself until her shoulders touched the bar, then pushed herself back up again. Then she fell forward again, releasing the bar and landing neatly with both feet planted. "But they change the grav, so sometimes you're normal, like now, and sometimes you go up to two, or three, or when they want to really work you very hard, to four G's."

Jason stared at her. "Are you kidding me? He finally asked. "They work you under 4 g's? "

"Not that much, it's too hard." Dev admitted. "And not what I just did. You can get really hurt. But just walking around, and sometimes carrying things."

"Holy shit."

Dev wasn't sure what to make of that reaction. "Mostly it's 2 g." She said. "It makes gym shorter too. I'm going to have to work hard here to match what I did in the crèche." She made a little face. "The last gym I did before I came here was the hardest. They had me to a whole round in 3g's and I was really tired when I was finished."

"Holy shit."

Dev managed a brief grin. "Excuse me." She turned and headed into the changing area, going over to her little cubicle and stripping quickly out of the wet exercise suit so she could exchange it for a dry one. She toweled off her skin and changed, and then she headed back out into the gym to find some good work to do.

**

Jess studied the met data, bracing one arm against the console as she overlaid her situational map over it. Two tightly lined whorls intersected their flight plan and she grimaced, moving the met prediction ahead until they cleared. "Well. Shit."

"What's that, Drake?" The meteorological officer glanced at her.

"Fucking storms biting my ass again." Jess sighed. "Are they getting worse or is it just my natural pessimism rearing its head?"

The met officer came around the desk and studied her plotting. "Has been bad up there this year." He agreed. "I was just talking to Mort earlier over lunch and he said the same thing you just did, storms are getting worse and more often."

"Mm." Jess coded the data to her pad and straightened up cautiously. "Well, puts me on ice for a few days. We can't fly into that."

"Yeah? I heard your hotshot new pilot could fly that shuttle to the moon and back." The man said. "That's the rumor, anyway, from the mechs."

"Yeah?" Jess regarded him.

"Heard them talking in the mess." The man said. "They saw the mission logs from your last run and there's a lot of lip flapping on it."

"Dev did a kickass job." Jess said. "Surprised the hell out of me, as much as anyone else. "

"That make you nervous?" The met officer asked. "Maybe they can replace you with a sim slot?"

Jess studied him.

"Just a thought."

Jess smiled briefly. "Who knows?" She picked up the pad and gave him a brief wave. "Later."

"Later."

Jess left the met office and walked along the hall, trying not to acknowledge how much a sense of relief she was feeling at having to postpone the mission for a few days. She considered that as she walked, reasoning that it probably was good because it gave her back a chance to heal up a little, and she could make sure all the repairs were done to the shuttle.

Two good reasons. She nodded to herself. Perfectly legit reasons. Nothing to do with any reluctance on her part to go back out in the field in a tricky insertion.

Nothing like that at all. She had no control over the weather, after all, now did she? Besides, it would give her time to work on her cover, and get her plan all nice and settled before she and Dev went haring off into the wild outside.

That was Fate talking, she was sure of it. She'd been doing this long enough to know that when all the odds started stacking up against you, that was the world warning you that you were pointing in the wrong direction and ignoring that never led to good things.

Last time she'd done it, had been her last mission with Joshua. Her gut instinct had been humming like crazy on that one but she just hadn't had the guts to stand up and say so, and scrub the mission. Not with Bricker's strident insistence on the importance of the raid, and her own arrogance and ego shoving aside her doubts.

Stupid. Very stupid of her. Jess exhaled. Stupid with a trending to deadly.

"Drake."

Jess turned and waited, as Alexander Bain appeared from nowhere and caught up to her. "Sir." She greeted him quietly. "I was just in met." She added, unobtrusively scanning the area for listening ears.

"Not good, I take it?, hm,?" Bain studied her.

"Looks like plus 2 days to go." Jess said. "There are two tornadic mega storms coming over between now and then." She paused, and waited, watching those cold gray eyes dissect her.

"Hmm. That's bad." Bain said. "However, on the positive side, you will be present for the incoming ceremony tomorrow night. " He added, "So not all is negative. I very much wanted you and your new colleague to be there when this new class comes in. This scientific raid can wait the few days – in fact, if it solidifies their findings, better for us."

Jess nodded, feeling a sense of relief shiver through her muscles. "Let them get the bugs out before we steal it." She suggested.

"Exactly." The old man smiled briefly. "And perhaps it will keep the enemy off our doorstep." Bain frowned. "Shocking, they made it past all the scans isn't it?" He watched her intently.

'Very shocking." Jess agreed. "They must have gotten very lucky."

"Hm."

Jess's lips twitched, and she quickly scanned the hallway again, finding it still empty. "Or someone wasn't watching."

"Hm."

"Or someone was deliberately keeping quiet."

Bain leaned against the wall, his spare frame barely seeming to cast a shadow. "Does it seem likely to you that they could have gotten in here with no warning, and no storm to cover their tracks?"

"No."

"And yet it seems that the logs for the hour preceding their arrival have somehow become lost, making it impossible for us to ascertain exactly what we knew, when we knew it."

Jess stared at him, her body stiffening. "That doesn't happen without leaving fingerprints somewhere." She finally said.

"Hm." Bain tilted his head slightly. "Troubling times, Agent Drake." He unfolded his arms and straightened up. "And quite dangerous, perhaps, to those of interest." He added. "So keep an eye on your new colleague, hmm? I wouldn't want anything untoward to happen to that charming girl."

"I will." Jess said, in a quiet tone. "I don't want anything bad to happen to her either." She added. "She's all right."

“Yes.” Bains’ eyes met hers, and he smiled, just a little. “And I will keep my eye on her creator. Though I am sure he would be extremely irritated to hear me say that”

“He’s a pretty good shot.” Jess commented. “He took out two of those guys.”

“Dan Kurok has quite a number of unusual skills.” Bain agreed wryly. “Pity we need to get him back to the station before they blow up the citadel trying to find him, hmm?.” He pushed off the wall. “A good day to you, Drake. “

“Sir.”

He glanced back at her. “Do remember to keep your options open.”

Jess watched him go, as she replayed his words in her head. Then she frowned, and turned on her heel, heading across the hallway towards the gym.

**

Dev rubbed herself dry with the towel, and was headed towards her locker when she heard Jess’s voice nearby.

A moment later, the tall agent stuck her head around the corner of the changing area, and then entered. “There you are.” She addressed Dev. “How’d the gym go.”

“Very nice.” Dev said. She removed her jumpsuit from the locker and stepped into it. “The stations are really good, and I jumped into the big wet thing.”

Jess studied her. “The pool?”

“Yes.” Dev ruffled her hair dry. “I really liked that.” She said. “But I think I have to work out that whole swimming thing since my head kept going under and it was all a bit difficult.

Jess put her hands on her hips.

Dev stopped her motion, seeing the look on Jess’s face. “Is there something incorrect?”

“Ever occur to you that jumping in water and not knowing how to swim is a bad idea?” Jess asked.

Dev considered the question, as she put the towel in the container and ran her fingers through her hair to order it. “No.” She finally concluded. “How would I know how if I didn’t try it?”

Jess nodded. “Okay.” She looked around. “Glad you liked the gym.” She exhaled a little. “I have to start getting back in here regularly now that med cleared me.” Her voice sounded regretful. “But listen, it looks like we’ve got a few days break due to met. “

Dev closed her locker. “Okay.” She said. “Is there something else we need to do?”

“C’mon” Jess started walking towards the door, and Dev followed her unquestioningly. They exited the gym and walked through the central corridor. “Tomorrow night we’ll have to go to the induction of the new class.”

“Okay.”

“And the party afterwards.” Jess said.

Dev walked along at her side in silence for a few strides. “What’s a party?”

Jess rubbed the bridge of her nose. “It’s when everyone gets together in one room and drinks themselves stupid while eating bad seaweed crackers and mushroom dip.”

Dev digested this thoughtfully. “Is this a good thing or a bad thing?” She finally asked, as they headed down the long corridor towards the carrier hanger. “You sound like it’s a bad thing.”

Jess chuckled dryly. “I’m just not a party animal.” She admitted. “You saw the crowd in the bar when we got back from the rescue. More of the same of that.” She palmed open the door to the hangar and motioned Dev to go in.

They walked inside, finding the hangar relatively quiet. “Want to check out the body job.” Jess said. “Always pays to put an eyeball on it.”

Dev decided just to follow along, since neither remark made any sense to her. She stuck by Jess’s side as they walked between the parked vehicles, moving towards the rear where the tech station was. The tall ceiling was shrouded in darkness, the roof overhead firmly shut.

There were a lot of techs moving around. They gave her and Jess brief glances, then went back to their tasks, which made Dev feel pretty good. She liked being treated casually. 'Do you have to go to the party?"

Jess sighed. "Yes and no." She responded. "Its expected. So we go, but … " She paused, and fell silent. "Maybe it was Josh dragging me to all of them I don't know." She led the way around a tool bay and ducked under the fuel piping. "Doesn't matter."

Here, close to where they were rebuilding what was apparently their carrier, the smells were sharp and the mist in the air made Dev's eyes water. She forgot all about the party when she saw the framework of the big craft under the lights, scoured clean of all the battle damage. "Wow."

"Stripped her down to bare." Jess agreed. "Ugly thing, isn't it?"

"I don't' think so, no." Dev edged around to get a better look. Without it's skin on, you could see all the systems and gyros that made the carrier function and she stared in rapt fascination, feeling a strong surge of programming tickling her. "This is very interesting."

A man in a scuffed and stained orange jumpsuit came around the side of the carrier. "What was that?" He sidled over to Dev. "Were you saying you were interested?"

"Very." Dev agreed.

Jess rolled her eyes. "Oh no." She sighed. "Now you're in for it."

"Shut up, Drake." The tech motioned Dev closer. "Finally, one of you appreciates my work." He focused his attention on the tech. "My name's Clint." He said. "We almost met the other day when you brought this baby back here."

"Dev." Dev smiled at him, a genuine and appreciative grin. "Are you building it all up from scratch? It looks much better already."

Clint returned the smile. "Let me give you a tour." He steered her towards the stripped down rig. "Beat it, Drake. I know you just think of this as your damned bus."

Jess felt a sudden rush of anger that really surprised her. She surged after them and only just kept herself from slamming Clint in the back, pulling back at such a last minute that Clint sensed it, and half turned, his eyes going a little wider in alarm.

He looked at her face, and then he stepped away from Dev and put both his hands up, palms outward. "Sorry. Over the top. Didn't mean to piss you off."

Dev had turned too, and she instinctively did the opposite. She moved a little closer and looked up at Jess with a slightly concerned expression, one hand lifting up and touching Jess on the arm. "Is there something wrong?"

Jess felt a flush rising to her face, and she was glad of the glaring lights that obscured it. "No." She said. "I just don't appreciate being told off."

Clint let his hands slowly lower. "Sorry, Jess.' He said. "I really was just razzing you."

Jess felt her body relax, aware that her muscles had tightened into a pre fight posture, her fingers twitching a bit at her sides. "It's okay." She said, briefly. "But you know, maybe I want to see the damn old thing too."

"Hey, no problem!" Clint smiled again. "C'mon." He turned and led them under the carrier, it's stark structure now so very evident. "You really torched it this time. We had to rebuild half the front end…"

Jess ducked under one of the steel ribs and followed him and after a brief pause, Dev joined her. 'Sorry about that." Jess muttered. "He just bites my shorts sometimes."

Dev reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose, giving Jess a sideways glance.

"Just a saying." Jess felt herself relax a little more, appreciating the humor. "He's never been near my shorts."

“So anyway.” Clint said, oblivious of the whispers. “Since we had to rebuild this old sucker from the frame I decided to put in a whole new scan package, and that newfangled targeting system they just released down in the lab.”

“Oh yeah?” Jess investigated the item. “I saw a squirt on that.”

Dev poked her head inside the frame and took in the details avidly, setting aside her concern over Jess’s reaction a moment ago. Her companion now seemed to be over the anger, and Dev was glad because she could see that it had frightened Clint.

Just like the security men had been frightened. Dev peeked over and watched Jess as she listened to Clint’s explanation of the new targeting system. She was relaxed and interested now, her hands running over the device.

Doctor Dan had told her she could trust Jess. Dev thought about that. She trusted Doctor Dan. So it must be all right. She put a hand on the curved nose, obviously new, and could see through the lines and gears the now empty spot her chair would rest in.

At least for her, it must be all right.

“Dev?”

Dev removed her head from the wiring and moved around the forward struts. “Yes?”

“Here’s the mod chamber.” Jess pointed to a door behind the dock. “You said you wanted to get some time in there sometime.”

“You mod?” Clint kept a wary eye on Jess, but circled back around to where Dev was standing. “You wouldn’t be interested in being a part of the assembly would you?”

“Yes.” Dev said, instantly. She could feel the programming bubbling up, as she ran her eyes over the internal systems and their internal schematics flashed behind her eyes. “I would really like that.”

“You would?” Jess was watching her in some bemusement.

Dev nodded. “It’s in my programming.” She explained. “How to run all the things inside, and fix them when they break. It would be great to touch and work with them firsthand.”

Clint clasped his hands dramatically to his chest. “I’m in love.”

Jess rolled her eyes.

Dev grinned, a little uncertainly. “Is that good or bad?”

“Seriously.” Clint smiled back at her. “It’s really great when one of you all take a true interest in the old buses. We work hard to keep them flying.”

“And we take them out and wreck them.” But Jess’s voice was mild and indulgent. “Be careful, Clint. She kicked my ass as a pilot her first run. She’ll take your job away if you don’t watch out.”

“I didn’t kick you.” Dev objected. “I would never do that.”

“I saw the log.” Clint said. “So they figured out how to make the real deal, huh? Crazy.” He studied Dev with curious eyes. “Oh well. At least they made her cute.”

Dev gave him a slightly startled look.

‘Yes, they did.” Jess found herself agreeing, somewhat to her own surprise, enhanced when she caught Dev blushing at the words.

That made her blush, suddenly, the unfamiliar sensation making her swallow. “Hey.” She redirected all the attention to the carrier. “So what’s the deal with the engines.”

Clint hesitated, then he cleared his throat and went with the subject change, moving around to the far side of the carrier where the huge engines were cradled, waiting for installation into the frame. “Y’know I heard rumors we were getting some new gear, but I don’t know if the new stuff’ll hold up like these babies did.”

“They.. um..” Dev felt a little confused, and a little lightheaded, but she wasn’t sure why. “They had a lot of power.” She rallied on. “More than the sims. I was surprised.”

Clint beamed, fully restored to good humor. “Why thank you, kind lady.” He made a half bow. “I tuned them myself. Let me take the cover off the cowling here and show you some of the tunings.” He pulled a tool from his coveralls and started wrenching the engine cover, turning his back to them.

Jess tilted her head and regarded her companion. Dev was studying the ground, a faint smile on her face, and after a second, she looked up and met Jess’s eyes.

For a moment, the hangar faded out a little and then they both looked away and Dev was shaking her head a little as she stepped forward and joined Clint at the side of the engine.

Jess put her hand on one of the bare struts and just stood there watching. She was aware, vaguely that something a little odd was going on, but she wasn’t sure what it was, so she leaned against the carrier and listened to Clint’s monologue as Dev circled the engine and peered inside, the bright lights of the work bay gilding her pale hair.

Slowly her mind returned to the plan, and she straightened carefully, moving past the carrier and approaching the engine. “Clint, the old man wants me to buzz out probably plus 2. This thing going to be ready?”

Clint looked up at her. “Plus 2?” He exhaled, and looked around. “Crap, Jess. Most of my mechs are working on the retaining wall at the bay. We gotta get that done before tomorrow night.”

Jess lifted both hands slightly and let them drop. “Not my schedule.”

“No, I know.” The master mechanic sighed. “Well, Dev, you up to help out for real? I could use a pair of hands.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “That would be excellent.”

“We’ll do our best.” Clint said. “but Jess, I’m not guaranteeing anything. You may need to take a loaner if you have to go out plus 2.”

Jess frowned. The last thing she wanted to do was go out with a strange vehicle. It wasn’t as if Clint’s team didn’t take equal care of them, but you spent a lot of time learning the quirks of what you were… Her thoughts stopped, and she focused on Dev.

Dev, who had stepped into this carrier for the first time, and flown it with no familiarity at all. “We’ll cope.” Jess said. “I’d rather have ours, but Dev can handle it.”

Dev looked up and grinned at her over the top of the engine, a smudge of silicone grease on her nose. “Thank you.” She said. “I am not sure that’s really true, but I’m glad you think so.”

“Ah, and modest as well.” Clint leaned next to her and pointed out a bit of machinery. “See that? Regs say the noz has to be ten inches, but I found a way to put a throttle inside there that really boosts the exhaust.”

“Oh yes!” Dev straightened, holding her hands up as though they were around throttles. “I remember that, how much faster it seemed when I was changing direction, and heading up.”

“Yeah, I can still feel it.” Jess rubbed her own shoulder. “Knocked my ass out of my chair twice.”

Clint chuckled.

“I did?” Dev seemed amazed. “Really?”

“My fault. Forgot to tighten my harness.” Jess eased over and peered inside the engine. The internal mechanics of the technology she’d mastered never really much interested her. She knew how it all worked, of course. Every agent did, it was part of the training. You never knew when you might get caught outside and need to make repairs, for example.

But still. That’s what the techs were for, after all, to pilot the carriers, sure, but also to know how they worked, and be up on all the systems so they could keep everything moving at the rate the agents needed to get their goals met.

And Dev, apparently, was going to be one of those kind of techs who slobbered over the gears. Jess gave her pilot a tolerant look, as she dug into a gyro.

Without warning, Dev hopped up onto the engine and lowered herself head down into the inside of the big blast chamber, both arms braced on either side easily bearing her weight.

Clint gave her a surprised look, then cocked his head and glanced over at Jess. “Drake.” His face scrunched into a wry grin. “I think you may have gotten more than you bargained for in this new driver of yours.”

Jess gave him a wry look of agreement. “Had occurred to me.”

“Is that the plasma igniter?” Dev asked, lowering herself a little more. “Wow. I didn’t know it looked like that.”

Jess walked over and poked her head inside the engine.

“Yes, that’s it.” Clint agreed, directing his hand flash over the object. “It’s one of the few things on the old crate that’s direct drive. That cabling system routes right into the throttles. Real old school.”

“Wow.” Dev pulled herself up and sprawled over the top of the engine, flexing her fingers a little. “I didn’t know that.”

“Wow.” Jess echoed. “I didn’t know that either.”

“Hey Jess.” Clint lowered his voice. “Are you going to trial that new weapons rig? The one they hook up to your head?”

Jess looked quickly around, but they were alone. She gave Clint a warning glare.

“Everyone knows.” He interpreted the look. “You know how this place is. I heard it in the lunchroom last week.”

Jess did know. She exhaled. “Not until they get the bugs out of it.” She said. “Since you heard that, you heard about what it did to Don”

Clint frowned, and nodded. Dev remained quiet, looking from one of them to the other.

“Not the way I’d choose to go.” Jess said with a note of finality.

“Gotcha.” Clint said. “So, anyway, once we get these chambers in here rebuilt, we can remount the engines.”

“I would love to help.” Dev reiterated. “This is great.”

Clint smiled. “You want to help too, Jess?” He asked.

“No.” Jess patted the engine. “I’m going to go run the tactics boards and see what’s out there. Catch up with you later, Dev.”

“Okay.”

Jess gave a light wave, and walked off, wondering why in the world she suddenly had an urge to learn about plasma injection.

And get her hands dirty.

**

It was late by the time Dev got back to her quarters, her head buzzing with all the stimulation from the day and her hands and arms covered in silica gel.

She’d had so much fun with Clint. He had the same enthusiasm for the machinery as she did and it was really enjoyable sharing that while at the same time getting important things done to get their carrier back together.

She’d learned a lot from him, too. Pieces and bits that programming left out, and additional understanding that let her put parts of what she had together better. All good, and they’d made some progress on the engines, too.

She went into the sanitary unit, and once inside stripped out of her jumpsuit. Clint had suggested she ask for the kind of work coverall he used, which had more pockets in better places for all the adjustment tools and was a tougher fabric.

Dev flexed her hands, noting she'd gotten a few cuts and scuffs on them from the work, but the discomfort wasn't significant and she divested herself of her underclothes and started the water running.

She had to laugh a bit. Everywhere her jumpsuit wasn't, she was covered in dirt and grunge, and it was very nice to get under the warm water and scrub. She had no idea in the world what she would have done up in the crèche. The amount of rad it would have taken to get this off her skin – boy that would have hurt.

This was much nicer. She happily squeezed some of the .. yes, Jess had said it was soap – onto the cloth and rubbed it all over her, then washed her hair and stood for a minute just letting the shower thrum against her skin.

It felt amazing.

She felt her stomach growl, and shut the water off, stepping out and grabbing a towel to dry herself off with. Then she paused and considered how natural it was starting to feel to be here, which in itself didn't seem natural because she'd only been here a few days.

But she did feel that way. She put her suit and underthings into the laundry basket and wrapped the towel around her, walking out into the room and crossing to her uniform case. She opened it and then paused, faced with a small surprise.

Along with the standard jumpsuits and her pilot ones, now there were a few others, one in a deep blue and another in purple that seemed very casual. She pulled aside the regular ones exposing the blue one and touched the fabric, which was very soft.

"Hm." Dev put on a pair of dry underclothes and studied the blue suit, liking the feel against her skin very much. "Wonder where this came from?" Was it another thing from Bain, she pondered. Or maybe just something that came as part of her job? Maybe it was something she would need on the mission.

Of course. Dev took out one of her regular off duty suits and slipped into it, fastening the catches and transferring her insignia to the collar. She went back into the sanitary unit and picked up her comb, raking it through her hair to order it.

She was just finishing when she heard the inner door open, feeling a funny little prickle down her spine as she looked in the mirror and Jess appeared in it, leaning against the edge of the entrance. "Hello."

"Finished wrenching for the day?" Jess inquired.

Dev turned and put the comb down. "Yes. I really liked it." She admitted. "Is that wrong?" She watched Jess's face, noting anew it's distinctive shape and the piercing quality of her eyes. "I didn't meant to be incorrect."

"You weren't." Jess's eyes shifted and met hers. "You're a tech. Some techs just want to drive and do mods. Some like to wrench. It's all right." She said. "Want to do dinner? I got stuck in comp pulling tracking data. I just got back."

"Me too." Dev said. "I'd love to go. It's been a long time since breakfast."

"It has. C'mon." Jess turned and led the way through her quarters to the outer door, which she palmed open. "Any good news on the old bus?"

"Yes." Dev said. "I think we did good work today. "

They walked along the corridor, which seemed a lot busier than Dev remembered it. There were a lot of people clustered in groups and passing them.

"Peh." Jess angled towards the wall to avoid a group of talking men. "Mess is going to be a damn circus."

"What's a circus?" Dev asked promptly. "I've never heard of that."

"What's a circus." Jess mused, as they turned down the hall and paused, spotting a big crowd outside the mess hall. "In the old days, they used to travel around and put up tents, where you

could go to see performing animals, and clowns, and trapeze artists." She glanced at Dev, who was staring at her in fascinated incomprehension. "I"ll show you on scan later."

They squeezed past the crowd and entered the mess, only to pull up short again. Every table was taken, and more had been shoved in until it was packed with bodies.

"Oh no." Jess turned and went over to the food service are. "I vote we get a bag meal and go sit on the porch."

"Okay." Dev went right along with it, having no real desire to squeeze in with the crowd. She took the wrapped package the Ceebee handed her and followed Jess out the door again, pressing back against the wall as a half dozen men in fancy looking suits pushed past them.

She saw Jess's eyes narrow, but the agent merely edged past them and headed down to the lifts. Dev kept close after her, and shortly they were going down to the lower corridors. When the lift stopped and they stepped out, they were alone.

"What a nuthouse." Jess grumbled. "I hate these damned ceremonies. Everyone and their mother's asshole shows up for them." She strode down the hall and the air got damp and salty as they made their way to the lock and went inside. "Weather's broken for a while. We can get some air."

Dev waited, holding her package, as the lock cycled and the outer door opened, giving them access to the small platform overlooking the sea.

Unlike the previous time, the winds were quiet and the sea below them was only rustling with a dim roar, not the fierce crashing Dev had heard the last time Jess had brought her here. She sat down on the bench next to the agent and started unwrapping her meal.

The air smelled wet and salty, but she liked it. She could almost feel the rasp of it against her skin as a physical thing, and as she took in a lungful, it occurred to her that the real thing felt very different than the manufactured air she'd become used to in the crèche.

That never smelled like anything. This she could taste on her tongue and as she took a bite of the roll that was in the package it enhanced the flavor of it. She peered at the item curiously as she chewed. "This is interesting." She said, after a minute.

"Seaweed roll." Jess answered, a little indistinctly due to her mouthful. She swallowed and regarded hers. "They take the little stuff they catch in the seine nets – the krill and tiny shrimps and all, and mix it with some water grain and wrap it in leaf weed."

"I like it."

"Me too." Jess smiled briefly. "But you seem to like everything."

Dev leaned back against the wall, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "Well." She chewed thoughtfully. "Nothings really been bad yet. I like some things more than other things, but I haven't gotten anything yet that made me just stop."

"Did you up there?" Jess leaned her elbows on her knees, her back to sore to press against the wall.

"Yes." Her companion said. "There was a kind of fruit once, and I just got a smell of it and it made me sick."

"Huh."

"They stopped making the fruit." Dev continued. "They tried all that stuff on us."

Jess's jaws moved stolidly, ingesting the roll. The pain was killing her appetite but she knew she had to get something inside her before she took more drugs for it. She'd found that out the hard way. And she did like the things, the spicy taste and crunch of the grains appealed to her.

Maybe a good night's sleep would help. She finished the first roll and took out the second one. There was also some rice cakes inside, and a tube of water and at the bottom a piece of sweet dough to finish with.

Common. She'd had many of these meals usually out on assignment, or waiting for insertion, but occasionally in the heat of ops they'd get them delivered to the comm center too. Not fancy, but it kept you going.

She glanced at Dev, who was busy consuming everything in her box with a studious seriousness that almost made Jess laugh. They had both fallen silent, but she was surprised to realize it was a comfortable silence, requiring no chatter between them.

She liked that. Jess herself wasn't much of a talker, and it seemed her new pilot wasn't either which seemed to her to be another good sign. In the dim outside solar powered light that lit the platform, Dev was cast in low color shadows, her pale hair contrasting with the darkness of her suit and she appeared relaxed, looking around as she chewed with a contented expression.

Jess went back to her own meal trying to ignore the once again throbbing ache in her back, trying to remember just how much of the painkiller she had left in her quarters. Maybe she could take some and just sack out….

The touch on her arm nearly made her jump out of her skin. "Urf!"

"Wow. Sorry about that." Dev withdrew her hand. "I didn't mean to alarm you, I just wanted to ask you a question."

Jess turned the seaweed roll around in her fingers for a moment, then she glanced sideways at Dev. "Go ahead and ask." She said. "But be careful about grabbing me. Sometimes I don't think first and I could hit you without meaning to."

"Okay." Dev was studying her with a serious expression. "Is there something disturbing you?"

Jess was caught by utter surprise at the question. "Me?"

Dev looked around the small platform, then back at her. "Yes."

'Why?" Jess heard a sharp note enter her voice, not entirely intended.

Undisturbed, Dev merely looked at her. "Since this morning, after the attack it seemed to be you were." She said. "I didn't mean to offend you by asking."

Jess studied those open and guileless eyes, hearing the polite concern in Dev's voice and not detecting any hidden meaning behind the words. "I'm not offended." She said, gruffly. "I said you could ask me things, didn't I?"

'Yes." Dev smiled. "You did."

There was an odd sense of conflict in her. Jess found herself teetering between brushing Dev off, and confiding in her and she wasn't entirely sure why. It was a strange feeling, new and confusing.

"I hope it wasn't something I did that disturbed you." Dev spoke up again, a faint hesitance in her voice.

All at once, Jess decided. "Nah." She shook her head. "You've only done good stuff, Dev. I slammed my back against a door handle this morning right where I got hurt the last time and it's bothering me, that's all."

Dev looked relieved, and yet, still concerned. "I'm sorry you got hurt. Are you going to med?"

"No." Jess shook her head. "It's not that bad. Just annoying and med tends to make big deals out of nothing."

The bio alt nodded. "I never liked going either. " She confided. "You never knew what they'd do to you and then.." She paused. "Well, you never wanted them to think you were really hurt or really sick."

Jess looked at her, head tilted slightly in question.

Dev glanced aside. "Not much use for damaged products."

Jess blinked. "What?"

Dev looked embarrassed. "We're not actually people. Not legally." She clarified. "So if you were really damaged they'd just scratch you and start over." She glanced up at Jess, who was sitting

there, roll forgotten in her hand, her jaw a little dropped. “So that’s why we like to find a place to do good work.” She concluded softly. “Kind of makes it safer.”

Jess reached out and put her hand on Dev’s shoulder. “You’re as much a person here as I am.” She said. “So don’t worry about them trying to scratch you as long as I’m around.”

It was hard to say, really, which one of them was more surprised to hear her say that. Certainly Jess herself was a little amazed and more than a touch confused as to where it had come from. She barely knew Dev, really.

And yet, it was true. Whether it was that she felt sorry for the kid, or that she felt responsible for her wasn’t really important.

“Thank you.” Dev said, after a moment. “So that’s why I asked if you were upset, and I was hoping it wasn’t at me.” She gravely studied Jess’s face. “And I’m very sorry you don’t feel well. I hope it gets better soon.”

Jess relaxed. She lowered her hand to her knee and settled slowly back against the wall, not bothering to hide a grimace now. “I’m sure it will be.” She sighed. “Never get stabbed in the back, Dev. It takes forever to heal and hurts like hell.”

Dev watched the sharp profile across from her, wondering if it was a trick of the half light or if Jess really looked for a moment as sad as those words sounded. Then her companion shifted a little and the impression was gone.

“Okay.” Dev went back to scavenging her box. “I’ll try to remember that.” She added. “It’s too bad you don’t have null grav here. That’s where I went when I hurt my leg in training. It made it feel better.”

Jess thought about that. “Well.” She finished her roll and dug out the sweet cake. “No, we don’t have null gravity here, but you know, water’s almost as good.”

Dev immediately looked interested. “Like the shower?”

“No.” Jess shook her head. “The gym pool maybe. It’s going to be too rough to go surf the caverns tonight.” She glanced up , to where clouds were now scudding over them, and the corresponding wind was picking up. “Want to join me later?”

“In the pool?” Dev asked.

Jess nodded. “I forgot the pool’s pretty good for therapy. Gets the G’s off you.”

“Yes, absolutely.” Dev’s eyes brightened. “Maybe you can show me how to swim. I didn’t have a lot of success with that.” She finished her tube of water and folded everything up, putting it back into the container neatly.

“What the hell made you just jump in?” Jess asked.

“I just wanted to feel what it was like.” Her companion said. “I never had any programming at all about that so I thought the fastest way for me to learn about it was to just do it.” She added. “It’s like that sometimes for us. You find a hole, and you want to fill it in.”

Jess considered that. “Interesting philosophy.” She admitted.

Dev smiled. She set the package down and got up, walking over to the edge of the platform and putting her hands on the railing.

The wind was coming up, and it was a little exciting to her to be facing into it, feeling the pressure of it against her skin as it blew her hair back and made her blink.

It felt a little wild and unpredictable. Dev decided she really liked that, as she watched the ruffled white capped darkness of the sea below them, lit by the lower outside lights of the citadel. She could hear the thunder of the surf below, and after a second, as though in counterpoint, thunder from above in the thick layer of clouds over head.

“Don’t get any ideas.” Jess placed her hands on the steel rail next to Dev’s. “Jumping in that would be a fast lesson but very very short.”

Dev chuckled a little. “We’re curious, but not generally self destructive.” She commented. “I know the difference.” She studied the view, and exhaled. “This is so amazing though. It’s like looking out at the stars in the crèche but better. So unlimited.”

Jess leaned on the rail and pondered that, watching Dev out of the corner of her eye as the spray dusted her skin. “Unlimited?”

Dev nodded, pointing out at the horizon. “It goes on a long way but you can tell that. The stars – you can’t really tell how far back they go so this gives you a better look at something big.” She clarified. “It seems more real.”

“It also gets you wet.” Jess wiped a bit of spray from her face. “I’m guessing space doesn’t do that.”

Dev held her hand out and watched her skin get coated. “No. You can’t touch space.” She said. “And it can’t touch you. Not like this.”

The air of the world filled her lungs, so much thicker and more vibrant than what she’d been used to and she could feel the salt on her lips and smell the pungent scent of the water. “It makes me feel all over.”

“You like that.” Jess commented.

Dev turned to look at her, with a smile. “Very much. Don’t you?”

Jess smiled in return, looking down at her folded hands on the rail. Then she glanced off across the horizon. “I might learn to.” She said. “C’mon. Let’s go back inside before the storm hits.” She turned and picked up her bundle, keying the airlock with her free hand. “See what other trouble we can get into tonight.”

**

She was going to learn how to swim. Dev felt a bit like bouncing around her quarters, as she waited for Jess to finish her discussion outside.

The halls had started to finally empty out as they walked back but Stephen Bock had caught up with them just outside the operations center and Dev had quickly realized he wanted a private talk with Jess.

In the creche, she’d gotten that a lot Proctors and other instructors always wanted to talk outside their earshot, as though bio alts really didn’t know what was going on.

Dev found that a little funny. New proctors always acted like they were dumb, and though some sets certainly weren’t that sharp, most had average intelligence and knew what was going on around them.

Others, like Dev, were just as intelligent as the teachers instructing them and it was usually a funny moment when the newbies figured it all out.

Like spelling words they didn’t think the bio alts would understand. Like they were children or something.

She remembered one of them, a woman who had just come to the creche from one of the science stations. She was teaching a class in how plants grew, and thought she had to explain to them what a pea was

What a pea was. Like they didn’t live on a biologic test station, and had been fed every single variety of pea the Ag group could come up with in hopes of developing something they could use downside.

Dev had stood up and recited the entire phylum of them, in alphabetical order. She could still hear her class laughing, there in her head and see the discomfited look on the teacher’s face as she was force to just stand there and listen.

She chuckled, now, and went over to the dispenser for a bottle of water to sip but paused when she saw a light sedately flashing on her pad.

Curious, she went over and sat down, pulling the pad over and keying it on. To her bemused surprise, she found she had a message waiting.

A message? Who would be sending her a message? She touched the surface of the pad and the message opened up.

Dev -

Thanks for your help today! I really appreciated the extra hands! Hope you can come back soon and we can really get into the engines!

Clint.

Dev sat back and folded her arms over her chest, rereading the message a few times. It didn't seem to really have a purpose, after all, Clint had said the same thing before she'd left that day, So why had he sent it?

Just to be polite? Dev keyed the screen and the data input came up. She replied to the message, deciding a polite gesture certainly warranted an equally polite response.

Hello Clint -

You are most welcome. I am glad we had good results. I look forward to helping again.

Dev

Dev regarded the message, and then sent it, with a little smile. "That's nice." She said. "He's an interesting person."

Another natural born who treated her almost like one of his own kind.

The inner door popped open and Jess trudged in, rolling her eyes and dropping down into one of the chairs near Dev's workspace. "What a shoe box full of buttcracks this is sometimes." She announced, propping her elbow on the chair arm and letting her head rest against her hand.

Dev stopped in mid motion and stared at her, then went immediately back to the pad and started typing on it then stopped again and looked at Jess. "How do you spell that second thing?" She asked, hesitantly. "I think I can guess what a shoe box is."

Jess chuckled wryly. "Stupid Stephen was trying to convince me to do the intake speech tomorrow night." She said. "I told him that was his job. I don't know what got into him."

Dev folded her hands on the desk. "So, he wanted you to talk to everyone?"

Jess nodded.

The bio alt considered this. "You have a very nice voice." She concluded. "I'm sure the new people would enjoy it."

Jess stared at her with her head cocked just slightly to one side. "What?"

"All of those people who are just getting here." Dev said. "I'm sure it will seem very strange to them, so wouldn't it be great for them to have someone as experienced and nice as you welcome them?" She watched Jess's eyes open up a little wider. "I would have liked that."

"Rather than having someone beheaded as your welcome?" Jess demurred. "Yeah, I guess." She muttered, her brows contracting. "What the hell would I say.. wait a minute. Did you call me nice?"

"Yes."

"Me? Nice?" Jess sat up a little.

"Yes." Dev smiled at the look on her companions face. It was a mixture of embarrassment and uncertainty and she found it sort of intriguing. "You've been very nice to me, and I wanted to say thank you for that."

Jess blushed visibly, which was very interesting. "Just trying to help" She muttered, then got up. "Let's do this pool thing." She brusquely indicated the door. "Maybe it'll make my back chill out and I can get a decent night's sleep."

"Okay." Dev got up and joined her and they headed for the door. She was a little puzzled though, since she'd never quite experienced such a discomfited reaction to a compliment before. She reviewed what she'd said, a few times, and decided she couldn't detect any particular reason her words should have caused Jess distress. "I"m sorry if I said something incorrect."

They walked through the central hall now almost peaceful, the few people going in the opposite direction mostly ignoring them. Jess glanced to either side as they turned the corner to the rec area, and cleared her throat "Ops agents aren't supposed to be nice."

"Not even to the people they work with?" Dev asked. "Why?"

"Because we're assholes."

Dev frowned. 'Here we go with that ass stuff again." She sighed. "I think I have to ask Doctor Dan if he has a translation for all of this. I'm not sure why you all find people's behinds so interesting."

"Heh heh." That put a grudging smile on Jess's face. "We're just typically nasty tempered people." She clarified. "You saw us in the bar. We'd go at each other's throats every meal if house rules let us."

Dev kept up pace next to her. "Well, okay." She said. "But Jess, you have been nice to me. Not nasty at all." She protested. "You've been nicer to me than anyone else I've ever met."

Jess remained silent, as they entered the gym.

At this late hour, it was almost empty. There were a few people in the weight bearing area, and one on a treadmill but the rest of the huge space was quiet, and the lights had been dimmed a bit in response to that.

They walked together into the changing room. Jess went to what was, apparently, her locker and opened it, studying the contents with a dour glare.

Dev decided remaining quiet was probably the best thing to do. She opened her locker, then paused.

After a brief moment, they both looked up at each other at the same time.

Jess came over and sat down on the bench next to Dev's locker, her exercise gear in her hand. "Sorry." She said. "I think we're nasty to each other because we know it's pointless to make friends. You just lose them. After a while of that, you just walk around the pain." She fiddled with her gear, and then shrugged. "Stupid, really."

Dev sat down next to her. "I understand." She said. "Sometimes it was like that in the creche. You never wanted to get too close to anyone because they could get assigned at any time and you'd never see them again."

Jess nodded. "Yeah."

Dev looked down at her hands, clenched a little on her workout suit. "Well." She said. "You know, I'm your pilot, so maybe it'll be that whatever happens will happen to both of us at the same time." She glanced up, getting caught by Jess's intent gaze at close quarters. "So maybe its okay to be nice to me."

Jess frowned a little

"I thought maybe you were being nice to me because you wanted to please the man with the gun." Dev added, in a quiet tone. "And that's okay too. Nice is nice no matter why, to us at least."

After a brief, still second Jess relaxed a bit, her face easing into a faint smile. "Nah. I'm nice to you because I like you." She said. "I don't like a lot of people."

Dev felt an unusual heat on her skin, and knew it was her turn to blush. "Thanks." She said. "I like you too."

Jess's smile became more pronounced. "So let's go swimming." She said, getting up. "Don't pay attention to the crap I say, Dev. Sometimes I just talk out my... " She paused, and laughed. "Sometimes I say things just to hear myself talking."

Somehow, Dev thought, as she changed into her workout suit and followed Jess into the big open space. Somehow, she didn't really think that was true. She thought Jess said exactly what she felt.

At least, she certainly hoped so.

“Okay.” Jess led the way around to the shallow end of the pool and stepped into it. The brief exercise clothes just outlined her tall form, and she paused for a minute and let her hand down to test the temperature. “Ah.” She sounded surprised.

“What’s wrong?” Dev stepped in next to her. “Oh. It’s warmer than it was earlier.”

“Yeees.” Jess seemed pleased. She splashed into the water and then dropped into it onto her back, making a wave swirl out from her all over the tank. “Oh, I like this.”

Dev followed more slowly. She took the time to enjoy the feeling of the water buoying her, it’s warmth immediately penetrating her and easing muscles just a little sore from her earlier exercise. “That feels very nice.”

Jess had gone to the edge of the pool and was leaning against it, her eyes half closed. “It sure does.” She agreed. “Damn, I’d forgotten what that felt like.”

Dev made her way through the water over to her side. “Why is it warm now?”

Jess exhaled. “I don’t care.” She shifted her shoulders and let her head drop back. “Just feels good.”

It did. Dev flexed her hands, breathing in the smell of the water. The sound of the treadmill had faded, and now only the clank from the weight bearing space was audible, along with the hum and low buzz that was the air handlers high over head.

“Okay.” Jess reluctantly opened her eyes. “So here we are, in the pool.” She pushed away from the side. “What did you do when you jumped in?”

“Just this.” Dev made a paddling motion with her hands.

“Natural instinct.” Jess looked approving. “Babies do that, when you drop them in the water.”

“You drop babies in the water?” Dev’s eyebrows went up. “Really?”

“Ahm... well, I've never done it, but that's what they say.” Jess launched herself forward. “Watch.”

Dev did, avidly. Jess lifted her arms up and put them forward, pulling back against the water and making her go forward. She was also kicking her feet.

“Ow.” Jess stopped after a few strokes. “Damn it.” She rolled over onto her back and used her legs to move her back to where Dev was, keeping her hands folded on her stomach. “Fucking shoulder.”

“It must hurt a lot.” Dev said, with sympathy.

Jess came to a halt next to her. “Driving me crazy.” She admitted. “Okay, now you try.”

Dev thought about what she’d just seen her companion do, and made a picture in her head about it, running through the motions in her imagination before she took a deep breath and presented herself to the water.

At the first stroke, her head went under. Dev only just kept herself from sucking in a breath in surprise, moving her other arm forward and exhaling as her head broke the surface again.

“Whoa whoa... “ Jess’s voice echoed behind her.

Dev’s head went under again, and then she suddenly felt hands on her hauling her up to the surface. She spluttered as she came up again, shaking the hair out of her eyes as Jess came around in front of her and grabbed her other arm just above the elbow. “Wow. That didn't work out very well.”

“Stop.” Jess was trying not to laugh. “You’re sinking like a damned rock.”

Dev stopped moving, blinking the water out of her eyes. “That’s why I stuck to the paddling.” She explained. “If I stopped moving I went under.” She could feel the grip on her, warm and sure, but not uncomfortable.

“So I see.” Jess pushed her gently backwards until they were shallow enough for Dev to stand. “Okay.” She released the bio alt, rubbing the tips of her fingers together as she remembered the strength she’d felt under the soft skin.

Interesting.

“You were doing this?” Dev leaned forward a little, and moved her arms in a swimming motion. “Right?” She peered at Jess, droplets of water dripping off the tip of her nose. “It looked so easy when you did it.”

“Right.” Jess motioned her sideways. “‘Let me hold on to you and you can practice it here where it’s harder to drown.” She gave Dev a quick smile. “It looked easy for me because I’ve been doing it all my life.”

“Really?”

“Really.” The tall woman assured her. “My family lives right on the water and the first thing you get taught is how to swim. Matter of fact, it was so long ago I don't remember learning.”

Dev digested this. “Brent said to ask you to teach me to swim. He said you were a fish.”

A faint, impish twinkle appeared in Jess's pale eyes. “He said that, huh? Heh. But anyway, c'mere, and lay on my hands, and we'll get you swimming.”

That sounded like a very good idea. Dev leaned forward again and Jess moved closer, putting a hand under her belly and another on her thigh. For a moment, Dev completely lost track of what she was doing as her body reacted to the touch and then the water hit her in the face and she forced her arms into motion.

“That’s it.” Jess commented. “Over your... yeah. Cup your hands, don’t slap the water.”

Dev did her best with the unfamiliar moves, then as she did as Jess suggested and cupped her hands, she felt the strong pull against the water. Abruptly a sudden tickle of programming clicked in and it went from awkward to familiar in the space of a breath.

Strange, and then not. A familiar sensation to her but usually not this visceral.

She started kicking her feet in the same rhythm, and after a minute of that, she felt Jess’s hold shift, from her stomach to her back, the long fingers tangling themselves in her light covering and holding her up.

“I’m gonna let you go.” Jess said. “Just keep that up... that’s right.”

Then the grip was gone, and she was moving forward in the water, this time without the odd and jerky lack of coordination that had shoved her head under the surface previously.

“Turn your head on every other stroke and breathe.” Jess called out, surprisingly close by. She was swimming alongside her, and every time Dev did turn to that side, she took a breath and saw her companion do the same.

There was a memory there. She realized it wasn’t really programming, it was something else. Something dimmer and less certain, a flash of a mental picture that was brighter and colder and had a lot more noise.

A thundering rush, and laughter.

Then it was gone, and it was just her, and Jess, and the big empty space again.

They reached the end of the tank at about the same time, and she grabbed the edge and held on, the bottom far below her feet. “Wow.” She spluttered. “I didn’t sink.”

“Nice.” Jess complimented her. “You keep this up you might not drown if we get dumped out of the carrier one of these trips”

Dev wiped the water out of her eyes with one hand. “Does that happen often?”

“It happens.” Jess was also holding on, moving her other arm around carefully. “Huh.” She looked a little relieved. “Water’s helping loosen it up” She turned around. “Below my shoulder blade, you see any bumps there?”

Dev moved aside the fabric and studied her companions back. “Here, you mean?” She touched a red, raw looking area.

“Yeah.”

Dev gently stroked the area with her fingertips. “I don’t... no I think it’s just the scar.” She said. “No bumps.”

Jess was regarding the skin on her arm with a bemused expression. “No bumps, huh?” She turned. “Well, good.” She pointed back in the other direction. “Let’s try another lap. We’ll have you communing with the fishes yet.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Ahheh.” Jess chuckled. “We’ll have to find out.”

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Jess sat down on her bed, the cool air brushing against her bare shoulders. Her skin felt a little waterlogged, and the soft sheets felt good as she slowly lowered herself down onto her back. “Man, I’m tired.” She spoke casually to the ceiling. “But that was a pretty damn good time.”

It was mid first watch, late and quiet in the citadel and the halls they’d walked back through had been blessedly free of random intruders. Jess exhaled, running her mind over the hours spent in the pool, hearing again the laughter echoing in her ears.

She smiled. Her body was slowly relaxing, and every breath she took made that more profound. She let her eyes close and spread her arms out carefully, feeling a residual ache but nothing like the sharp pain she’d experienced all day. “Ahhh.”

Then her comm buzzed. Jess groaned and turned her head towards it, seeing the flashing light that indicated not an internal call, but one from outside. “Huh.” She levered herself up and went to the workspace, coming around the table and sitting down in the chair as she touched the console. “Drake.”

The screen came on, and after a fuzzy moment, cleared and she was looking into a pair of eyes the same color as hers, framed in a male face with a neatly trimmed dark beard. “Hello, Jess. Sorry. I know its late there.”

Jess leaned forward. “It’s all right, Jimmy. What’s up?” She responded, watching her brother’s expression intently. Several years her senior, he’d finally worked his way into a decent position at one of the processing centers and gotten married. Managed to spawn two kids, one little girl and one tow headed boy who was, Jess remembered, around five.

Around five.

“Just wanted to let you know about Tayler.” Jimmy said. “He went through the battery last week. They called us today. He’s in. They’ll take him next month.”

Jess exhaled a little. “Generation 12, huh?”

“Yep.” Her brother studied her. “The old family tradition.”

Jess wasn’t really sure how to answer that. She knew she had nothing to do with Tayler’s scores, but there was always a bittersweetness to it hearing that another family member had tested in. They’d had at least one and occasionally more in each generation, the one prior to Jess’s father’s had sent three, and Jess had an uncle serving up in the Arctic somewhere and a cousin out on the west coast.

It was what it was “If I’m still around when he inducts, I’ll keep an eye on him.” Jess said. “You can give him my comm if he wants to talk about it, later.”

“Thanks.” Her brother managed a brief smile. “At least you know you don’t have to donate those eggs to keep the line going, right.”

“Huh.” Jess snorted wryly. “Yeah. Like that would need to happen.” She glanced to one side, then looked back at the screen. “How’s Mari?”

Jim shrugged. “Took it hard. But she knew who she was marrying.” He concluded. “At least she knows Jimmy’s going to be set and get schooled. More than most do.” He said. “Peg’s going to be pretty smart, we think. Maybe go into science” He added. “She tested that way.”

“Good to hear.” Jess said. “How’s mom?”

“Running for chamber councilor.” Jim said, with a wry look. “She’s probably going to bunk in with one of those other polits. Said she was tired of looking at 2D pictures on the wall and talking to dad’s old boots.”

“Don’t blame her.”

“Me either.” Her brother assented. “Matter of fact, she boxed up a lot of his stuff. “He glanced at Jess, with an apologetic expression “I told her to send them to you, not dump em. Figured maybe you’d at least like to look through em.”

Jess gazed somberly at him. “Thanks, Jimmy. Appreciate the thought.” She said. “There’s still a couple of old goats in service around here that would probably like to take a look too.”

Jim smiled. “Anyway, it’s late. I’m surprised I caught you there. Things okay?” He asked. “Anything up with you guys?”

“Eh.” Jess thought about her recent past. “Same as usual.” She responded. “We’ve got induction tomorrow night, we’re all around.”

“That it?” Her brother asked. “Everything okay with you there?”

Jess's brows contracted. “With me?” She asked, wondering if he could have heard about Bricker. “Oh.” She said. “Yeah, matter of fact I got a promotion to senior.” She said. “Day or so ago. Booted my allocation up and reg'd me for retirement finally.”

“Gotcha.” Jimmy nodded. “Hey, congrats. You matched dad.” He glanced to one side. “Gotta run. Have a good time at the induction.”

Jess grinned. “Thanks. Give my regards to Mari and the kids.” Jess leaned back, as she watched her brother lift his hand in goodbye, and cut the signal off. She pondered the dark screen for a few minutes, thinking.

Jimmy was the only one who took pains to keep in touch. Her other brother, Jake... she wasn’t even sure where he was most of the time. Never had any ambition, the last time she’d seen him he was a raker on the coast, and apparently content to stay that way.

When she reached field retirement age, if she did, she’d have the option to take a permanent admin assignment and get married, and have kids.

Jess chuckled wryly at her faint reflection in the screen. She didn’t see any of that happening, even if she somehow survived her active phase, but now, with Bain’s attention she might possibly end up running something if she did. That would be all right. She could picture herself in Bricker’s position, with a lot more savvy and a lot less jackasswardness.

And no Sandy kissing her ass or anything else.

Jess got up and went back to the bed, considering her next day’s schedule. The halls would be nuts, so maybe she’d show Dev the caverns. Maybe they’d end up in the pool at night again. She got under the covers and stretched out feeling a vague sense of content that was for her quite rare.

She heard the faint sound of movement from next door and turned her head towards the inner portal that separated her quarter’s from Dev’s, imagining her pilot rattling around in the big space, probably settling down in bed much like she was.

She was really starting to like Dev. Aside from her unexpectedly significant skills as a bus driver, she had a gentle and appealing personality that was completely unlike anyone Jess had ever worked with before. Most agents, and even techs were intolerantly aggressive and ego driven herself included.

Dev was neither. She had a dry yet pronounced sense of humor, didn’t take herself seriously, and her bright and impish smile made it almost impossible to stay in a bad mood around her.

She liked spending time around her. Jess thought about that for a minute. With Joshua, it hadn’t quite been like that. It was more like she didn’t mind spending time with him. He had been someone she could casually play a board game with, or have a drink while they talked about work.

He hadn't sought out her presence, she hadn't done the same for him. They were compatible in the sense that they could easily mesh on the job and she wasn't irritated by him most of the time but Jess knew the feeling was completely different than how she felt about Dev.

She wanted to be in Dev's space. She'd almost stopped thinking of her as a bio alt.

Jess studied the ceiling intently. Was she moving towards a place where she might consider trusting Dev? Was the fact that the bio alt had no choice in any of this making her feel sorry for her? Making her want to protect her? Was Jess's innate sense of honor making a surprising and inconvenient appearance?

"Huh." She let out a small grunt. "Let's just see where it goes." She put the thoughts aside, and closed her eyes, rolling over onto her side and tugging the covers snug around her, glad for once to surrender to sleep.

**

Dev sat herself down on the mat that was in her relaxation area and crossed her legs up under her, leaning her elbows on her knees as she regarded the dimly lit space.

Her body was very tired. After the long session in the gym, and the long session in the pool doing all those unfamiliar things she felt pleasantly exhausted and she was looking forward to the big comfortable bed downstairs. But first, she wanted to sit and think for a few minutes.

This was something she'd never been able to do. She'd never really had the choice of where to go and what to do, except for those few minutes between class and meals, and lab and sleep.

Now, here in her quarters she could choose to do downstairs and go to sleep, or sit here and think, or read a page of her book, or even go into the other side of her two level space and run a sim if she wanted to all night long instead of rest.

It was all up to her. The freedom was almost intoxicating.

So though she was tired, she had climbed up into her relaxation area and now she was sitting here on the cushy meditation pad enjoying a bit of peace and quiet just because she could.

She was pretty sure no other bio alts got to do this. The ones in the creche - certainly not. The ones here in Interforce? She'd heard two of the mechs talking when she was working with Clint. They'd discussed eating in the common room, and their sleep bunks in a communal room together and what would happen if they were late getting to work.

They hadn't sounded really unhappy, more typical griping she remembered from the creche but they weren't treated as natural born. They didn't have what she did. Dev looked around her space pensively. Here she had the same as any other person in the ops group, an insanity of riches to one of her kind.

So. She figured she had to do a really, really excellent job here at Interforce because she didn't want to go back to being treated like the mechs were. Dev felt a little uncomfortable with that, but she also knew it was true.

She'd gotten a taste for what it was like being a natural born, and she liked it. Was that what Doctor Dan was trying to warn her about, that night? Maybe it was. But she knew she didn't want to go back to the creche, or even to be reassigned to a lesser job here.

She wanted this. She wanted to be not only a tech, but the best one here, to do excellent things for Jess, and have Jess come to trust her to do the right thing at the right time and make them both successful. She felt it as a fire in her gut, and it was new and strange, but good.

With a nod, she stretched herself out, and lay down on her back, looking up at the rock ceiling with its inset speckles of crystal that were evident in the low, blue light.

They were almost like stars. Dev felt her body relax, and she was able to let go that determination and think about her day, especially the lessons she'd learned in the pool.

That had been fun. A lot of fun. Not only had she gotten a pretty good idea of how to swim, she'd spent hours with Jess and they chased up and down the tank so many times she could still hear the splash of the water and Jess's low laughter.

When they'd left the gym, it had been completely empty and they'd changed together in a comfortably casual silence before leaving the space and making their way through the quiet halls back to their quarters but not without a detour to the mess hall for a snack.

Just a fish roll and a cup of kack but it really hit the spot after all the activity, and especially more so because of the relaxed companionship as they sat in the mess just like any other agent and tech pair. Just like Elaine and Tucker, who gave them a casual wave as they passed through.

Jess. Dev called up a picture in her mind of her next door neighbor. She smiled as she thought about her, aware of a warm, happy emotion that caused. She thought maybe the pool had done Jess's shoulder some good too, because she seemed in less discomfort when they finished, and her mood had improved as the night went on.

All good.

Dev let her thoughts drift a little. Then she let her eyes open, and sat up, getting to her feet and walking down the steps to the main part of the room. She was already in her sleepwear, and she went to her bed and got under the covers, wondering what the next day would have in store for them.

She only hoped it wouldn't start like the previous day had.

**

For the first time in a while, Jess woke normally, at her own time. There was no strident alarm, and no soft bong of her timer, just a slow fade from sleep into awareness that left her blinking into the dim light, her body curled into comfort under the covers.

She glanced at the chrono and relaxed, seeing a respectable time before morning that let her stay where she was, and enjoy the moment instead of bouncing out of bed and bolting for the shower as sometimes she had to when she forgot to set the alarm.

She rolled over and stretched her body out, flexing her hands and sighing as she settled into comfortable position on her back. The room was still mostly dark, the lights embedded in the walls just faintly lit to match what was going on outside.

There was no real beating that circadian rhythm. Jess folded her hands over her stomach. Not that they hadn't tried, and not that she couldn't rig her own for a short while, especially when inserted. But she'd been born in this zone and given it's preference her body stuck to it.

That turned her mind to Dev. What zone did your body think it was in when you were born on station, whirling around the planet all day long? Did they even have the same rhythms she and the rest of them did?

Dev seemed content to wake and sleep when told to, so maybe they'd done something to her that let her adjust without complaint. Or maybe she really did have to adjust, but just didn't bitch about it.

Jess considered that last thought had it's merits. Dev wasn't a complainer. Part of that she knew was built in because she was a bio alt and part she suspected was just how Dev was. At least, she hoped so because it was something she really appreciated in a p..

Jess paused and exhaled. In a pilot? Sure. She'd told Dev point blank that's all she wanted her to be, just a bus driver, hadn't she? Well that was good. Dev had turned out to be an unexpectedly good bus driver so far, so they both should be very happy.

And yet, there was something in her that didn't like that artificial segregation.

She didn't want a partner. Certainly not a bio alt partner she knew very little about, right? Jess frowned, the words sounding metallic and false in her own mental ears because she suspected it wasn't really all that true after the last couple of days.

It just hurt though, thinking of Joshua and that last bitter laughter. She felt embarrassed that she'd been taken like that, even though everyone else had too. She didn't want to risk that happening again, and suffer the shame and the... grief... of knowing you were so horribly wrong about someone.

It was just too hard. Her stomach felt sick just thinking about it. Wasn't it safer and easier for both her and Dev if she just kept her at arms length? What if the bio alt funked out at something, and had to be kicked back to serving bread sticks or washing the floors. Wouldn't it be easier on her if she...

Jess pinched the bridge of her nose. Who in the hell did she think she was fooling? Here she was laying her arguing with her conscience when her ears were already cocked to listen for the first sounds of stirring from beyond that inner door.

There was part of her that wanted that friendship, no matter what her ego said about it. She wasn't really a natural loner and never had been, enjoying the companionship of first her classmates, and then her fellow agents. Even when she disagreed with them, she liked being part of this closed, eclectic brotherhood.

Well. Jess tapped her navel with the edges of her thumbs. Maybe Dev just wasn't structured for that kind of relationship with.. what did she call us? Natural borns. She seemed very friendly, but reserved so maybe she really didn't have a choice after all and she'd have to deal with however it was the bio alt was programmed to relate to her.

Jess stretched again, and then pulled the covers aside and got up, passing through her workspace as the lights reacted to her presence and brightened. She keyed the dispenser to provide some kack and touched the ops console com, nodding a little as the overhead speaker started to echo softly with the current ops chatter.

Nothing sounded out of place. Unlike the previous day, she could only hear standard reports, and the ship com to two carriers that were on patrol.

Taking no chances. Especially since they had the induction tonight, and that meant a lot of dignitaries and newcomers around. Her com chimed, and she sat down, and keyed it. "Drake."

"Jess, it's Stephen." Bock answered. "Listen, I know you really don't want to hear me bugging you again about that speech but I really wish.."

"Okay." Jess propped her chin on her fist. "I'll do it."

"Sorry, got a call. Anyway I really wi... wait. What?" Stephen said. "What did you just say?"

"I said I'll do it." Jess said. "Anything to keep you off my back."

Stephen was silent for a minute. "Really?"

"Really." Jess said. "Anyway, Dev thinks I"m so nice I should greet all the newbies so they feel at home."

Another long moment of silence. "What??" Stephen repeated, more loudly and disbelievingly.

Jess heard a soft tap on her outer door. "Gotta go." She cut the line off and went to the door, checking the sensor, a little surprised to see it was her pilot. She palmed it open. "Hey there."

"Hello." Dev had her arms full. "If you thought the mess was crazy last night you should see it this morning. I grabbed what I could. Want some?"

Jess smiled, and stepped back. "Absolutely. C'mon in." She clapped Dev on the back as she followed her over to her workspace. "Can't think of a better way to start the morning."

Dev looked up from putting down her burden, cocking her head slightly as she regarded Jess with a faintly questioning look.

The agent winked at her, and grinned, as she sat down and grabbed a bag meal.

**

Dev regarded her reflection in the mirror, reaching up to adjust her uniform collar a little. She'd found this new one in her quarters and Jess had told her it was what she was to wear to the induction and then, to the party afterward.

It was more formal looking, and less comfortable. The fabric was heavier, and thicker and it had a lot of silver threads on it making sedate designs along the front of the jacket. She straightened up a little, pulling the sleeves a bit straighter and moving her head as the high collar tickled her neck.

The uniform was a sleeveless jumpsuit and this jacket that fit over it, and though it wasn't entirely easy to move around in it, she sort of liked it. She studied her pale hair, caught back in a knot at the back of her head and nodded in satisfaction.

Her insignia were on the collar, and she touched it. There was also a metal bar on her chest that had her name engraved on it, a glitter of silver and black, the NM-DEV-1 crisp and clear.

Interesting. She'd never been labeled with her designation like that before. But natural born here did it. Maybe to point out how individual they really were?

She went over and sat down to pull her boots on. This pair were mid height, and shinier than her regular ones, and she fastened them as the inner door slid open.

"Ah." Jess entered, fastening the collar on her own uniform. "I see you're all set."

"Yes." Dev stood up. "That looks really nice on you." She complimented Jess.

Jess stopped in mid step. "What?" She looked down at herself. "This?"

Dev took a step back and regarded her. "Well, that is what you are wearing." She said. "So yes, that." She watched the other woman's eyes open wider, unsure really of why. The uniform outlined Jess's tall body really well, and her dark hair was loose, framing her face. "Why is my saying that so surprising to you? Is it incorrect?"

Jess's face wrinkled up in sort of a confused grin. "No, it's... um." She let her hands drop. "People don't say stuff like that to me." She said. "Usually." She added in a low mutter.

It was Dev's turn to be confused. "Why not?" She asked. "You're very attractive. Why wouldn't people tell you that?" She cocked her head to one side as she watched Jess blush. "In the creche, it was always okay to tell others compliments of that kind."

"Um." Jess reached up and rubbed her face. "Thank you." She said. "It's fine. Sorry I'm acting like a nitwit. It's been a long time since.. " She paused. "Anyway, if you're ready, let's go. We'll meet the rest of the ops group near the big lift."

"I'm ready." Dev said. "Lead on."

Jess turned and complied. They walked together through her quarters, and out into the hallway, which was now, thankfully, quiet and empty. "Everyone's up there." Jess commented. "We're always the last ones to go."

"Why?"

"Hm." Jess studied the ground as they walked over it. "Tradition, mostly I guess. Everyone goes up in order of their... hm. Well, their ultimate importance I guess to Interforce."

"I see."

"So either you can figure we're the most or least important." Jess went on, in a droll tone. She scanned through out of the ops area and they were in the main halls, the sound of their boots echoing softly in the silence. "I like to flatter myself in thinking the latter."

Dev was pretty sure that was the real truth anyway. She followed Jess as they turned the corner and then crossed the big rotunda and then entered a long hall. Ahead, she could hear low voices, and as they reached the curve in the hall and went through it, she saw a group of people standing next to one of the big lifts.

It was the other agents and techs, she realized as they got closer. They were standing together and as they approached, the voices stilled. Everyone was dressed like she and Jess were, and there were, she counted, sixteen of them including them both.

"About time." Sandy snarked at Jess. "You stop to blow Bain or something?"

Jess ignored her. "We ready to go up?" She asked Jason. "Someone check in?"

"Almost." Jason said. "They said give it five. Trying to get everyone seated."

A moment later, the light on one side of the lift went on, bathing them in a gentle green glow. “Here we go.” Jason said. “Brent, hit the lock, wouldja?”

Brent, standing next to the doors, complied. He stepped back as the big portals opened, revealing a square, utilitarian gray box.

Everyone fell silent. It was awkward, and uncomfortable, and Dev felt like taking a step back from the crowd as they shifted a little. She could sense anger around her, and quite a few of the eyes watching Jess weren’t friendly. It was hard to tell though, what exactly the problem was.

After all, Jess was just standing there next to her, with no particular expression on her face, her hands clasped behind her back. She glanced at Dev, a look of droll amusement appearing as she scanned the crowd, and rolled her eyes a little.

Interesting, but extremely confusing.

Then Jason stepped back and to one side and cocked his head at Jess. “Go on, number one.” He said, in an almost anticlimactic way, waving her forward with a casual motion “Clear a path, people.”

The discomfort increased, but reluctantly, people moved aside as Jess started forward, some with resigned expressions, some with approving ones, some just angry.

“C’mon.” Jess indicated that Dev was to follow.

Dev didn’t need to be asked more than once. She stuck to Jess’s back as they made their way through the small crowd, and followed her into the lift, their boots making a faintly hollow ring as they crossed the metal floor.

Jess moved to the back of it, but kept facing the wall. She stopped next to it and waited, as the rest of the group came in after her filing in with a scuffle of boots and meant to be overheard whispers. She put her hands behind her back again and braced her legs, ignoring it all.

Dev stood quietly next to her, realizing none of the rest of the people in the lift had come even with them. She wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, but she could tell there were a lot of mad people, and that something Jess had done had displeased them.

She looked up at Jess’ s profile, outlined in the harsh white light from the ceiling. There was no emotion there, she merely watched the surface of the wall as they traveled upwards. After a moment, Jess looked at her, and slowly winked.

Dev muffled a smile, putting her own hands behind her and waiting herself in silence.

The elevator reached it’s destination, and the doors in front of Jess slowly opened. They now faced into the huge space, which was filled with people, all looking at them, all in the same complete silence.

Dev didn’t know where to look first. Near the door they were at were line upon line of bio alts, all in their jumpsuits in various colors. In front of them were natural born, but also in the same kind of jumpsuits and in front of them were techs, and then the admin people.

Near the front she saw Alexander Bain, and standing next to him, to her surprise and pleasure, Doctor Dan. On a low platform at the very end of the space were a big group of people in different clothes.

Some, she recognized. They were from the creche. Some she didn’t, and there were twelve people there in dark gray jumpsuits with either black or green sleeves. She figured those must be the new agents and their techs.

Jess started forward, and motioned her to follow.

Dev took a deep breath and did, as they started out and walked down the steps from the lift and into a long, stone aisle that went down the middle of the huge space. Their boots made a surprisingly loud sound that echoed a little, a discordantly disorganized noise since they were all walking at their own pace and not in step with each other.

Outside a storm was going on, and there were lightning bursts and thunder all visible through the transparent walls and roof. It was an eerie counterpoint to the silence of the crowd as they all watched Jess lead the rest of the operations agents and techs through them.

Dev could see the new comers watching them now and she straightened up, setting aside her discomfort, and the strangeness of the surroundings. She matched her steps to Jess's as they walked along the aisles, past the bio alts, and the workers, the techs and the administrators as that weird silence beat against them.

Jess walked up the steps to where Bain was standing, coming to a halt next to him and Doctor Dan, as Stephen Bock came up on the other side. She waited for Dev to come up next to her then she turned to face the low platform, letting her arms relax at her sides.

The rest of the ops agents and their partners filed in behind them and as they did, Dev sorted through the positions of the crowd, and the layers of emotion and got a sense of why so many people were glaring at her. She was aware enough of the politics of humanity to understand there was status involved here, and that was always a little uncomfortable.

It had been in the creche. She'd gone through that sense of discomfort when she'd been singled out in any way for praise, and faced the envy of her creche mates. There was that sort of thing here. Jess had been singled out, and people were mad because it wasn't them.

Got it. Dev felt a sense of satisfaction, and now she put the issue aside and exhaled in contentment, glad she was standing where she was.

Bain caught her eye and smiled at her. Dev smiled back, then caught Doctor Dan watching her with a proud grin. She wasn't really sure why he was, but it felt good anyway and she stood there quietly at Jess's side, her arms at her sides and her head held high.

Bain waited for a moment more for everything to settle, then he strolled over to the steps and mounted them, arriving at a podium planted on the edge. "Well then, people." He rested his hands on the edge of the podium. "Here we are."

He paused, but no one said a word, nor did he seem to expect them to. "I'm quite glad to welcome all of you here." He gestured at the crowd. "And to welcome our newcomers too." He indicated the platform. "I know we've had some difficulties lately, but I think now we're on the right track, and headed in a better direction."

Doctor Dan cleared his throat gently, and visibly suppressed a smile.

Bain raised an eyebrow at him. "At any rate, I'm glad you are all here, and now I will turn this over to our new senior operations agent, Jess Drake." He stared pointedly at Jess. "Agent Drake?"

Dev felt Jess take a deep breath next to her, and she gave her a smile of encouragement as she walked forward and then up the steps to where Bain was standing.

She could see all the newcomers watching her and she suspected if she turned around she would see all the other people watching her too, but Jess merely exchanged nods and places with Bain, leaning against the podium for a long, silent moment.

"So it's a time of new beginnings." Jess said, after that pause. Her voice, low and vibrant, rolled through the chamber and echoed softly. "I've learned the hard way not to live in the past, and you all shouldn't either." She eyed the newcomers. "Don't look back at where you came from, or who you left behind because every day means something different here."

Bain had stepped to one side, and now he nodded silently.

Jess paused. "If there's anyone here who should be tradition bound, it should be me." She went on. "I'm the eleventh generation of Drakes who've worn this uniform and my brother Jimmy called me last night to tell me my nephew's the twelfth."

The newcomers exchanged glances. Jess studied them. "But I figured out recently tradition buys you nothing." She said. "So do yourselves a favor and keep your eyes open to all the possibilities out there." Briefly, she studied the young faces focused on her. "That's all I have to say. Welcome."

With that, she turned and walked back down to where Dev was, coming to stand next to her and folding her hands in front of her as she stared pointedly at Bain.

“Excellent.” Bain didn’t miss a beat. “Instead of the long winded blather you’d have gotten from others, we can now perform the induction and start the celebration. Thank you, Drake.”

“Sir.” Jess pronounced, putting just the slightest drawl on it. She gave Dev a sideways glance, one eyebrow lifting.

Dev grinned at her and carefully imitated her earlier wink.

**

The party was loud. Dev kept close by Jess’s hip as they squeezed their way through the room, towards a place where people were getting drinks. The big space had been rearranged, the podium and platform removed and tables full of food were now appearing on the fringes.

Jess got to the bar and leaned an arm on it. “Gimme a grain straight up and.. “ She turned to Dev. “What’s your poison?”

Dev’s brows creased. “No, wait.” She held up a hand as Jess started to explain. “Does that mean, what do I want to drink?”

“Yeah.”

Dev considered. “Do they have the stuff we had at dinner?”

“And a beer.” Jess told the man behind the bar, a bio alt who was staring at Dev intently. “Hey!”

The bio alt jerked and reached for the drinks. “My apologies, agent.” He handed Jess a glass and then offered Dev another , taller one.

“Thank you.” Dev took the glass. She looked around. “Wow.”

“Freaking mess.” Jess muttered. “C’mon.” She eased past a group of engineers and techs and found an open spot near one wall. “Glad that’s over with.”

“Are you?” Dev leaned against the wall next to her, watching the crowd go by. “I thought you did great.”

“Dev.” Jess half turned and looked at her. “C’mon. Those things are supposed to be an hour long with six pages of notes. I blew them off and everyone knows it.”

Dev studied the crowd. “They all don’t look unhappy.” She said. “And I heard people saying they were really relieved not to have to listen to... um.” She paused. “To all the bullshit?” She pronounced the last word carefully. “I think that’s what they said.”

Jess chuckled wryly. “They didn’t, did they?”

“Yes. What’s bullshit?”

“Ah.” Her companion leaned against the wall next to her. “Its the excrement from a four legged, hoofed cud chewing mammal that no longer exists.” She replied. “The male of the species.”

Dev looked at her, then she took a sip of her beer and merely shook her head.

“Let’s hang out here for a little while.” Jess said. “See who comes over and starts trying to suck up to me.” She regarded the crowd with an ironic eye. “See if any of the new bio’s has the guts to come talk to you.”

“Agent?” A soft voice interrupted them. “May I take your jacket?”

Jess turned to find a server there, a young bio alt almost her height, with curly red hair “Sure.” She put her drink down on the small table next to them and undid the catches on her jacket, stripping out of it and handing it to him. “Dev?”

Dev had already put her drink down. “Is this usual?” She undid her jacket, as the bio alt patiently waited. “Thank you very much, Ayebee.” She handed him the fabric, receiving a real, though brief smile from him in return. “Have you been downworld long?”

“Six months.” Ayebee said. “It’s a tough adjustment.”

“To some things, yes.” Dev agreed, picking up her glass. “This.” She lifted it.

“Yes.” He chuckled. “I will have your garments sent back to your quarters.” He gave Jess a nod of respect, then he went on to the next group.

“You know him?” Jess asked, casually.

“That Ayebee?” Dev pondered the question. “I know his set.” She explained. “I trained with a group of them doing rec in the creche. I don’t think I know that specific Ayebee though.”

“They all have the same name? I’ve heard them called all sorts of stuff here.”

“They’re all Ayebees. A-B.” Dev pronounced the letters separately. “I think he’s an A-B-800 Instance 6. But they get nicknames sometimes.”

“Oh.” Jess said. “You don’t have that problem.”

“No. I’m the only NM-Dev.” Dev agreed.

“One of a kind.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “So it seems.”

“I like that about you.” Jess told her, noting the faint blush that was visible despite the low ights. “Do you like it?”

Dev was silent for a while. “I think I'm getting to.” She finally said, with a faint grin.

“There you are.” Jason appeared next to them, with Brent and Elaine in tow. “Nice speech.” He gave Dev a brief smile. “Short and sweet. Half the citadel wants to kill you the other half wants to kiss you.”

“Which half are you?” Dev asked, unexpectedly.

Jason paused in mid breath, and stared at her. “What?”

Jess started chuckling. “Which half are you?” She asked Dev, then paused, looking embarrassed.

“Well, I definitely don’t want to kill you.” Dev said, after just a little too long a pause, as their eyes met.

“Anyway.” Jason apparently caught his breath and plowed ahead. “Bain’s happy. No one else matters.” He clapped Jess on the shoulder. “Sandy decided to take a bottle to her quarters and get drunk so you don’t have to worry about her jackass tongue tonight. Ready to dance?”

Jess was still looking at Dev’s face. “Sure.” She muttered. “I’m ready for anything.”

“Great.” Jason turned and stood on his toes. “Hey, they finally got the grub out. I’ll grab some. Brent, stay here.”

Brent took up a spot against the wall next to Dev, folding his muscular arms over his chest and watching the crowd with a skeptical frown.

Dev leaned next to him, sipping her beer. After a minute she turned and looked at Jess, and smiled, getting a smile back as Jess lifted her mug and both eyebrows at her.

**

“Here you go.” Jess took a seat on the ledge next to Dev, handing her a plate of assorted goodies and then setting her cup down.

Jason and Elaine, and Brent and Tucker were ranged on either side of them, holding an informal court as a long parade of people came up to say hello.

Dev was happy to sit quietly and watch, kept well supplied with treats from Jess’s frequent escapes through the crowd. They were on one end of the big room, in the curve, with the transparent panels providing a colorful backdrop as the storm continued to rage.

She had her legs pulled up crossed under her, with a plate balanced on one knee, and was fully occupied in listening to Jess talk to the other agents as she kept an eye on people approaching from her peripheral vision.

There was a lot of conflicting emotion going on. But Jess seemed to be in a pretty good mood, so she supposed the party was going well.

The food was good, and she was enjoying it. She and Brent had traded fish rolls, since he preferred the ones with the crunchy seaweed in them and she liked the other kind, and she had spent some time talking to him about the work she was doing on the carrier.

He liked that sort of thing too, so now he was explaining about how he tweaked the engine tork on his vehicle and she was wondering if she could try doing that on hers. On theirs, she mentally corrected herself, since the carrier really was assigned to Jess.

Jess was sitting side by side with her, and their shoulders were pressed against each other. Since their shoulders were both bare, it was a warm and pleasant sensation she was very much enjoying just as she had enjoyed their banter earlier.

It made her feel good, to think that Jess was beginning to trust her a little, enough to joke around. Dev knew that was rare, both between bio alts and definitely between bios and natural born but she liked it. She thought about what she'd asked Jason, and then what Jess had asked her, and it made her smile.

She definitely didn't want to kill Jess. Dev munched her fishroll, stealing a glance at her companion's profile. She definitely didn't want to kill anyone, but especially not Jess. Bio alts didn't do that.

Of course, she really didn't have any idea what kissing her would be like either but since she thought Jess was quite attractive, and she liked her, she supposed it would be an all right thing to do.

"Ah, here they come." Jason nudged Jess. "The kids finally scraped up the guts to come meet you."

"Would you stop it?" Jess growled. "I've got enough crap to deal with."

"C'mon Jess. Enjoy it for a change." Jason waved the newcomers forward. "You earned the bump. No one gave it to you." He said. "Screw that bitch Sandy and her buddies. They're just farting jealousy in three colors."

Jess regarded the new agents and their partners dourly. They all seemed ridiculously young to her, all slim and leanly muscled, with short cropped hair and cleanshaven faces.

Of the agents, four were men, and two were women. All of the techs were men, but that wasn't unusual. Two of the male agents had dark hair, two had light, and both women had brown hair and looked like each other.

Very average.

The tallest of the men came forward. His name plate said Arias, M and he had a quiet self possession. "Agent Drake, I just wanted to compliment you on your speech."

Jess eyed him wryly. "Yeah?" She said. "If you blinked, you missed it." She said. "Maybe I'll get lucky and they won't ask me again."

"Remember when Bricker did it last year?" Jason said. "Kept us standing there for an hour and a half. Bastard."

"Well, if that's the case, I'm glad I inducted today." Arias half turned. "This is my partner Chester." He motioned forward a tech standing just behind him. "He's a west coaster."

"Hey there, Chester." Jason lifted his glass. "So am I. " He said. "Rainer Islander."

Chester produced a grin. "My uncle lives there. He likes it."

"This is Elaine Cruz, and her partner Tucker." Jason went on. "This is my partner, Brent." He paused, then glanced at Jess, raising one eyebrow.

For a moment, Jess stared back at him impassively, then she looked at the new agent. “I guess you already know who I am.” She remarked. “This is my partner Dev.” She tilted her head in Dev’s direction. Then she went back to munching on a seaweed fish wrap.

Jason chuckled. “That didn't take long.”

“Shut up.”

Dev looked over at her with a startled expression. Then she recovered, and cleared her throat. “Hello.” She greeted the agent. “Nice to meet you.” She added. “Welcome to the citadel.”

“Mike.” The agent stuck a hand out and smiled when Dev shook it. Then he turned and motioned the other new agents forward.

Dev took the opportunity of the distraction to look back over at Jess, who, after a moment, lifted her eyes to meet hers. After a brief moment, Jess shrugged a little. “Hell.” She said. “I can’t go on calling you my bus driver if you keep saying nice things about me now can I?”

Dev smiled happily as the other new agents came up in front of them. She turned to face them, finding herself looking at one of the new female agents. “Hello.”

“You’re the bio alt?” The woman asked.

“Yes.” Dev responded cordially. “NM-Dev-1.” She added, taking a quick sideways look as she felt Jess shift, and became aware that her companion’s attitude had shifted, from casual to alert, her pale blue eyes fixed on the newcomer. “Is that a good or bad thing for you?”

The woman seemed caught offguard. “Um.. “ She lifted her hands a bit and let the drop. “I don’t know, really. We just heard about it when we were heading out here.” She said. “I’m April.” She said, belatedly extending her hand. “Did you say... Dev?”

“Dev.” Dev confirmed, shaking her hand. “Welcome.” She felt Jess relax and turn her attention back to her plate, which was nearly empty.

“So is it true you got all your stuff in a week?” The brown haired man next to her asked. “I’m Doug.” He added. “April’s mule.”

“Doug.” The woman gave him a look.

Jess gave them both an approving look, but didn’t interrupt.

“That’s not exactly true.” Dev said. “I had my basic instruction starting when I was five, and went to advanced school when I was twelve. So I’ve been learning a long time. I did get a big dose of programming before I came here, but that was mostly all the tech stuff I needed to do my job.”

“Not so different from us.” April said.

“No, not at all.” Jess said. “I didn’t think a bio alt would work, but Dev proved me wrong.” She said, in a matter of fact tone. “Uncomfortable as that is for all of us. It is, what it is.”

“I don’t think I’ve proved that yet.” Dev objected. “I’ve only done one mission with you.”

“Did you know they’ve been playing the recorder file of that one mission in the rec center for the last two days?” Jess asked, her brows lifting.

Dev blinked. “No, I didn’t.” She responded honestly. “Why would they do that?”

“And she’s modest too.” Jess addressed the assembled agents, who chuckled softly. “That’s what I meant about going with change. I thought this was going to be crap. I was wrong.” She regarded Dev. “Who knows? Maybe we won’t need a thirteenth generation of Drakes doing this.”

“You really want that?” Mike asked. “It was my ticket to school. Rest of my family harvests grubs and half of them can’t read.”

“Mine too.” Jess agreed. “The ones who don’t get taken to Interforce, that is. I’ve got a brother raking weed, and another doing recap for the processing station downhill.” She extended her arms, and the light hit them, showing the burned in sigils. “But every dot’s a dead body on these.”

A silence fell, and the new agents exchanged glances.

Jess turned her arms over, since the sigils went around in a band. “Clear means stalemate. Green means we won. Red means they won. “ She looked dispassionately at her skin. “Yellow diamond means I ended up in med.”

Dev examined her companions arms intently, since some of this code was new to her.

“Maybe it would be better to have them do it.” Jess said, after she let the silence go on for a moment. “Most of us don’t survive to forty.”

“Wow.” Mike finally said.

“Don’t tell ya that stuff so much in field school, huh?” Jason smiled thinly “They didn’t when I went through.” He hopped off the ledge and stretched his arm out next to Jess’s. Despite his greater height, their fingertips matched, though the burned sigils only went halfway down his arms just past his elbows.

Elaine circled to come up on his other side, showing her own. “People will talk crap here.” She said to the newcomers. “But this tells the real story.”

Dev watched intently, seeing the young faces that surrounded them absorbing the information. She felt that they were a little ambivalent about her, but that was okay. She hadn’t gotten the outright antagonism she’d sensed from Sandy and her partner, or the two other older agents she hadn’t been introduced to.

She reached over and touched Jess’s arm, running her fingers over one of the more intricate sigils, which also had a prominent yellow mark on it. To her surprise, she watched goosebumps rise behind her fingers and she looked up, to find Jess watching her. “Was that a bad trip to med?”

“Broke my back.” Jess said. “So yeah.” She looked down at the mark, which bore six green roundels. “They kept me in a fuser for a week, and then in a pin rack for two more. I’d rather have died.”

Dev grimaced. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t.”

The sound of clapping drew all of their attention. “Enough war stories, people.” Bain was standing nearby “Go dance and have fun for a change. Tomorrow’s soon enough to be serious.” He waved them all towards the lit, open area, and as he did, music started playing.

Jess made no move to stand. Jason and Elaine exchanged glances, and then Jason held his hand out. “Shall we? Show the kids how it’s done?”

“You’re on.” Elaine said, and they walked through the crowd as others moved along as well, and the music picked up in both pace and loudness. “Cmon, kids.”

The newcomers shuffled, and then trailed after them, as the lights went down to a lower dimness, and that only let the lightning overhead become more prominent.

Jess and Dev were left at the ledge, everyone else obeying Bain’s orders.

Jess turned her head and studied her companion. “Do you dance?”

Dev tore her eyes from the dance floor and returned the regard. “I have absolutely no idea what that is.” She responded. “It looks like they’re walking across a very hot floor with no shoes on.”

Jess laughed gently. “Yeah, I’m not much for it either.” She admitted. “I’m too self conscious, I think.” She said. “I’m always aware of how stupid I look flopping around like a fish out of water there.”

Dev studied her. “Are you a fish out of water here?” She asked. “You seem different than the rest of them.”

Jess looked up, with a startled expression. “I belong here.” She stated flatly. “Are you saying I don’t?”

Oh no. Dev felt immediate distress. “I’m sorry.” She said. “I didn’t mean to be incorrect.” She slid off the ledge and faced Jess, her brow creased. “I’m very sorry.”

Jess responded to the near panic in her voice, her anger dissolving as she put her hand on Dev's shoulder. "Hey. Take it easy." She said. "It was just a weird question, that's all."

Dev studied her with a worried expression. "Its just that you've been so.. " She paused, unsure of whether to continue. "I don't want you to be angry. I meant that in a good way."

Jess leaned on her elbows, clasping her hands together. It was almost dark in the room, save the dance lights, and it gave her an illusion of privacy. "Maybe I have always been a little weird." She admitted. "No matter how much history my family has of this."

"You're not weird." Dev said, automatically. "You just see so much more than they do. They're so... um.. " She paused again. "Not as deep as you are."

Oh. Jess sorted through that, detecting that it was, in fact, something positive. "Sorry I freaked you out."

"Excuse me?"

Jess chuckled wryly. "You hit a sensitive spot of mine." She admitted, in low tone. "I've always been a rebel. They all know it. That's why so many of them are pis... are mad that I got senior."

"Oh." Dev slowly eased herself back up onto the ledge, her heartbeat starting to settle.

"I've never done things... the right way." Jess went on. "I always did what I thought was best, not what I was told. I've been in trouble more times than.. " She sighed. "I embarrassed the hell out of my father. He was such a regulation stickler." She paused. "I wondered if I should change my name so he didn't have to hear it from everyone when I screwed up."

Dev put a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry." She said. "I really didn't meant to upset you."

"I know." Her companion pulled one long leg up and wrapped her arms around it. "No way for you to know about all that stuff. We've only known each other for what... three days? Four?" She looked sideways at Dev. "It's fine, Dev. Its a good question, and I don't mind talking to you about it."

Dev nodded, and kicked her heels against the ledge a couple times. "To tell the truth." She said, after a long pause. "I think I know I'm different too." She said. "Maybe it's because I'm a dev model. But I was always really aware of being... I think you called it a one off."

"Good or bad?" Jess asked.

The bio alt thought about that for a long time in silence. "When I became aware of it.. I guess I was around ten or so, it was a really lonely thing to think about." She said. "None of us has any family. But at least everyone else had their set mates and I remember being at a celebration.. sort of like this." She indicated the room. "And I realized I was the only one of my kind there who was alone."

"Mm." Jess grunted softly, deep in her throat.

"It was uncomfortable."

"I bet." Jess looked around the room, watching all the moving bodies and hearing the laughter and music. Then she turned her head back towards Dev. "Wanna go steal a tray of brownies and go for a swim?"

Dev looked back at her and grinned. Then she indicated the room. "This is all a little much for me." She admitted. "I'm not used to it."

"Don't need to tell me twice." Jess slid off the ledge and waited for Dev to join her. Then she put her hand on Dev's back and guided her towards one of the walls. "I know a secret way." She announced. "And it passes right by the prep area for the kitchen."

They left the noise and the celebration behind them, as Jess scanned open an unmarked black door and they passed through into a bare, utilitarian hallway and as the door closed, it cut off all the clamor like a knife.

"Oh." Dev looked behind them, as silence took the place of the chaos.

"Soundproof door." Jess remarked, leading the way to an equally unmarked lift door, which accepted her palm scan without complaint. "Not many people know about this back route." She waited for the lift to

open, then stepped inside. After Dev joined her, she keyed a command on the inside panel and the door slid shut.

It opened again, at the lower level, but inside the medical area. Jess strolled through the pristine halls, keeping her eyes forward and not looking into the exam rooms on either side. She debated telling Dev why she knew the back way, then decided against it.

Hopefully, she would never have to witness the situation that elevator was there for.

**

The gym was silent and half dark, and the water was again soothingly warm. Jess carefully spread her arms out along the tank wall, just relaxing in the liquid and glad of the relative quiet around her.

Relative, because Dev was paddling around idly, practicing her swimming.

Jess watched her unobtrusively. Despite her concentration, she could sense her pool mate was distracted, the expression on the bio alt's face thoughtful and somewhat withdrawn. She wondered if Dev was still worried about upsetting her. "Hey."

Dev looked up. "Yes?"

"C'mere." Jess crooked a finger at her.

Obediently, the bio alt swam in her direction, her body already moving with burgeoning assurance through the water. "Damn." Jess sighed. "I sure wish I could learn that fast."

"What?" Dev reached her and grabbed the edge of the wall, since the bottom was below her reach.

"You're already picking up swimming." Jess remarked. "I said I wish I could learn like that." She lamented. "And that wasn't anything that was programmed, was it? That's how you learn?"

Dev paused in the water, her eyes going a little unfocused. "I never really thought about that." She said. "But I guess it is. We're conditioned to learn. It's good when you have programming for something, but sometimes you don't and you need to be able to do it anyway."

"Like what you did in the carrier, evading the bad guys."

"Yes."

"I'd say that's a damn good thing." Jess said. She moved along the wall, bumping Dev a little until they were shallow enough for her to stand. "Thanks for indulging me in being an anti social sourpuss."

That made Dev smile. "The party was okay." She said. "But I think it is going to take me a while to get used to things like that. When we had them in the creche, there wasn't any drinks involved and no.. uh... dancing."

"Probably why they didn't call it a party."

"Yes, that's true." Dev agreed. "It was always called a gather, or a gathering. We did get treats sometimes though. Candy balls, or a bit of cake."

"You like that stuff."

Dev nodded, visibly more cheerful. "They told us it wasn't good for us, but yes, I do." She said. "I think you do too."

Jess licked her lips. "The whole tray of brownies clue you in to that?" She laughed. "I'll probably be sick tomorrow from it but I don't care. It was worth it." She paused. "Another one of my faults. I live for the moment." Her eyes went to Dev's face, watching the subtle tension relax.

Ah. That made her feel better. "I think the kids took to you all right." She said. "Better than I thought."

Dev considered that. "I don't think they made up their minds yet." She said. "They seemed to want to be friendly though. "

“They did.” Jess said. “Jason was right. I pissed off half the room and at least didn’t alienate the other half.” She turned and leaned against the wall, stretching her shoulder out. “But at least they got to meet you and interact before some of the other assholes got to them over breakfast.”

Dev leaned her back against the tank wall and folded her arms over her chest. “I don’t think Jason was in the part that wanted to kill you, by the way.” She remarked.

Jess half turned and regarded her. “No, and you either apparently.”

Dev hesitated, then turned her head and met Jess’s eyes, a very faint smile appearing on her face. “You didn’t really think I would be, did you?”

“No.” Jess managed a small smile of her own. “I’m not the most social person out there but I didn’t figure you hated me.”

“I don’t” Dev said. “I like you very much.” She paused and thought. “I did wonder, though, what it would be like to kiss you.” She added, in a mild tone.

Jess blinked. “You did?”

“Yes.”

Live in the moment, isn’t that what she said she did? Jess did not stop to think, even for a second. “Okay.” She turned and leaned over, tilting her head slightly to one side and kissing Dev on the lips, completely unprepared for the jolt in her guts and the instant and powerfully sensual wash that sent tingles to every inch of her body.

She meant it to only last a second but it went on longer than that, until a door slammed in the distance, and she drew back, to find Dev staring at her, eyes round and astonished. “Uh.” Jess croaked out, then fell silent

“That.” Dev finally said, on an unsteady breath. “Was not at all what I expected.”

Jess was finding it a little hard to catch her own breath. “Me either” She eventually muttered. “What in the hell did I just do?”

Dev rubbed her eyes with one hand “Well if you don’t know, I definitely don’t.” She muffled a short laugh. “But wow did that ever surprise me.”

Jess folded her arms over her chest and rested her head back against the wall of the tank, feeling the unsteady race of her heartbeat thundering in her ears. “Yeah.”

They looked at each other. Another door slammed in the distance, and Jess looked up over the edge of the tank, and then back at Dev. “Not sure what’s going on. Maybe we should get out.”

“Okay.” Dev said. “Maybe we should.”

They were both silent for a moment more, then Jess started laughing, shaking her head and plowing through the water towards the steps. Dev let herself sink down into the water and swam after her, using the casual motion to give her time to stop...

Shaking? Dev flexed her hands as she got to the shallow end and could walk the rest of the way. Stop something. Her body felt very, very strange.

**

Dev closed her locker, aware of Jess’s closing presence behind her. She turned just as the taller woman arrived and smiled. “That was nice.” She said.

“It was.” Jess agreed. “C’mon back to my place. We’ll share a cup of grog.”

Dev nodded, happy to deposit her damp towel into the dispenser with Jess’s and follow along. She found herself still thinking about the kissing thing. That had been *very* interesting. She hadn’t expected it to feel like it had and if she concentrated she could still sort of feel how it felt on her lips.

“Dev?”

“Huh?” Dev jerked a little, looking up to find Jess looking at her in bemusement. “Um.. sorry.”

“You okay?”

Was she? Dev wasn’t entirely sure what she was at the moment. “I think so.” She said. “Maybe I’m just a little tired.” She suggested. “That was a long session in the gym today.”

“Yeah, it was.” Jess agreed, with a sigh. “Reminded me again of how little time I’ve been spending in there lately.” She rubbed her bare arms with her hands. “Too much time spent in med instead.”

“Is your back all right?” Dev asked.

“Yeah. It’s okay.” Her companion twisted her body cautiously. “Just out of condition a little. Wish they had a pill or an instant program for that, I’ll tell ya.”

Dev smiled. “Me too.” She admitted. “It’s a lot of hard work.” She looked around at the empty halls. “Is the party still going on?”

Jess had been watching the ground as she walked. “Huh?” She cocked her head. “Oh. Yeah. Right. The party.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t care. Maybe. You want to go back to it?” She looked at Dev who was shaking her head side to side definitively. “Right. I should check met, I guess... see when that window’s going to happen... how’s the carrier?”

Dev blinked at the onslaught of rambling details. “Ah.” She sorted through them. “We did some very good work today and Clint was going to finish the engines tonight. I think it will be ready for tomorrow at some time.”

“Great.” They reached Jess’s quarters and she scanned in and they walked inside. Jess halted after a few steps and stood still, sweeping her eyes around the room. “Hold it.”

Dev stopped and waited.

After a minute, Jess relaxed. “Ah. They just brought the jackets back.” She pointed at the chair, where two sets of them were draped. She walked over to them and lifted hers, then handed Dev the other one. “Might as well get out of your monkey suit.”

Dev looked at the jacket, then at her.

“Just another saying.” Jess tossed her jacket back over the chair back, stepping over to where Dev was standing and reaching out to gently ruffle her hair. “You don’t look like a monkey.” She said. “Go on and change and then we’ll sit down and have a glass of mead together.”

She watched Dev smile, then turn and walk over to the door, pausing to let it open and then going through, noting consciously the clean lines of Dev’s body and how well proportioned she was. Then she took in a breath and released it, going over to her uniform cabinet and opening it.

She put the jacket away and unsealed the catches on her sleeveless jumpsuit, peeling it off her body and setting it onto it’s holder. Then she paused and regarded her reflection in the mirror mounted in the back of the cabinet, scowling a little at what she saw.

Then that made her frown, and shake her head, as she grabbed a set of shorts and a tank and put them on. What the hell did she care what she looked like? It mattered only in the field sometimes, and then she had her clothes on and looked all right.

Outsiders didn’t see the scars. Hell, most insiders never saw them.

She went to the sanitary unit and ran a brush through her hair, which was almost dry after her swim. She met the somber regard of her own eyes in the smaller mirror, her thoughts going back to the pool.

Going back to that kiss.

Damn she’d enjoyed that. Jess stared at her reflection. She closed her eyes as she felt the sensation again, the faint, surprised reaction from Dev, and then, unmistakably, her response. Hard to say really which one of them was the more freaked out.

Might have been her. Dev seemed surprised and interested, but that was all. Did bio alts kiss up on station? Or anywhere? Jess was a little bemused to find herself very much wondering about that. Did she want to kiss Dev again?

Hm.

Did Dev want to kiss her again? Probably not. She probably was sitting down in her workspace right now and keying it up on her pad to find out what it all was about.

With a sigh, she turned and went back into her main area, just as the inner door opened and Dev came in, holding a box. “What’s that?”

“I was kind of hoping you’d tell me.” Dev came over and set the box down. She was also in shorts and a tank, and barefoot. “I found it in my space.”

Jess examined it thoughtfully. “It’s one of the boxes our nav modules come in.” She evaluated. “I’m guessing no one sent you a nav module.” She gently opened the box, tipping the top back and exposing the contents. She and Dev peered inside, almost bumping their heads together.

For a moment they regarded the contents in mutual silence. Then Jess reached in and picked up a sample, bringing it out and into the light. “Ah.”

“What are those?” Dev asked.

“Seashells.” Jess responded. She handed over the specimen, an oblong item with a tan and orange pattern on it. “NM-Dev-1, I think you have an admirer.” She wasn’t sure if she should be amused or pissed off. To have someone send this sort of crap to an ops tech....

“This is interesting.” Dev was turning the shell over in her fingers. “What does it mean?”

Well, most techs were men. Jess eyed her new partner. Most of them weren’t charming young women. “It means someone likes you, and sent you that because they thought you would like it, and by extension like them.” She pronounced. “It’s a present.”

Dev’s brow creased. She tilted her head and looked at Jess, visibly deeply confused.

Jess went to her small cabinet and took the mead and glasses out. She crooked a finger at Dev and then went to the steps up to her relaxation area, climbing up them and entering the quiet space.

Dev followed her, carrying the box.

Jess filled the glasses and put the bottle down on the small, low table, then sat down on the comfortable couch and waited for Dev to join her before she handed over her glass. “Here.”

“Thank you.” Dev leaned back and seemed to relax. “Could you explain this present thing?” She indicated the box. “I don’t really understand it.”

Jess took a long swallow of her mead, and let it slide down her throat into her gut first. “Well.” She said. “Um...” She looked sideways at Dev. “What do bio alts do when they like someone?”

Dev had to really think about that, so she took her time and did. What was Jess actually asking her? She cast her mind back over her life in the creche, and tried to imagine just giving something to someone to make them like her. Would she do that? Had she? “What exactly do you mean by like?” She finally asked.

Jess’s lips twitched. “Didn’t you have any friends up there? People you hung out with? That you wanted to do something for, just because?”

Dev stared into the glass she was holding between her hands, her eyes a little unfocused. Then she took a sip. “I don’t think I did.” She said, after a long pause. “I had daymeal sometimes with Gigi.” She said. “And we talked about things but I never wanted to do anything for her except maybe hold the disposal door open when she had to put her tray in.”

“That’s really not what I meant.”

“No I didn’t think so.” Dev said. “Oh, wait.” She said. “Is it like... I was in the mess this morning, and when I saw all the people, I thought about how you wouldn’t like it so I thought it would be nice if I brought you something?”

“Well...” Jess made a face. “Sort of.”

“Is it like this?” Dev held up her glass. “You do nice things for me.” She looked up at Jess, with a serious expression. “Do you do that because you like me?”

It was almost a disruptive honesty. Jess bit her tongue as she had the oddest sensation of momentarily losing control over her body and quite possibly her mind at the same time. “I.. um.” She felt warmth come over her and realized she was blushing.

What the hell? “Sure.. I mean, yes.” She regained control over her ability to communicate somewhat. “I think you’re.. um.” Jess found those curious and interested green eyes studying her. “Hey you’re my partner. I’m supposed to do stuff for you.”

Dev studied her glass again, a faint, wistful smile appearing on her face. “Oh.” She murmured. “Well, I’m glad about that.” She said. “But I was sort of hoping maybe you were being nice just because.” She took a sip, holding the snifter between her hands. “That would be an interesting thing to experience.”

Jess was caught flatfooted again. She had no idea what to say to that, or what to do about the sort of forlorn expression on the bio alts face. It made her stop and think again. “I’m.. um.. not really.. “ She paused. “ I w..want to be nice to you.” She stuttered a bit. “I don’t have to be. I don’t want you to think I do things because I..” She let the words trail off, not really sure what she was trying to say.

“Because you want me to like you?” Dev offered, softly. “You don’t have to. I do like you. I like you just because, and it made me feel good to bring you stuff from the mess.” She said. “So I think I get that now.”

“Oh.” Jess felt intense relief. “Good.”

“But it really doesn’t explain this.” Dev put the glass down, and picked up the box of shells. “Why would someone send these to me? I don’t know anyone else here but you.”

“Oh.” Jess set her glass down next to Dev’s and took the box. “I think Clint sent these to you.” She said. “I think he wants to get to know you better.”

“Ah.”

“Back in the day.” Jess was very glad they’d jumped subjects. “When someone was interested in someone else, and wanted to get to know them better, they sent them a nice present. Usually flowers.”

“We had those at the creche.” Dev said. “But no one was allowed to send them to anyone.”

“These are the new flowers.” Jess held up the shell. “So Clint’s saying he’s interested in getting to know you.”

Dev leaned back on the couch and folded her hands in her lap, regarding her companion thoughtfully. “Wouldn’t it be more productive for him just to ask me?”

Jess shrugged. “Do you want him to?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Jess put the box down.

“I think he’s pleasant and funny but I don’t want to get to know him any better.” Dev clarified. “I enjoy working with him, but I don’t think I would enjoy doing this with him.” She picked up her glass, and drank from it. “So what do you think I should do about these... um.. “ She picked up one of the shells and examined it curiously. “things?”

“I’ll take care of it.” Jess offered, in a quiet tone. “Don’t worry about it, Dev.”

“Thanks.” The bio alt smiled at her. “That’s very nice of you.”

Jess found herself smiling back. She picked her glass up and looked at it. “Do you like doing this?” She indicated it.

“I like spending time with you.” Dev said. “You make me feel human.”

Disruptive honesty. Jess felt her jaw drop a little, as she tried to process that with sufficient intent to come up with a response that was other than a splutter. She looked at her companion, feeling just a little short of breath, feeling her eyes blink repeatedly.

“Are you all right?” Dev asked, after a long moment. “You seem to be in some discomfort. Was that incorrect for me to say?”

“No.” Jess put her glass down and reached over to put her hand on Dev’s shoulder. “I think it was a huge damn compliment. Probably more than you know.” She felt the weird tension she’d been feeling relax and she smiled. “You make me feel human, too.”

Dev studied her for a minute, then smiled back.

“So.” Jess released her, and leaned back. “Let’s find something less weird to talk about.”

“Okay. Could you tell me about this mission thing?” Dev amiably went with the subject change. “Where are we going? What’s it going to be like?”

Jess picked up a control on the table and pointed it at a screen embedded in the wall. “Lemme show ya.” She said. “I don’t usually ask people up here to see my etchings, y’know.”

“Oh. Well, thanks.” Dev slid a little closer, as the screen lit. “Thats very nice of you.”

“When you see how bad I etch, you’ll change your mind.”

“What exactly is an etching?”

**

Dev hadn’t changed her mind. She had completely enjoyed seeing Jess’s sketches of the places they would be going, and even more, she’d enjoyed hearing Jess talk about them.

Now she was in her bed, curled up under the covers and in a state of almost profound bemusement. She felt strange, and warm, and like she wanted to giggle and she really didn’t know why, except that she was having a hard time thinking of anything except for Jess.

Well, she supposed that was natural. A lot of things had happened to them today, from their rough and ready meal in the morning, to the ceremony, to the party, to swimming to... well, the whole kissing thing, and then the mead and all that.

Tomorrow night they would finally go on their mission. Jess had told her they would spend several days on it, and might even have to sleep in the carrier while it was going on.

She found that thought very interesting.

Jess had also told her they would pass through at least one of the big strongholds where many people lived, and get a chance to see what that was like, and then go to a very remote place where she would meet with the fishermen she wanted to travel to the bad guys with.

It all sounded good. The mission itself, and the danger she thought Jess was trying to make small still worried her a lot, but the parts around it were getting her excited, and she had to admit she was looking forward to getting in the carrier and going off to do it.

It would take a lot of really hard work to get the carrier ready in time, but she was confident they could do it.

That made her think about Clint. She wondered about that box of shells. It was hard to decide if that was a good thing he’d done or not a good thing, though she thought maybe he thought it was good. He seemed like a nice person, and she didn’t think he was trying to get something from her, but Jess seemed to think maybe he was.

She wasn't sure what the something was. Jess had gotten all flustered again when she'd asked, there at the end after they'd found themselves talking about it again so she'd just dropped the subject.

She thought it was really cute when Jess got like that. There was something really sweet and nice about it, since usually Jess was so strong and self possessed. It would be excellent of course, if she knew why simple straightforward questions seemed to evoke that, but she supposed eventually she'd figure it out.

Dev curled her arms around her pillow and exhaled in contentment. It had been such a good day. She was trying really to decide which had been the best part of it - Jess saying they were partners, or that kissing thing.

She was so proud about the partner thing. She'd looked the word up when she'd finally left Jess's quarters and found the description to be very good. It said Jess wanted to continue working with her, and maybe, it meant Jess was starting to trust her in a way she hadn't really expected since she didn't actually think she'd done much to earn that trust yet.

So that was excellent.

But, now, that kissing thing.

That was pretty interesting too. Dev had, of course, had her basic biology class and she knew all about that. They'd studied the science of reproduction in her advanced level classes - though it wasn't anything any of them would ever expect to know in person since they did things to them to make them not have babies. So there was no point in the rest of it, according to the lessons.

She remembered talking after class, and everyone wondering what the big deal was and why the natural born were so fixated about it.

What she hadn't known was what it would be like, and how interesting it made her body feel. She hadn't felt like that during the class, nor after, but if she closed her eyes and thought about it now, about that touch on her lips, she felt that feeling again, and she really liked it.

She had wanted to ask Jess if they could try that again, but it had gotten really late, and she could see Jess was tired. So she saved that for another day, and she figured maybe they could talk about it on the flight.

Jess had said there would be a market in the stronghold they'd visit. Dev closed her eyes and smiled. That would be interesting and she was looking forward to it.

Maybe she'd be able to find Jess a present.

**

It turned out, the next morning, that Dev ended up handling the Clint issue herself anyway. After a very early breakfast she'd gone to the carrier bay, and got to work right off helping get her vehicle ready. She was inside the carrier, lying on the floor with her head inside a console when she heard steps on the ladder and peeked out to see Clint enter.

He came right over and sat down on the floor next to her, crossing his legs and resting his elbows on his knees. "Hi."

"Hello." Dev shifted so her head was in view. "Good morning."

"Listen, I have something to explain to you." Clint said. "I did something but I dind't really think it through, so I wanted to apologize."

Ah. Interesting. "Do you mean the box?" Dev inquired.

Clint nodded, blushing a little. "I just thought it would be something you'd like." He said. "I didn't think about how new you were, or that.. um.... I mean maybe it wasn't something you were used to."

"Because I'm a bio alt?"'

"Uh.. something like that."

Dev considered. "I'm not used to it. I had no idea what that was. Jess had to explain it to me." She admitted, watching his face tense into a grimace at her partner's name.

Her partner's name. That threw Dev right off her intent and she had to wrestle her attention back with a surprising amount of effort. "I thought the shells were really interesting. I would like to know more about them, but you don't have to send me things to prompt me to talk to you."

Clint blushed a deeper shade of red.

"I'm not really comfortable with all that yet. " Dev explained in a serious tone. "I got a lot of programming about tech and this." She pointed at the console. "But not very much about how to deal with natural born people."

"Ah." Clint cleared his throat. 'Well, sure. That makes a lot of sense." He said. "Was Jess pissed off?"

Pissed off. Pissed off. "Was she angry?" Dev hazarded. "No, I don't think so." She shook her head. "She didn't sound angry. She said she would talk to you about it."

Clint went a little pale now. "Okay, well, I guess I should get back to work. Anyway.. ah.. thanks for understanding. Maybe we can just talk sometimes."

"Clint?" Dev edged a little further out. "May I ask you a question?"

"Uh. Sure."

"Why are you so afraid of Jess?"

Clint stared at her for a long, long moment "Yeah I guess they didn't tell you that much about things, huh?" He said. "Just don't get on her bad side. That's all I'll say." He got up and dusted his coveralls off. "Maybe you should get your ..uh.. whatever those people are to fill you in a little. "

"You mean a proctor?" Dev asked. "I dont think I can do that but maybe I can ask someone else about it."

Clint froze, then whirled, as a figure entered the carrier. "Hey! Who the hell are you coming in here?" He put himself between the figure and Dev.

"Doctor Dan!" Dev crawled out from her position and sat up. "It's okay, Clint. This is Doctor Dan. He brought me here from the creche."

"Sorry." Clint edged around the newly installed gunner's couch and got to the door. "Talk to you later, Dev." He scrambled down the steps, leaving them quickly behind.

Dev started to get up, but then sat back down when Doctor Dan waved her back, coming over to sit down on the deck next to her. "Good morning, Dev. Did you like the party last night?"

"It was okay." Dev said. "It was a little strange for me. But it was all right."

"It's a lot to get used to." Doctor Dan agreed. He was dressed in a plain, dark jumpsuit, with no markings or insignia at all. It contrasted with his pale hair and he seemed comfortable in it. "There were a lot of things going on last night. I wanted to know if you needed me to explain anything to you."

"I think it was okay." Dev said. "But I would like you to explain to me about kissing."

Doctor Dan blinked, his eyes going a little wider. "About what?" He asked, in a very startled tone.

"Kissing." Dev repeated. "I know what we got in school, but I think they left out some details."

The scientist laughed gently, lifting one hand to cover his eyes. "I'm sorry, Dev." He said. "I never anticipated having to discuss this particular subject with one of you." He looked at her. "In fact, a very dear friend of mine would be laughing so hard we couldn't hear ourselves think if he'd been here for it."

'I"m sorry." Dev said. "Was it incorrect to ask?"

"No." Doctor Dan leaned against the console, extending his legs across the carrier deck. 'It's never wrong to ask questions, Dev. Even if it's uncomfortable for someone to answer them." He folded his hands together. "Are you asking me this because you want to try it, or because you have?"

"I have." Dev said. "I mean, I did. One time." She clarified.

“And you want to do it again.” This wasn’t quite a question, and Doctor Dan was giving her one of his sweet, gentle smiles.

“Yes.” Dev smiled back at him. “I really liked it.”

Doctor Dan sighed. “Where do I start.” He muttered to himself. “I think we need to talk more than once about this, Dev, and I know you have a mission you’re going on this afternoon.” He said. “So let me ask you this first, was it that gentlemen who just left that you.. ah.. kissed?”

“No.” Dev said in a mild tone. “It was Jess.”

Doctor Dan studied her for a long moment in utter silence. “I see.” He finally said, slowly. “Did she ask you to do this, Dev?”

Dev shook her head. “No, I asked her.” She replied. “I wondered what it would be like, and said that, and she said okay and kissed me. I liked it.” She wasn’t really sure how Doctor Dan felt about it all, he was acting a little funny, and now, something else must have happened because he was trying hard not to laugh. “Was it incorrect?”

Doctor Dan rubbed his face. “No.” He said. “It’s not incorrect... well, not in that sense, Dev.” He said. “There are rules... oh, well, not really rules more customs .. “ he said. “That natural born people here know they are not supposed to make biological alternatives do things like that when they don’t want to.”

“I wanted to.”

“Yes, I understand.” Doctor Dan’s eyes were now gravely twinkling. “You asked her to do that.”

“Yes.” Dev said, in a positive tone.

Her mentor was quiet for a little bit. “It’s not unknown, in this service, for people who are working very closely together to want to do things like that.” He said. “The most important thing is, that it be something that both people want to do, and not feel like they have to do. You understand me, Dev?”

Dev nodded. “I do.” She said. “I remember what happened with TeeJay in the creche.”

Doctor Dan’s lips compressed, and he nodded. “That is what I mean. I don’t want you to get into a situation where something bad happens and you are unhappy.”

“Okay.” Dev said. “It was only a kiss.”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan smiled at her again. “But the way it works, Dev, is that you start by kissing, and then that feels good, so you want to do other things.”

“What other things?”

“Things like touching, and giving pleasure.” Doctor Dan said. “It feels so good you don’t want to stop and it can be very attention consuming and emotional.”

“Oh.” Dev said. “Thats very interesting.” She paused thoughtfully. “Does Jess know about all of this? She seemed to know about kissing.”

“I’m sure she does.” Her mentor said dryly. “But I think you should wait to talk to her about it until after your mission. I know you’ll both be very busy.” He glanced up as loud noises started outside the carrier. “And I think there’s some work needing to be done here.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “We have to get the hull sealed.” She explained. “Thank you for explaining that, Doctor Dan. But.. “ She hesitated. “It’s a correct thing, isn’t it?”

Doctor Dan looked at that young, innocent face, now smudged a little with silicon grease, and smiled. “To be honest, Dev, if you were in one of the regular bio alt positions, or in the creche, it would be incorrect.” He said, straightforwardly. “Mostly to protect you.”

She nodded.

“But you’re not.” He said, quietly. “You’re in a role that makes you the equal of all the natural born humans around you. I think you know that.”

She nodded again.

“So, along with the responsibility of performing that role with excellence, you also have to take on the burden of relating to them as though you were one of them.” Doctor Dan said. “That’s a difficult thing, because they don’t all see it that way.”

“No.”

“But Jesslyn Drake does.” He said. “So no, Dev, it’s not incorrect for you in this case, but please be careful. I would hate to see you become unhappy because of all of this.”

Dev wasn’t sure how kissing could make her unhappy, but she accepted Doctor Dan’s words at face value. “I will be careful.” She said. “Especially on the mission. Kissing seems to make Jess very distracted. I wouldn’t want to do that and end up with less than excellent results.”

Doctor Dan started laughing again. “Oh Dev.” He shook his head, still chuckling. “Ah, to be young and facing life for the first time again.”

Dev chuckled herself, a little, more because her mentor was than because she understood the joke. “This is such an excellent position. I’m so glad you picked me for it, Doctor Dan.”

Kurok let his chuckles wind down, and then he patted her leg. “Go and do well. We can talk more about this when you get back. Okay?”

“Okay.” Dev watched him stand up. “Thanks again Doctor Dan.”

He winked at her and then went to the carrier door, giving it an affectionate slap before he disappeared down the stairs leaving Dev alone inside.

Whew. That was a lot to think about. Dev squirmed back under the console and picked up her adjustment tool. But in the meantime, there was a lot of work to do, and she decided to set aside the thoughts and get down to it.

**

Jess assembled her mission information package and sat down at her workspace to go over it. Met had finally cleared them, and she spread out the maps, laying out the routes she wanted to take and reviewing the contacts.

A small folder was set to one side that had their false credentials in it. Jess paused a moment and opened it, sorting through the scan cards and traveling passports with her and Dev’s holos in them.

She studied Dev’s. They’d assigned her a fake name of Devlin Marks, using the standard theory that one’s own first name should be used whenever possible since it reduced the amount of gotchas in any situation. Her own this time was Jessie Arnula.

Not really one she favored, but what the hell. Jess set the creds aside and poured over the latest intelligence, checking her chrono then reaching over to tap the comms. “Hey Dev?”

After a second and a short crackling noise, her pilot answered. “Hello!”

“How’s it going?”

“Very well.” Dev said. “The interior systems are complete. They are putting the outer skin on presently.”

“Great.” Jess smiled. “Good job.”

Dev’s smile could clearly be heard over the com. “Thank you.” She said. “I will be asking for the comp synch soon.” She said. “And run engine tests.”

“Great.” Jess repeated. “Keep me looped.”

“Um. Okay.” Dev said, and signed off.

Jess chuckled and shook her head, going back to studying her metrics. It was a relatively straightforward plan. They’d pull in to Cape Quebec and pick up supplies, then stop at Interforce’s North Station and get the latest met as well as any last minute intel.

Then a hop to the outlands. Dev would need to park the bus likely in an ice cave, and they would have to hike in to the fishing village. “Supply?” Jess pressed a com button. “Drake.” She said, when it answered. “Leaving plus four I need two arctic kits in my bus.”

“Got it.” A voice responded, and clicked off.

Jess whistled under her breath, then paused, wondering why she was so damned happy. Hadn’t she been the one who’d been finding any excuse not to leave just two days ago? Now she felt nothing but anticipation and confidence, and she was human and self knowing enough to stop and wonder why.

Maybe the induction the previous night had helped. Even the grudging acceptance of her new position was bracing, and she’d gone from feeling like something of a failure to being in a place where she was ready to envision success again.

It felt good. Jess studied her hands. She felt good today. She picked up the communications folder and studied the inside of it, seeing the brief acknowledgement from North Station, and the latest overhead sat map of the ice flows.

It would be a cold mission. Jess made a note to get them both some warm undergarments in Cape Quebec, more than the light synth ones they issued here.

A light knock at her door made her look up. “Come.”

The door opened, and Alex Bain entered. Jess was caught by surprise, and she half stood as he sauntered over and sat down in one of the chairs across from her desk. “Sir.”

“Sit, Drake.” He waved at her. “This is an informal meeting.”

Jess sat. To have Bain call you in, that they’d come to understand was normal. Even to have him call you to ops command? Normal, though now a bit creepy. To get a visit in your quarters? “What can I do for you?” Way outside.

Bain studied her intently. “I have some information I wanted to pass along to you before you depart.” He said. “Where is your charming new colleague?”

“Fixing the bus.” Jess said. “At this point it wouldn’t surprise me if she could knit one from scratch.”

A smile crossed Bains long, craggy face. “You have developed a.. hm.. strong appreciation.. for this bio alt.”

Jess hesitated, then she nodded. “She's good.”

Bain nodded back. “We have just received confirmation that we still have a leak inside.” He said. “That is the main reason I am here, in your bedroom, telling you and not in the operations center.”

“Damn.”

“Hm.” Bain nodded again. “That is what was behind the attack on Dr. Kurok. Word had gotten to the other side of his .. hm.. success with your new pilot.”

“Partner.” Jess corrected him quietly.

“Indeed?” Bain’s eyes twinkled. “That would dismay our friends all the more, I believe. But it surprises me, hmm? You were so adamantly against it.”

Jess looked at her hands, folded together on the table. “It surprises me too.” She admitted. “I never got to say it, but thanks.” She looked up at him. “Glad I bumped into you on the top of that rampway.”

A completely different smile appeared on his face. “It was my great pleasure.”

They were both silent for a few moments. “We have to find this person.” Bain finally said. “I’ve had security go over every single record a half dozen times. They have found, ah, nothing.”

“We have to trap them.” Jess said. “You won’t find anything, and the fact that what they sent over was broadly known information should tell you something. Our last run, when no one really knew what the plan was, didn’t get leaked.”

Bain nodded thoughtfully. “That ah, had occurred to me.”

“So.” Jess said. “There are two major bits of information I let slide for this mission. One, that I was stopping at Quebec, and two, that I would report in at North before I went on. The rest of the gig.. the only person I told that to was Dev.”

“I see.”

Jess picked up a bit of plasfilm and handed it to him. “That’s who I told what.” She said. “So let’s see what happens when I get to both places.”

Bain slowly smiled at her.

“Now, they can do one of two things.” Jess said. “They can try to stop me before I get there, or they can wait until I get there, and trap me. They tried option 2 already once. Didn’t work out so well for them.”

“No it didn’t.” Bain agreed.

“Letting me get close last time didn’t work out so well either.” Jess said. “So I’m hoping they think I’m dangerous enough to want them to stop me ahead of time, and if they do, then maybe we’ll know who it is.”

“Hm.” The old man grunted. “But you will be careful, won’t you, Drake? I would hate for anything permanent to happen to you, or to that charming young lady.”

Jess smiled. “Dev is safe with me.”

“Hm. And on the mission as well.” Bain stood up. “Very well. Keep me advised.” He offered his hand. “Good luck, Drake. Glad you rose to the challenge.”

Jess shook his hand, and then he was gone, the door sliding shut behind him. She leaned back in her chair and nodded to herself. She figured if she pulled this off, there was a decent chance Bain would kick Stephen into Brickers job, and her into Stephens.

She had almost two sleeves. She’d busted her ass. She had more brains than anyone else in the bunch here, and damn it, she’d earned the chance.

Damn right she had. Jess gathered her documentation together, and packed it up into her flight kit. Then she got up and headed for the door, figuring maybe they could use another set of hands on the carrier to get it flight ready.

She grinned wryly. Or at least, Dev could.

**

Dev ducked back into her quarters, half out of breath as she let the door close and took a moment to sit down and think about what she needed to do next.

She’d just taken the carrier through it’s flight certification, a first for her, and she was very pleased when the check out pilot had signed her off after a single round of tests.

Very good. Even though the pilot had been grumpy, and seemed not to like her. He’d muttered something about Barbie dolls, which she had no idea of the meaning of, and finally just keyed in his okay and told her to land.

She had, and then gotten Jess’s call to get herself ready, and now here she was. The problem was, she really wasn’t entirely sure what she was supposed to be doing besides getting into her pilot’s jumpsuit and collect her helmet.

A shower seemed appropriate, though, so she hauled herself to her feet and slipped into the wet room, shucking out of her work coverall and into the warm stream of water, it’s pulsing pressure feeling very good against her skin as she washed the dust and grime off it.

The soap smelled nice and felt even better, and she gladly scrubbed her hair to rid it of both silicon and sweat. She let the hot water pound against her for a minute, then she shut it off and shook herself hard sending droplets against the wall with tiny little spitting sounds. “Ahh.”

Then she picked up a folded towel and started drying herself off, wrapping the towel around her and tucking the end in as Jess had taught her before she ran her comb through her hair.

“Hey!” Jess’s voice echoed as the inner door opened. “Dev?”

“In here.” Dev called out. “I was just taking a shower.” She was glad she’d finally gotten the word for it in her mental storage, and could now call it by it’s proper name. She glanced to her left as Jess poked her head in and gave her companion a smile. “Hello.”

Jess was in the simple undergarment she wore under her heavy jumpsuit. It was a mild gray in color and hugged her body. “We’ll have to pack a kit.” She said. “A lot more stuff than the last time.”

“I thought that was possibly so.” Dev turned. “I just wanted to get clean first.”

“So I see.” Jess grinned. “Carrier all done?”

“Yes.” Dev nodded positively. “All ready to go.” She followed Jess out into the larger part of her space. “Do you know a person named Davis?”

“Ahhugh.” Jess stopped and turned, regarding her wryly. “Johnson Davis? Crotchety old bastard who doesn’t have a good word to say for anyone and looks like he sleeps in his clothes?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Jess indicated the pack that had come in box Bain had sent. “That’s what you use for the kit.”

“He was the one who did the flight check on the carrier with me. He seemed to be in some kind of discomfort.” Dev reported. “So I was wondering.”

“He’s an asshole.” Jess wandered over to cabinet and studied the corner of it.

“Um. Okay.” Dev got into a pair of under wraps, then a twin of the suit Jess was wearing that felt nice and soft against her skin. “Does he feel uncomfortable about my being a bio alt?”

“No. He just hates women. He probably isn’t even aware you’re a bio alt.” Jess told her. “He’s the one thing Sandy and I agree on.”

“Oh.” Dev eyed her. “I see.” She paused. 'What's a Barbie doll?”

Jess stopped and looked at her. “Did he call you that?”

“No.” Dev said. “Well.” She reconsidered. “He might have. He said something about Barbie dolls and it sounded like he might have meant it to apply to me. What is it?”

Jess's eyes narrowed. “If I thought for a minute he meant that and was not just how he felt about women in general I'd go find him and pull his cock off.”

Dev blinked in astonishment “Um... what?”

“I don't care who he thinks he is.” Jess avoided the question. “Stupid mindless drunken bastard.” She braced her arm against the storage cabinet then peered at Dev, her dark hair dropping across her eyes for a moment. “Sorry.” She said, after an awkward pause. “I must sound like an idiot to you.”

“Not at all.” Dev shook her head. “But I wish I understood what is causing you distress.”

Jess straightened and folded her arms. Her face scrunched into an expression of mixed embarassment and irritation. “I don't... we should... “ She exhaled. “Never mind, Dev. We can talk about it later. Let's get going on the run.”

“Okay.” The bio alt agreed mildly.

“So here.” Jess started pointing. “You’ll need the jacket, a couple of extra under suits, and one of those colored jumps like that blue one. We don’t wear uniforms in places like Cape Quebec.”

“Okay.” Dev neatly folded the items and fit them into the pack. “Why not?”

“Hm.” Jess held a hand up. “Okay, let’s sit down a minute and talk about being outside.” She motioned towards the chairs. Dev detoured over to her drink dispenser and got out two containers, then came over and handed Jess one before they both sat down.

“Thanks.” Jess studied the container, before she opened it and took a sip. “So you decided you like this stuff?” She held up the kack.

“Yes, it seems so.” Dev smiled. “It’s a little fizzy, and that’s very interesting to my tongue.”

“Aha.” Jess cleared her throat a little. “Okay, so - the deal is this. When we’re here, we’re just who we are. You got that right?”

After a brief hesitation, Dev nodded. “I think so.”

“When we’re out there, most of the time we don’t want to be who we really are.” Jess said. “It’s not always safe.”

Dev’s eyes lit up a little. “Oh. You mean we’ll be undercover.” She pronounced the word carefully. “Pretending to be someone else, correct?”

Jess looked surprised. “Right.” She said. “Did they give you programming about that?”

“Yes.” Dev said. “That came in the job programming. Not specific things, but the need to do that.” She explained. “And how to hide and all that. I know the programmers and Doctor Dan were concerned because we do have this.” She touched her neck. “And that’s hard to hide.”

“Turtlenecks for you.” Jess smiled, then muffled a chuckle at the look of mild bewilderment on her partner’s face. Partner. Jess sighed internally. Didn’t I say I wasn’t going to do that again? So why did I? “It’s a shirt that has a high collar.” She explained. “You just have to remember not to take your clothes off outside.”

“Okay.” Dev amiably agreed. “I won’t.” She paused. “Well, not unless you tell me to.”

Jess shot her a quick look, and swore she saw a twinkle in those green eyes. “Riiiiight.” She drawled. “I’ll have to remember that.” She waited, but the bio alt’s expression remained mild and inquisitive. “Anyway, we usually put together a cover before we leave, and we get credentials issued to us that match that. Hang on.” She got up and went into her quarters.

“Hang on to what?” Dev wondered to herself. “Hang on to the chair?” She peered around. “To the cup?” She sat back as Jess returned, carrying a folder in her hands. “Hang on to you?”

Jess paused in mid step. “What?”

“Sorry.” Dev took a sip from her container. “I was just thinking about something.”

Jess sat down, leaning on one arm of the chair. “Okay.” She handed Dev a set of cards, and a holder. “This is yours.”

Dev accepted them, putting down her container and studying the materials. She blinked, when she realized the first set of cards was a citizens credentials, with her picture on it and an unfamiliar name. “This is very interesting.”

“Yeah, not bad.” Jess was sorting through hers. “So, when we go into Quebec let me do the talking.” She said. “The names they issued us are close enough to our own that it would be hard to slip up, but think about the name they gave you so you respond to it if anyone asks you about the card.”

“Right.” Dev agreed. “What’s yours” She peered at Jess’s card. “Oh, okay. I see.”

“When we get to the North Station, you just be yourself.” Jess said. “But in the outlands - don’t let on to anyone that you’re not a... what did you call us?”

“Natural born.” Dev said. “But they won’t call it that will they? So I’ll just be a regular person.”

Jess smiled a little. “Yes.” She paused. “Why natural born?”

“Well, because you are.” Dev said. “Born naturally.”

Jess considered that. “And you aren’t?”

“No. They make us up in test tubes.” Dev responded, with a brief grin. “The scientists, like Doctor Dan, select the genes and mix us up and then give us a little zap to get the division started. Then they put us in a shell, and once we outgrow that, into an incubator. Then they hatch us.”

Jess stared at her, blinking. “Are you messing with me?” She asked, after a brief silence.

“Messing.” Her pilot mused. “Is that like... are you asking me if I’m making a joke?” She watched Jess nod hesitantly. “No,, that’s really how they do it. So .. that’s why we call you natural born.”

‘All righty then.” Jess got up. “Lets get packed and get going. We’ve got a long trip ahead of us.” She toasted Dev with her drink. “Stick some of these and some crackers in your kit if you want - always good to have some extra with us.”

“Okay.” Dev got up and retrieved her pack, making sure everything was neatly tucked inside it, and taking Jess’s suggestion she added a few bottles of kack and several packets of the seaweed crackers. She also tucked a spare pare of under wraps inside, and a set of her sleeping clothes since she remembered Jess saying they would be gone for days.

Then, after a pause, she put her book inside the pack too. She sealed everything up, and went to the cabinet to take down her flight suit and get into it. It made her a little excited, feeling the heavier fabric close around her as she arranged the clips and feeds she would hook into the carrier.

She put her boots on, straightening up just as Jess poked her head in the door, her body encased in it’s familiar black semi armor. “Ready?” She asked the agent.

“Ready.” Jess said. “Grab your pack and let’s go to the hangar.”

Dev emptied her container, then she went back and picked up her pack, slinging it onto her back and adjust the straps. She ran her fingers through her hair, now mostly dry, and went into Jess’s quarters to find her seating her sidearm into it’s holster, her hair pulled back into a tail.

Jess shouldered her own pack and they exited their quarters, emerging into the random traffic of the after lunchtime shift change. They attracted some looks, Dev realized, people who caught their flight suits and possibly wondered were they were going.

People did, sometimes. She remembered the whispered speculation in the creche when sets were being sent on assignment, and her last talk like that with Gigi when she wondered if she would ever go.

Now, Dev had to laugh to herself, or maybe at herself for that. She certainly had gotten an assignment hadn’t she? They didn’t stop to talk to anyone, and in a few minutes they were at the hangar, moving across the vast open space towards the landing pad their carrier was sitting on.

Right where she left it. Dev noted. There were six or so bio alts scrambling around the outside, and the hatch was open, last minute details being taken care of as their launch time neared. The carrier was surrounded by faint wisps of off gassing and Dev could feel a distinct thrill as she took in the vehicles powerful outline.

“Looks good.” Jess said. “Nice work.”

Dev smiled. “I just did a small part.” She demurred. “There were many people working on it.”

They cleared around the last work pedestal and approached the pad. “Well.” Jess paused, studying the side. “The mech team thought you did a good enough job to put your name on it. Good sign.” She pointed at the side of the carrier, where Dev’s name had been stenciled right under hers.

“Oh!” Dev’s eyes widened. She slowed long enough to study the letters as they walked up the ramp, dodging an exiting bio alt who was carrying a calibration rig. “I didn’t expect that.”

“I figured once word got around they might.” Jess went into the carrier without explaining that cryptic remark, but Dev lingered a moment to let her eyes trace over the blocky, capital letter DEV inked on the metal side. Not her designation, just the short name and she found herself grinning just to see it.

“Looks good huh?” Clint ducked under the engine pod, wiping his hands on a rag. “They just finished. Hope you leave it in one piece long enough for the paint to dry.”

Dev made a face. “I’ll try.” She said. “I know we caused a lot of hard work.”

“You did some yourself.” Clint said. “Good luck, Dev. Bring her back in one piece and you all in it.”

“Thank you.” Dev gave him a smile. “I”ll do my best.” She patted the side of the ship and ducked inside, only just avoiding crashing headlong into Jess. “Oh!”

“Sorry.” Jess backed up. “C’mon in. I like the new chair.” She let Dev enter then she went over and sealed the hatch. “Once you get everything squared away, lets get clearance and get out of the bathtub.”

Dev strapped her pack down next to her station and sat down in the pilots chair, strenuously resisting asking Jess what a bathtub was. She checked her initial settings, then she started up the comp and began her preflight checks.

Of course, she’d done all that before the certification lift, but her programming told her in no uncertain terms that they had to be done every single time and she could feel the stress on that which indicated to her that this was an important thing.

She listened to Jess rattling around behind her, getting her own pack lashed down, arranging her hold down straps, and checking the weapons and drop kit.

Dev settled the comm set on her head and slipped the earpiece in, hearing the low murmur of ops traffic on the link as she brought the nav comp online. “BR27006, comm check.”

“Stand by 27006.” Ops came back quickly.

“Standing by.” Dev lit up the engine systems board and started running the checks on the new systems, pleased with the response to her test signals.

“27006, Central ops, register comm check, clear channel.”

Dev tuned in the channel a little, her sensitive ears hearing the digital shaping as it evened out. “Central ops, BR27006 reads clear channel, good comm check.” She locked the signal in and released a test squirt, then studied the engine status and the readouts from the navigation comp. “Systems coming online.” She warned Jess.

“I hear em.” Jess grunted. “Give me power please.”

Dev opened the power channel to the weapons systems, her eyes flicking to her boards as the carrier drew current from their umbilical to soak the batteries. She checked the multiple fuel cells, and nodded at the full charge, reaching over to pre-tune the internal generator that would take over once they were disconnected from the base.

“They asking for a route?” Jess called from the back.

Dev regarded the comp. “No, they aren’t. Just standing by.” She said. “Everything‘s online. Should I ask for flight clearance?”

“Hang on.” Jess settled into her bucket seat, locking the restraint straps around her and feeling them gently snug against her body to hold her down. They had a fast release plate positioned over her chest, and a single slap could get her out of them because you just never knew what was going to happen even in flight.

She tested the new chair, feeling it solid and easily swiveled, and she pulled down her targeting comps, pleased with the feel of the new surface under her. The chair was more than decently padded, and she reached behind her back, pushing the supports experimentally. “Hey.”

“Yes?” Dev turned around in her seat.

“They put extra pillows in this thing?” Jess watched her pilot blush slightly. “Hm?”

“Not exactly.” Dev said. “I asked them to add a little bit of support for your back.” She admitted. “I thought you would like that.”

Jess studied her, caught between embarrassment and pleasure. “Do you have any idea how much crap I’m going to have to take for that from the rest of the agents?”

“No, I don’t.” Dev said. “I didn’t consider them when I asked.” She frowned. “Why would they care what your chair was like?”

“Hm.” Did she care if they cared? Jess wriggled a little and felt the comfort of the extra support on either side of her spine, and at the base. It felt good, and she decided she really didn’t care if they cared. “I dunno.” She said. “It’s great, thanks Dev.”

Dev smiled, and turned back around. “All systems are online and ready.” She fastened her own restraints, taking a peek at Jess in the small strip of mirror above her console. She could see the little grin on her face as she regarded the chair and she grinned herself, glad she’d asked for that small comfort.

The bio alt doing the chair, one of the craftsman BeeAre set had listened seriously to her, and done what she’d asked without question, showing her a personal level of respect that was both surprising and gratifying. It was a small thing, but she was now very glad she’d done it.

“Okay, tell them to crack open the top.” Jess said, as she leaned back in her surprisingly comfortable seat. “Let’s get this party started.”

“BR27006 to pad support, please undock umbilicals.” Dev spoke into her mic, catching sight of two bio alts ducking under the engine pod in response. She poised her fingers over the power grid, and as they unlocked the port and removed it, she activated the internal power feed and brought them online. “Internal systems green, please clear for lift.”

“Pad control, we’re clear, BR27006. Good mission.”

“Thank you, pad control.” Dev changed channels. “Central operations, BR27006 requesting flight access please.”

Jess chuckled from behind her.

Overhead, she heard the big doors start to open and a moment later, she heard the clearance come back into her ear. “BR27006 acknowledge. Lifting.” Dev spooled up the engines and engaged the bottom jets, taking them up towards the opening roof with steady confidence.

It was a rare moment of no rain. Dev took the carrier up into the clear air, and did a circle, scanning the horizon before she settled with the carrier’s nose pointed to the north. She keyed in the coordinates Jess had given her for Quebec City, and checked her consoles one more time. “Ready?”

“Go go gadget.” Jess said. “Keep your eyes out for bad guys. I may fall asleep here in my comfy chair.”

Dev smiled, and engaged the main engines, heading them off into this new adventure.

**

Cape Quebec wasn’t that far, Dev discovered. She spotted the cliff face full of lights ahead of them as her nav station beeped, and she adjusted her speed lower. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Jess agreed, putting her hand on the back of Dev’s chair and peering through the sectioned windows. “Okay we can’t valet park this bus, so you’re going to have to land on the plateau there, see the opening?”

“Yes.” Dev said. “Go down in there?”

“Yeah.” Jess returned to her seat and locked her restraints. “There’s an old stairway cut into the rock. It’s a hike, but the carrier’ll be hidden and they won’t see what direction we came from.”

It all sounded quite mysterious. Dev angled the carrier towards the cliff wall, and cut the mains, using the landing jets to gently lower the carrier past the crevice. It was all shadows and gray stone, with water drizzling off the edges and making a constant rattle and thunder past them as she found a bit of higher stone and set the vehicle down onto it. “Okay?”

“Great.” Jess stood up and hit a set of switches. “We’ll blend in here.” She started getting out of her armored suit. “Now we need to change into civs.”

Dev finished shutting down the engines and as she did, and their distinctive whine faded, she could hear the rain falling on the carrier’s roof, and the drum of the water on the ground outside.

Outside. Aside from her brief movement from the shuttle to the citadel and her visits to the ledge, this would be her first big exposure to outside, and Dev found herself a little unsettled over it. Dr. Dan had talked to her about it - about being outside under that vast, gray sky but talking about it and doing it were two very different things.

"You okay?" Jess was apparently watching her.

"Yes." Dev opened her pack and removed the blue jumpsuit, unsnapping the catches on her flight suit. "I was just wondering what it was like to be on the ground outside."

Jess paused as she fastened the neck on her civs, They were rust and gold, flashier than the ones Dev was donning. "Oh that's right. You came from outer space. I forgot."

Dev smiled as she finished fastening her suit. She picked up the jacket Bain had sent her and held it, not entirely sure what should happen next. Jess seemed to be sorting through some things so she put the jacket back down and went to the dispenser and took out a small bottle of water.

"Run an external scan, willya?" Jess asked. "Doesn't pay to take a chance."

Glad of something to do, Dev went back to her station and sat down. She opened the water and took a sip, then put the bottle in it's gimbaled holder ad activated the scan. She set the routine running, observing the results and glancing outside the carrier window to match the terrain with the scan.

It was rocky outside, and dark with clouds and rain. The carrier was settled between a half dozen large boulders and she had slid it just under a slight ledge which protected it somewhat. The area around them was clear of any life at all - only rocks and rubble were around them with some small patches of moss being the only hint of color.

"Clear?"

"Yes." Dev responded. "Nothing for 500 meters at least."

"Good." Jess finished tucking various things in her pockets. She walked over and picked up her own jacket. "Okay. Now we climb up the steps to a path I know, and that will take us to one of the outer entrances of the city. You need to stay close with me, and for now, don't talk unless you have to. We're just here to shop, we're a couple of bored techs on a day holiday from the Rocky Mountain generating center. Got it?"

"Got it." Dev rummaged in her memory for details about the generating center which she'd had some basic programming on. Science and research were done there, she knew, along with it's primary responsibility of creating and storing hydro power in massive sealed batteries.

Was it a target, she wondered. Like the facility they themselves were trying to breach?

"C'mon.". Jess shrugged into her jacket and fastened a colorful patch on the outside. She waited for Dev to mimic her then attached a similar one on her sleeve. "There. Now you work for Energine.". She patted Dev on the shoulder and went to the door. "I'm keying this so only the two of us can get back in. Anyone else tries it"ll blow a hole the size of the docking cavern."

"I see." Dev said. "This stop here - it's to obtain supplies?"

Jess hit the door release and the hatch thumped open, admitting a gust of cold, wet air. "Yeah. Some outside gear I need for the ice fields and to get current gossip. The intel we get in the citadel sometimes isn't really current - not to mention it' could be planted. I like to listen to whats going on before I do an insertion." Another mistake on her last mission. She'd let Josh talk her into skipping the recon.

She pulled her jacket hood up and fastened the neck cover then eased down the unfolded steel steps and got her boots on the wet rock before she motioned Dev forward. Though her head was well covered by the fabric the half frozen rain pelted her face and she blinked a little at the harshness of it. “Ugh.”

Dev spent a moment absorbing the experience. She could feel the half rain, half ice drops pelting the surface of the fabric encasing her, and she made a mental note to go back and thank Alexander Bain for providing the jacket to her. She lifted a hand and pulled the glove off it, feeling the sting of the rain and the chill before she put it back on. “That's interesting.”

Jess eyed her. “Not interesting enough to stay out in it. Let's go.” She circled the carrier and climbed up a small rise towards the cliff walls, pausing to turn and look back at the vehicle. “Nice.” She complimented Dev. “That new mottled skin really works.”

Now that the hatch was closed, you would be hard pressed to identify the carrier against its landscape. The outer shell had taken on the tones of the surrounding rock, blending the metal until it was almost invisible.

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “Clint was really happy with how it turned out. It's a new thing. He said it would help us hide against the clouds, too.”

“If we want to hide.” Jess turned and started away from the small ledge they'd parked on. “Quebec's a mix these days. Used to just be a supply depot, since they've got a decent harbor, but they finally dug out the cliff and fixed the roofs of all those old buildings and people drifted in from the outlands.”

“I see.” Dev was keeping up with her companions long strides with a bit of difficulty. The uneven ground was new to her, and she was having some trouble keeping her balance on it. “What do they do there?” She asked, more to keep Jess talking since she'd studied the records in comp on the place when Jess had told her they were going there.

“Fish mostly.” Jess promptly supplied. “They've got enough coastline to harvest weed, but they're big on shallow water shellfish too.” She licked her lips thoughtfully. “Be glad to introduce you to those. Since they got enough people around, they've got markets and grub too.”

Shellfish. Shell, and fish? “Do they have anything to do with that gift from Clint?” Dev hazarded.

“No.” Jess chuckled. “Well, actually.. “ She pondered. “Sort of I guess. They do get tiny crabs out of some of those shells and use em in stews. But the ones he sent, those didn't have any crabs in em. They just wash up near the base of our cliff.”

“I see.” Dev had found her balance now, and she was beginning to enjoy the tramp across the rocks. Jess was leading the way across a barren stretch of bare granite towards a wall, and already she could see even through the rain a narrow uneven set of steps cut into the face of it. It angled up the rock wall to an outcropping above and she couldn't see past that.

It seemed very desolate where they were. She couldn't hear anything besides the far off sound of the surf and the rumble of thunder over their heads and her face was starting to feel very cold where the rain was hitting it.

She blinked a little, as she followed Jess up a slope and across a long stretch of loose, crunchy sounding small rocks that led up to the base of the wall. There were big rocks all around them, and she peered upward as a scattering of tiny stones rattled off the cliff and fell around them. “Did those rocks come from up there?”

“Yeah.” Jess wound her way through them. “That's why we park here. People with sense stay far the hell away.” She pointed at a long rusted sign tacked tot he stone, a pictograph of a crudely drawn slope and what were supposed to be boulders. “It's a rock fall zone.”

“I see.” Dev regarded the wall. “So one of those could fall down right now?”

“Sure.”

“I see.”

Jess half turned and grinned at her. “Closer to the cliff you are, safer it is. Don't worry.”

“I' am not worried.” Dev kept at her heels, as they got to the base of the cliff and started up the stairs. They had been very crudely cut into the rock, and were in some places more suggestions than footholds. “If something unfortunate happens, at least I will have had lots of new experiences.”

The steps reminded her of the climbing exercises they'd done in the creche and she placed her boots with confidence, glad of her gloves as she gripped the rock edge they were climbing up. The coverings were dark gray and made of very tough fabric, thin enough for her to use her fingers well, but thick enough to keep her hands nice and warm.

It was interesting and exciting being here. She could feel all sorts of new sensations – the strain on her legs of climbing, the pelting rain, the roughness of the stone under her gloved fingertips. It

was all new, and she focused on Jess's tall form, careful to step where she did once she'd moved on.

The rock smelled, she realized. It had a flat, dense scent a little like the walls in the citadel, but different. She could also smell the rain and she experimentally stuck her tongue out, catching some of the icy droplets and tasting them.

Interesting. She saw Jess slow up and halt ahead of her, and she paused, watching her companion closely. Jess moved again after a moment, but more slowly and she took one hand off the rock and let it rest against the pocket Dev knew she had her weapon in.

She decided to remain quiet, figuring Jess didn't need any distractions if there was something dangerous occurring. They were almost up near the little ledge, and she watched Jess pause again, one hand resting on the rocks and her head cocked to one side.

After a moment, the agent untied her hood and pushed it down, exposing her head to the rain but also exposing her ears which were, interestingly to Dev, twitching visibly.

Then, after a moment of silence, Jess pulled her hood back up and continued on, climbing up over the edge of the crevice and then turning, offering Dev her hand.

Dev wasn't sure what that was about, but she reached up and clasped it, a bit surprised to find herself pulled up onto the ledge to stand next to her partner. “Thank you.”

“All quiet.” Jess released her then moved across the ledge to an uneven square hold in the side of the mountainside. She slipped inside, then activated a hand light and paused, before she continued forward. “Let's get outta the damn rain at least.”

Dev hadn't entirely minded the experience, but she found the cold a lot less inside the tunnel they were now in, and she pushed her hood back and wiped the rain off her face as she followed Jess in. “Very interesting.” She regarded the tunnel which was as crudely cut as the steps outside, taking off a glove and running her fingertips over the surface.

She could feel chisel marks on the stone. “Did you cut this wall?”

“Me?” Jess chuckled low and deep in her throat. “Hell no. They sent a team out here when Quebec started becoming a population center. Ten guys with plasma cutters. You see all that rubble at the base? That was from them. “

“I see.” Dev activated her own hand light, and examined the wall. It had interesting sparkles in it, not that different from the walls in the citadel. The floor was as uneven as the walls, and she focused the light there, avoiding the unexpected angular cracks and bumps as they walked along.

It was out of the wind here too, and warmer because of it. Dev ran her hand through her hair and noticed Jess was having to duck a little as she walked. “Is it a long way in here?”

“No.” Jess said. “Couple more minutes.”

And in a couple more minutes, in fact, they were moving from the narrow tunnel and squeezing through a crack in the rock so narrow Jess had to take off her coat to fit through, and Dev almost did. Then they were in a more regular hallway, with smooth walls, evenly spaced low lights and a faint look of dusty disuse.

“Emergency tunnel.” Jess shrugged back into her jacket and fastened it. “Place for them to run to.” She closed her hand light and stuck it in her pocket as she lead the way up a gently sloping floor. “Minute or so, and we'll be in the lower levels. “

“Okay.” Dev caught up and walked along at her side.

“Whatever you see, just keep your mouth shut.” Jess said. “It could be weird for you. There'll be other bio alts here, but it's not like in the citadel.”

Now, what did that mean? “Okay.” Dev agreed anyway. She saw Jess raise a hand a little, and she slowed, keeping behind her partner as the hallway they were in ended in a big, square opening and a murmur of sound reached her. They crossed another wide hallway that led off into dusty silence in both directions and then they were moving through a wide arched opening into a cavern filled with people.

Jess moderated her pace, turning her purposeful walk into a more casual stroll, sticking her hands in her jacket pockets and letting her head turn from side to side.

Dev copied her, glad she had a chance to absorb what she was seeing. Unlike the uniformity she was used to in both the creche and the citadel, the people and the sights were far more random here. There were people who looked like workers, but their overalls were patched and so worn and covered in dirt it was impossible to tell what color they were supposed to be.

Then there were other people, in skin tight suits carrying boxes with lights, and other people who were covered in strangely mottled garments and heavy boots.

The smell of the place was past her ability to self describe. It was a mixture of strong scents and musky tones , overlaid with the more familiar intensity of machine oil and salt she was becoming familiar with in her new home. A few people glanced at them, but then moved on, and she followed Jess along the perimeter of the space towards a set of long, shallow stairs.

They passed a pair of men with scrubbers, removing a layer of oil from the floor and Dev felt a jerk of recognition as she took in their visible collars. Effens, her memory supplied, wearing roughly finished gray coveralls with dark maroon sleeves.

They didn't look up as she and Jess went past, their eyes firmly on their task as they patiently scoured the floor. Normal, she thought, having worked with a few of that set in the creche. They received a lot of programming for cleaning – it's what they did in the creche, in fact, specialists in maintenance.

Did Jess think she would find that strange? Dev pondered the thought.

They walked up the shallow stairs, moving into a more brightly lit space that suddenly, as they emerged at the top, also became a lot louder. Dev almost stopped walking as they turned a last corner, and she was looking at the inside of a large, high roofed cavern filled with..

Well, filled with everything. “Oh.”

Jess turned and peered at her, slowing and closing the distance between them. “This is the market.” She said. “Remember, we're just techs on holiday, looking to shop.”

“Okay.” Dev followed Jess's lead and unfastened her jacket, which had started to become very warm. She left it hanging open with it's hood pushed back, and followed her partner towards the ball of chaos ahead of them. The rock walls echoed back the sounds of all the people roaming from area to area, voices raised.

After a minute, it sorted itself out and her programming kicked in, and she knew what she was looking at much to her relief. This was a center where people came to offer up things they did and products they made for sale. There were dozens of rows of little rooms, made from what looked like stones cemented together.

Each room had some people inside it, and ledges on all four sides where they had things displayed. Some rooms had lots of other people on the outside looking at the things, some had few, but there seemed no reason behind what was next to what, or why some were popular and some weren't.

And the people. Dev had never seen this many people in one place, not in the creche, and not in the citadel, including at the party. There seemed an endless sea of them all dressed in widely varied combinations of clothing, strange things on their heads and a mixture of things on their feet that completely escaped any of her programming.

She really couldn't process it all. So she stuck at Jess's side, resisting the urge to latch onto her jacket as they started moving into the market area and into the surge of human traffic. She blinked her eyes a little, finding them watering slightly from the pungent smells.

“Crazy, huh?” Jess commented, as she sidestepped two men arguing loudly.

“Yes.” Dev said, in a positive tone.

“Everyone around brings their stuff here to sell.” Jeff confirmed Dev's programming. “You can get some interesting trinkets here, see?” She detoured over to a stone house. She picked up one of the

wares, a bit of stone that had been hollowed out to leave a small dish like depression at the bottom. “You put scented oil in here, and light it. Makes a nice smell.”

Dev regarded it. Then she looked all around them, and back up at Jess, one of her pale eyebrows lifting a little. “Do they make them any larger?”

Jess grinned, and turned, finding the merchant watching them with wary politeness. “How much?” She indicated the trinket.

“Quarter credit, citizen.” The man replied promptly. “Third if you buy two.”

Jess dug in her pocket, pulling out a handful of something and singling out two bits of it to drop on the table. “Here.” She picked up a second and handed it to Dev. “Keepsake.”

The merchant snapped up the glittering bits on the table and gave her a look of much greater respect. “Citizens.” He inclined his head in their direction. “Good market to you.”

Dev regarded the item with some bemusement.

“We can try it out later.” Jess winked at the merchant, then she bumped Dev with her shoulder and led the way further into the melee. “Most of the stuff is pretty useless.” She confided to Dev. “These guys just hope to pick up a credit or two to add to their allotment, maybe afford a bottle of grog once in a while.”

“What did you give him?” Dev asked curiously.

“Ah.” Jess dug in her pocket again, then held her hand up. “Turn your hand over.”

Dev did, only to find a scattering of brightly glinting bits landing in her palm. She studied them, discovering squares of yellow metal with numbers stamped on both sides.

“In places like this.” Jess had drawn her over into a corner. “You don't have scan cards. People don't' like to identify who they are or what they're buying.”

“I see.”

“So this is hard credit. The biggest one's a full cred, then there's a half, a third and a quarter. It's gold.” Jess added. “You know what that is?”

“Yes.” Dev looked at the squares in surprise. “I never expected to see it in this form. We used it all the time on logic boards in the creche.”

“Well, here you can trade it for stuff.” Jess closed her hand over the credits. “Put em in your pocket. Spend em if you want.” She paused, and her eyes flicked over Dev's shoulder. “But not right now. C'mere.” She moved closer and put her arms around Dev, turning her back on the crowd.

Dev hastily put the handful of metal into her pocket and hesitantly returned the contact, feeling the warmth of Jess's body as she pressed against it. She had no idea at all what was going on, but the sensation was very pleasant and she was halfway wishing they could try that kissing thing again after a long moment of it.

“Hold still.” Jess's voice breathed into her ear. “Look past my arm and tell me if a tall guy with blond hair and a scar 's gone by.”

It took a very long moment for Dev to sort that out and figure out what to do about it. She peeked past Jess's elbow, and saw three men strolling by, glancing slowly around them. One was, she noted, tall and scarred. “They're behind us.” She murmured back.

She could feel Jess breathing against her, and decided it was very nice. “Now they are past us, and going away.” She said, after a few more moments. When Jess didn't answer, she looked up, to find Jess looking back at her, with an expression that actually made her heart skip.

It skipped! Dev's eyes widened. What an incredibly odd sensation.

Then Jess sighed and released her. “Okay.” She took a step back and turned cautiously, watching the men's backs as they retreated. “I don't' think they saw me.” She eased out into the stream of people again. “Let's stay behind them, just in case.”

Dev's whole body was tingling, and she really didn't much care about the men. However, she followed along obediently. “Who were they?”

Jess chuckled without any real humor. “The bad guys.” She said. “Very interesting they ended up here, huh?”

“Very interesting.” Dev said, not entirely referring to the men. “Very interesting indeed.”

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They lost sight of the men in the crowd a little while later. With so many people and so many distractions it wasn't that out of the question, but Jess was still annoyed with herself that she let them get away. “Damn it.”

Dev waited quietly nearby, as her partner quartered around four of the rooms there, letting her own eyes gently move from face to face as the crowd moved past her.

“Hey kid.”

It did not occur to Dev that someone was addressing her, until she felt a tug on her sleeve. She looked quickly to her right, to find a stocky man with thick silver hair next to her. “Yes?” She decided no response was probably more dangerous than following Jess's strict order to not speak.

His eyes were dark, and shrewd. “That coat ain't worth nothing. C'mere, lemme show you what I got.” He pointed to his little room, which had garments hanging everywhere around it.

Dev scanned the surrounding crowd, finding Jess at the next little room over, picking through some hats while she carefully watched the passers by. Since her partner was so close, she decided it would be all right to look at the garments, and therefore she followed the man over and listened to his pitch.

She knew what a pitch was. Her programming had given her enough background on the cities to get by with, and Dev herself wasn't nearly as naive as she apparently appeared. There had been little markets in the creche, in fact, when they'd gotten a chance to get a few rare treats and she understood the concept even of bargaining.

This did not seem really the place to engage in that though. Dev studied the clothing, and reached up to touch a piece of it, a jacket made from a smooth, tough substance.

“Ah, like that one huh? Didn't figure you for shark though.” The man came over and lifted it down. “Nice hide.”

Shark. Dev glanced over at Jess, who was deep in discussion with the other vendor. With a faint shrug, she took off her issue jacket and tried on this other one, finding it surprisingly comfortable. Shark was a fish, she recalled. It felt very strange to be wearing the skin of an animal, but it felt a bit like heavy fabric and it didn't smell like fish.

“Looks good on you, kid.” The man said, watching her shrewdly. “Where ya from?”

Dev removed the jacket and donned her own. “How much cred is this?” She asked, deducing this would distract him from asking her more questions.

“Two cred.” The man said. “Don't' bother trying to bargain with me, kid. I can see how wet behind the ears you are.”

“All right, I won't.” Dev handed him back the coat. “Excuse me.”

“Wait.” The man looked very surprised. “Hold on, you don't want it?”

“Not for that amount.” Dev started to move off, angling her steps to end her up in the same room as Jess was. She could see the taller woman was concluding whatever her business was, and Dev wanted to be close by so they could move off to their next thing. Whatever that was.

“Wait, a cred and a half.” The man scurried after her. “C'mon, kid. You know you want it.”

Dev turned and faced him. “I have a one cred piece. If you would like that in exchange, that would be good. If not, then I have to be moving on.”

“Nah it's worth more than that.” He shook his head.

“All right, good bye then.” Dev turned and started walking again, seeing Jess putting something in a sack.

“Okay okay.” The man got in front of her again, holding the jacket out. “One cred.”

The motion caught Jess's eye, and Dev saw her wheel around and start towards them. “Okay.” She dug one of the bits of metal from her pocket and inspected it, then took the jacket from him and handed it over. “Thank you.”

“Highway robber.” The man grumbled, looking at the bit. “Why I should...”

“You should what, Roderick?” Jess had reached them and now she leaned her elbow on Dev's shoulder. “Are you giving my friend a hard time?”

Dev watched his face in fascination as it turned dead white under his beard and he backed away from them with some of the same look of fear as Clint had. “Not at all, Jess.” She told her partner. “I was just making a purchase from him.”

“No harm, no foul.” The man held his hands up. “What brings you here?” He asked, looking around quickly. “Haven't' seen you in a while.”

“Let's go have a cup of kack and we can talk about it.” Jess moved forward, forcing him to retreat. “I had you on my list of people to chat with anyway.” She casually looked around. “Business looks slow right now.'

Roderick nodded briefly and turned, leading the way back into his room. “Digger, keep a look on the store.” He told a younger man standing there. “Me and the ladies have business.”

Digger smirked. “Sure.” He folded his arms over his faded and patched overalls and watched them go. “No problem.”

They followed the merchant into the back of the small room, then down an unexpected set of iron rail lined stairs that went down in a spiral under the floor. The sound from the market dimmed and then cut off, as they reached the bottom, and were inside a cramped, spare dwelling with a low ceiling and rough stone floors.

It was well used, and long lived in. There were shelves made from stones and old boards, and two corridors led off towards the back that were curtained off with carefully opened and cleaned sacks.

Roderick led them into a square common space with a table and four chairs. “Didn't know the kid was a friend of yours, Jess.” He pulled a chair back and sat down, placing his elbows on the table and folding his hands.

Jess took the seat facing him. “She's my partner.” She said briefly. “Give me the scoop. What's going on here. I saw Red Dog.” She glanced at Dev, who took the seat next to her. “I don't' think he saw me.”

He nodded. “I was surprised to see you. I heard about Wellington.”

Jess shrugged.

“There's a price on you.” Roderick said, after a bit of silence. “Ten thousand credits. Gold.” He cocked his head a little. “I sent that news in to base. So I'm really really surprised to see you here. I know you've got brass ones, but that ain't smart.”

Jess's face didn't so much as twitch. “I've got a job to do.” She said. “That what the Dog's doing here? Looking for me?”

“No.” Roderick shook his head. “He and Jersey are looking for dirt on some new project on our side.” He glanced around the space. “You hear anything? Some big thing, your way?”

Jess considered the question, giving a side glance at Dev before shaking her head. “Nothing I know of. You?”

Dev's face was a study in wry innocence. “I haven't' heard of anything.” She said. “But I've only been here a few days.”

“Ah, new class. We heard they were in.” Roderick exhaled. “Well, I can say you sure pissed off a lot of people, Jess. You get the body count from that last run? Five hundred.” He eyed the agent. “Credits or not, if they catch you they're gonna splat you.”

“Five hundred for one?” Jess smiled thinly. “Guess the old man'll consider it a bargain.”

Roderick finally loosened up, chuckling a bit. “Maybe. But be careful. You get caught napping his ego won't think of it that way. You know how it is.” He shifted a bit, tapping his fingertips together. “Anyway, most of what we're hearing is the usual. Seen a few more of them sniffing round though.”

Jess nodded. Then she turned her head and regarded Dev. “What'd he scalp you for?”

Dev's brow hiked just slightly, as she gazed back at her partner.

“The jacket.” Jess pointed. “What'd it cost ya?”

“Oh.” Dev cleared her throat. “A credit.”

“Told you she chewed me down.” Roderick said. “She's a kid but not a stupid one. That's one of my best pieces she picked out.” He studied Dev “Where ya from? Waterside I'm guessing since you knew right off the skin.”

“She's a west coaster.” Jess said. “Monterey headlands. So yeah, she knows the water.” She tapped her fingers on the table. “I need some ice boots, two pair. Who has em?”

Dev folded her hands quietly, and just listened. She made a mental note to check where Monterey was when she got back to the carrier, and somewhat irrelevantly wondered if it was a nice place. She knew the stark, scattered islands on the other side of the inland sea were supposed to be striking.

She'd seen pictures of a few of them.

“I'll send Digger. Petros had about a dozen pair, not sure what's left. He'll steal every last credit of yours if you try it though, he can spot one of us easy as sneezing.” Roderick stood up. “Be right back.”

Jess waited for him to leave, then she gave Dev a little smile, and pointed at the jacket, making a come hither gesture with her fingers. Once her partner had complied, she studied the garment, her brows lifting a little at the smooth, soft texture and the finely stitched patterns on it. “Nice.” She handed it back. “Find me one next?”

“Sure.” Dev grinned. “I was actually looking for one for you as I was concluding my deal.” She added. “I think I saw one on the other side of the little house.”

“Sale stall.” Jess said. “Rod's one of our outside agents.” She added, in a very low tone. “He gets paid to just sit and sell and watch.”

Dev nodded. “I remember from the class.” She fell silent as Roderick returned, dusting his hands off as he entered.

“All right, that's set but I gotta go back up stairs. People'll rob me blind otherwise, and we've got Festival coming. My wife wants a few things... can't afford to lose my stock.”

Jess and Dev stood up. “How's Karyn?” Jess asked. “She still working upstairs?”

“Got in with Maersk.” Roderick led them back to the stairs and started up them. “Got us a better slot after Festival, be something moving out of this place.”

“Nice.” Jess glanced around her as she climbed up the steps. “Maersk, huh? Maybe you'll end up riding one of their super c's. Bet the quarters are nicer than these are.”

Roderick chuckled dryly. “We all got our place.” He emerged into the store and looked around in a studied, casual way before he moved away from the top of the steps and let Jess come up after him. “So there ya are. See? I made a right bargain.” He added loudly, a truculent note now back in his tone.

Jess strolled through the store, examining the wares. “Yah, well, we'll see.” She eased between the hanging garments, pausing between two racks to study the crowd. She was aware, suddenly, of a presence at her back, but after the first jolt she realized it was Dev, standing quietly behind her.

Very quietly. Jess looked over her shoulder, slightly amazed at the way her new partner blending into her surroundings, standing just so between the haphazardly hung clothing, only her pale eyes moving.

A sudden commotion distracted both of them, and Jess swiveled to face the sound, her hand dropping to her jacket pocket as her body stiffened in reaction. Ahead of them, in the open lane between the stall they were in and the one across, two men had grabbed a third, a tall lanky figure with, she realized, a bio alt collar.

“I told you not to touch me you freak!” One of the men yelled.

The bio alt hunched his shoulders, and remained silent, holding his hands up in surrender. “Sir, didn't mean to bump you.”

“You did it on purpose!” The man shoved him against the wall. “Probably going after my credits, huh freak?” He lifted a hand and balled it into a fist. “Were you?”

The bio alt cringed. “No sir.” He said. “I was just walking. I tripped.”

“Freak.” The man shoved him again, then walked off, shaking his head. “C'mon. Stinks around here. Place is full of these freaks these days.”

The merchant across the way came out of his stall. “Get out of here.” He yelled at the bio alt. “People'll think you belong to me. Move along!”

The bio alt moved away from the wall and hurried away, keeping his head down and by a jog in his stride, missing the kick aimed his way by the irate man. As he passed them he furtively looked their way, jerking his eyes back forward when they met Jess's.

Jess waited a moment, then she turned. Dev was still standing behind her, still with a mild, untroubled look on her face, still completely silent. “It's like that here.”

Dev tilted her head slightly. “Like what?”

“What they did.” Jess said. “A lot of people who don't have bios don't like them.”

“I see.” Dev pondered the scene. She saw the man from across the path come over and talk to Roderick, who half shrugged, and lifted his hands in a resigned gesture. “They don't like them, why?”

Jess exhaled. She was saved from an immediate answer by Roderick coming over to them.

“Ladies, you see anything else you want?” He asked, swinging around the shelves and pausing with his hand on one of the racks. “Day's not getting any younger and neither am I.”

“What was that all about?” Jess asked, jerking her head towards the spot where the altercation had taken place.

“What?” Roderick frowned. “Oh you mean those guys?” He shrugged. “Usual crap. More of the hooty boys are getting the jelly bag brains and the city's started to put them to work places. Got a lot of old timers who don't like it.” He added. “But those guys? They're just a bad fight looking for a place to happen. Wasn't the bio, it woulda been Digger coming back with the boots.”

Jess stole a glance at Dev, surprised to find that same mild look on her face. “What do you think?” She found herself asking, her brain momentarily forgetting where she was. She held her breath for a second, wondering what her bio alt partner was going to say about that.

Could almost be anything. She hadn't really dialed in on Dev yet.

“What do I think?” Dev repeated. “I think that one right there would fit you.” She pointed at a long coat hanging behind Jess against the wall. “And it matches your eyes.”

Roderick chuckled low and deep in his throat He removed the jacket and took the hanger out, tossing it over to Jess. “Your friend's got some smarts, Jess. Didn't know they were sending them out of school with that these days.”

Jess accepted the diversion, shrugging off her jacket and slipping the new one on. She twitched the shoulders straight and found the sleeves long enough for her long arms. “Huh.” She fastened it, then turned, raising her arms and holding her hands out. “Not bad.”

The coat was actually quite attractive, Dev thought. It was far less bulky than the one they were issued, and the cut of it was flattering to Jess's tall figure. It was made of something like the same thing the one she'd bought was, and she thought Jess was pleased with it. “It's very nice.”

“All right.” Jess exchanged coats again. “What are you going to get out of me for it?” She asked Roderick. “You robber baron you.”

Roderick chuckled and held a hand up, looking casually all around him before he spoke “I'll bill the old man.” He said. “Digger'll drop the rest of it over with Jonton. I assume you're going to go eat there?”

Jess smiled.

“Robber baron? You call me that?” Roderick bawled. “Take it! Get out of here you wanton hussies!” He started forward, waving the hanger the coat had been hanging on. “Get out! Get out! Before I call the guard!”

“Watch it old man!” Jess yelled back. “Take your threats and shove em! Let's go, Dev.” She turned and walked out of the store, heading sharp right and then taking a left as she cleared the next stall over. She paused and got behind a column, leaning against it and looking at the sleeve of the jacket with complete absorption.

Dev stuck right with her, finding something in the booth to look at as Jess watched what was going on them intently. It was all extremely strange, and she wasn't comfortable at all with what was going on, but she examined the little pouches on display in front of her and kept herself relatively out of view.

“Okay.” Jess finally said, turning and putting a hand on her shoulder. “Good job, Dev.” She said, in a very low voice. “I know it's crazy here, but you're doing a great.”

Dev smiled. “Thanks.” She whispered back. “It's very confusing.”

“I know.” Jess now clapped her on the back. “Let's go get something to eat. I bet you never tried hopping shrimp, now did you?”

Hopping shrimp. Dev had to admit the experience was overwhelming her programming. There were too many new experiences, and too much uncertainty for her to comfortably handle. “No.” She answered. “I know what a shrimp is. Why does it hop?”

“Ah.” Jess put a companionable arm over Dev's shoulder, and guided her along the path, towards another set of long, low steps. “Come with me, my friend. I will introduce you to my favorite meal and show you why they hop.”

“You meet the shrimp before you eat it?”

Jess chuckled. “I”ll have to take you shrimping sometime.” She said. “Maybe limpet collecting too.”

Dev eyed her.

“Maybe we can find some cockle stew.”

“I think I”m glad I brought that pack of crackers.” Dev commented mournfully. “I wouldn't know what to do with a cockle.”

Jess's sudden laughter drew stares, but they were moving up the steps before anyone could get too close a look or stop them and then they were gone, disappearing into the strident chaos of the wet market.

Behind them, a squad of bio alt cleaners tentatively emerged, looking cautiously around before they started sweeping half a day's debris from the floor

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It turned out that hopping shrimp were a lot better than they initially sounded. Dev regarded the plate in front of her, a deep blue glazed platter covered in bright orange and pink animals curled in a half circle that smelled really really good.

They had cups of something sweet and fizzy in front of them, and the shrimps, and a flat cake that was rather seaweed like but had a drier, earthier taste.

“Now.” Jess picked up a shrimp. “First you rip the head off.”

Dev watched her with some bemusement. They were seated in a small alcove at the back of the eating place, amongst a few small alcoves that were tucked away out of sight, with a light gauze curtain around them and artfully placed strong lights on the curtains that made it impossible for anyone to see in, but for them to easily see out.

The man in charge of it had known Jess by sight and had seemed to be expecting her. He'd shuffled them quickly into their little hiding place, and shortly thereafter, the plates had arrived.

“Then you suck their heads out.”

Dev jerked, coming rapidly back into focus. “You what?”

Jess applied her lips to the back of the animal's head and inhaled, making an odd whistly sucking sound. “You suck their heads out.” She repeated. “Try it.”

Obediently, Dev picked up a shrimp and twisted it's head off, turning it around and inspecting the interior before she hesitantly put it to her lips and sucked at it. A small mass of spicy goo hit her tongue, and she mouthed it, analyzing the taste before she swallowed it. It was rich and full of flavor and the spices filled her throat in a surprisingly nice way. “Oh.”

“Oh good, or oh gross?” Jess asked, in an apparent good mood.

“That's excellent.” Dev responded. “I've never had anything like that before.” She peered inside the head.

“I knew I liked you for a reason.” Jess set the head down. “Okay, now on this part, you pull the legs and the shell off, like this.” She demonstrated. “And you eat this part inside.” She watched Dev, with a complete focus and seriousness that tickled the hell out of her, strip her first shrimp naked and bite into it, chewing it with intense thoughtfulness. “Well?”

Dev swallowed, and stared intently at her plate. “Can I eat this part too?” She picked up the shell.

“No.” Jess chuckled. “It's like chewing fingernails. Just eat the inside. So you like it?”

“Yes.” Dev said, positively. “Do we ever get this where we live?” She regretfully set the shell down and picked up another animal, ripping it's head off with more confidence.

“No.” Jess sighed. “They aren't found around our shoreline, and they wont' pay to have them brought in. The idea is we're self sufficient at home.” She started in on the rest of her plate. “Damn shame. But it's one of the nice things about going outside.”

Dev got through another couple of shrimp before she started conversing again. “You asked me before about the bio alts.”

Jess glanced up quickly. “Didn't mean to.”

“What were you expecting my reaction to be to that?” Dev asked. “Did you expect me to be upset?”

Jess chewed her shrimp, then took a sip of her drink. “I don't know what I expected. Yeah, maybe.” She said. “Were you?”

Dev's eyes met hers. “They teach us to expect that.” She said mildly. “To expect natural borns to treat us poorly. To make fun of us, to be mean to us, that sort of thing.” She sucked another shrimp head, her eyes widening a bit at the odd sound it made. “We know what we are, Jess.”

Jess sat quietly a moment, watching her. “Do you?” She mused. “I don't' think you're like that guy mopping the floor over there.” She indicated a lone figure, in the distance.

“I”m exactly like him.” Dev didn't sound at all upset about it. “Except I'm a different gene set, and I have different programming.” She watched her partner. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“You're not like him.” Jess repeated. “I've been working with bios since I got out of field school. I never met any one of them that was anything like you at all.” She nibbled a bit of her flat cake. “Is that why you were so surprised when I was... um... nice.. .to you?”

“Yes because you don't have to be.” Dev said. “We know that. We just... take what we get, you know?”

Jess's face went still and serious for a moment, then she grinned a little. “Well, you got me.” She said. “And I don't buy that whole story so you'll have to deal with that.” Her eyes dropped to the table and she fiddled with a shrimp, then she looked back up to find Dev looking at her with a gentle, sweet smile on her face.

It made Jess blush. She felt uncharacteristically off balance and she she could have sworn all of a sudden her tongue felt fuzzy. “Anyway.” Her fingers pried the shrimp apart, and plucked the legs off. Then she looked back up. “Is that why you freaked out when you thought I was mad at you?”

Dev stopped in the act of sucking a head out. She put the item back down. “Yes. We never want to make our assignments mad. It means... they teach us that it means we're not doing a good job.”

“That's horsecrap.” Jess regained her equilibrium. “People sometimes just get mad.” She said. “It doesn't mean anything like that, at least not with me.” She took a swallow of her drink and glanced past the curtain, studying the passing crowd outside before she returned her attention to her table companion. “Okay?”

Dev reached over and touched her hand. “I”m very glad I got you, Jess.” She said, simply. “You're really special.”

Jess was caught in those eyes again, in the crystal clear warmth of them that made her feel shy and strangely unsure. She'd never really felt like this before and it confused her, a little.

Excited her, a little. Definitely it was distracting her more than a little and she almost missed the subtle shift in the lighting and the sound of approaching footsteps until it all penetrated her senses and she shifted, jerking her head towards the curtain. “Police. Just keep cool.”

Dev went back to quietly ingesting her shrimp, producing a mild look of inquiry when the curtain was jerked back, and revealed two men standing there in black suits with shiny black chest plates and helmets.

“ID.” The one in front said, extending his hand.

Jess produced hers and handed it over, and a moment later, Dev did the same.

The policeman flicked a scanner over both sets, and studied the results, then handed them back. “What's your business here?”

“Lunch and shopping.” Jess said, casually. She held up the neatly tied bundle that she'd made of her jacket, and pointed at the plates.

The man studied her, then studied Dev, who looked back at him with interest.

“Ladies.” The man gave them a half wave and moved away. “Enjoy your day.”

They went on to the next little alcove, and the curtain swung closed again, obscuring them. Jess waited for them to engage with their neighbors, before she removed a small box from her pocket and keyed it, directing it after the police and tapping a few entries.

Dev heard a very high pitched, very soft whine, and she watched with curiosity as Jess reviewed the results then put the box back into her pocket. “Is that a usual interview?”

“What, the cops?” Jess glanced after them, a faintly disapproving look on her face. “Eh. Looking for non citizens to bust. They attract em here, since the weather's such crap. They round them up and toss them back out into the scrub or ship em off to the edge to let them go forage there.”

Dev looked a bit confused. She picked up one of her few remaining shrimp and worked at it. “What is a non citizen?”

“Well.” Jess seemed glad of the distraction. “You get tested, right? Kids do, like I did. Either you get aptituded to a training school, or you test for brains, or some skill, or you don't” She took a

long swallow of her drink. “Those that don't can't get citizen status. They get tossed into the outlands, and have to fend for themselves.”

Dev blinked. “That's very interesting.”

“If you can do something, you get cit status. Or.. “ She lifted a hand. “If your family is in service, like mine is, then everyone gets automatic cit status, and a minimum level job somewhere. Reward, I guess.” She picked up her last shrimp, looking regretfully at the plate. “But the non cits try to sneak in anywhere they can, and beg or steal what they can to live off of. You get real tired of scraping lichen to eat and catching water bugs after a while.”

Dev tried to imagine that. It was hard for her to fathom, because in the creche everyone had their purpose, after all, they were made to be useful, weren't they? No one was left out, even if there was an 'out', there was always work, and a function for everyone and they were taken care of, fed, and housed as the valuable resources they knew themselves to be.

“I was glad, when I tested in.” Jess commented. “I didn't want to spend my life hauling nets, or supervising a power station at the waterline.”

Dev only just kept herself from reaching out to touch Jess's hand again. “But you do something very difficult.”

“I do... we do.” Jess smiled at her. “But on the flip side, we live in nice digs, and have creds to spend, and eat well. It's worth it.”

Dev looked at her identification, studying the picture, and the name, and the pretty, embossed emblem with a number that marked her as a citizen.

Interesting.

Except she wasn't. She wasn't even a non citizen. Beneath the neck on the rich blue jumpsuit she was wearing she had the same traced collar as the man she could just barely see washing the floor and she knew a moment of deep, disturbing confusion because she wasn't entirely sure of how she should feel about it all.

She was different. She was bio alt. She was hatched and raised in the creche to serve her assignment.

And yet. She looked up at Jess, who was busily pulling the legs off a shrimp. As if sensing the attention, Jess glanced up and met her eyes, tilting her head a little in question.

And yet.

More footsteps approached, and Jess grew wary, her body stiffening up and her balance shifting even in her seat so it was over the balls of her feet. “If I tell you to duck, you duck.” She reached out and picked up her glass, casually looking to her right as the curtain stirred and drew aside.

“Ah.” She grunted. “It's you.” She relaxed perceptibly.

“It's me, myself.” A short, dark haired and bearded man with a thickly muscled body sidled up to the table. “A gift for you, princess.” He put a bundle on the padded bench seat next to where Jess was sitting. “And who is your very pretty friend?” He waggled his bushy, thick eyebrows at Dev. “Much improvement over your last one, yes?”

Jess snorted slightly. “This is Dev.” She said. “Dev, this is Jonton, more commonly known as the Pirate of Quebec.” She gave the man a wry look. “Jonton's something of an old family friend, and this is his place as you probably guessed by the fact his name's on the sign outside.”

“Hello.” Dev responded. “It's very nice to meet you.”

The man smiled, showing a mouthful of teeth that were curiously decorated with tiny engravings. “It is my pleasure, Miss Dev.” He bowed. “Any friend of my old family friend here, is a friend of mine.” He turned back to Jess. “A very great improvement over this last one for sure.”

“Definitely” Jess agreed. “Smarter, has a lot more common sense, a better bus driver and much cuter on top of it.” She winked at Dev. “I got damn lucky.”

“So I hear.” Jonton leaned against the table. “Especially what I have heard lately of your luck.” He lowered his voice, touching her arm. “I am pleased to see you here in good health.”

Jess grinned briefly. “Thanks.” She touched the package. “This the boots? I'm glad they're done. I need to get clear of here. Too many eyes around.”

“It is. May you have good wearing of them.” He bowed again. “Till next time, princess! And again, so nice to meet you, Miss Dev.” He stepped back and then ducked out of the way, leaving the curtains to slowly swing back closed again.

They were both quiet for a moment. Then Dev gently cleared her throat. “What exactly is a pirate?”

Jess chuckled. “I'll tell you later, when we're back on the bus.” She studied her plate to make sure she'd consumed everything on it. “We need to get out of here before someone spots me and starts trouble.” She looked up at Dev. “You done?”

“Well, since you said not to eat the shells, I suppose I am.” Dev gazed mournfully at her plate. “They were excellent. Thank you very much for bringing me here.”

“It was my pleasure, Dev.” Jess said, her voice taking on a gentle tone. “I remember my first time in this place. My father brought me here after I graduated basic school. I thought the city was the coolest place on earth.” She tucked the jacket she'd gotten under her arm, and picked up the boots.

“May I take that?” Dev offered, pointing at the boots. “My jacket's smaller.”

“Your every thing's smaller.” Jess handed the bundle over and they slid out from behind the table, pausing to let Jess study the outside space before she stepped through the curtain and held it for Dev. “To the left there, and down that ramp.”

Dev went as directed, and they slipped out of the wet market and started downward. Jontons place had been on the edge of the market, which was now becoming quiet as the merchants started packing up for the day. The market area was high ceilinged, and the sounds echoed, to the counterpoint of thunder rolling overhead.

Dev could smell the dampness, and the salt and fish tinged smell in the air as they edged past two men maneuvering a cart full of fish down the ramp beside them. She stuck close to Jess's side as they passed from the light of the cavern into the darkness of the tunnels, and after a few minutes walk, Jess paused to fasten her jacket.

So Dev did too. She put her bundles down and got herself sealed up, then picked the packages back up as Jess moved on. Neither of them spoke, and Dev could see the tension in her companions face as she scanned and rescanned the area.

It felt a little dangerous They walked to the base of the ramp and then Jess turned right and angled over across traffic to a side corridor that led to a set of stone steps. A group of bio alts came past them, easing to one side of the steps to get out of their way.

Dev recognized the set, but dimly, from much earlier memories when groups of bio alts would be loaded on shuttles, all of them happy, waving as they left to what they were sure would be good assignments.

They didn't look very happy now. Dev met the eyes of one of them, and he looked quickly away, hunching his shoulders. A Geebee, she remembered, but this one and his mates had scars on their faces, and threadbare coveralls – and one was missing fingers.

Dev exhaled a little, as she followed Jess down the steps and along the right hand side of a busy tunnel, now mostly workers were passing them, citizens in gray and green jumpsuits and men driving small electric cars. The two of them were mostly ignored, getting only brief, dismissed looks as they made their way downward.

“Here.” Jess pointed at a dark offshoot tunnel. She ducked inside and then her hand light appeared to light the way, as they went down another set of steps, these crooked and then under a crumbling arch, to another set of steps – these heading up.

Abruptly all the sound cut off, and as they climbed, Dev could hear a soft roaring sound. “Is that the sea?”

“Yes.” Jess was one step up from her, and she moved steadily upward. “And some rain. I can smell it.”

Dev sniffed, but there were so many smells around it was hard to tell which one Jess was talking about. She could smell a metallic, not quite pleasant tang coming from the rock they were walking over, and a tinny, dry smell she didn't recognize.

Far off, she caught a bit of what she thought was the ocean, that wash of salt and brine she remembered from the little outside balcony Jess had taken her to. The steps were getting narrower, and she shifted the package to her right hand, letting her left one rest against the wall.

The surface was interesting. It felt rough and cold against her skin, and a bit moist. It was irregular, and when she looked down, the steps were too.

They turned a corner and started up a more steep set of stairs, and now Dev could feel fresh air coming in and blowing against her face. She could hear the thunder, and was aware of a rich, wet smell. “Is that the rain?”

“Yeah, put your hood up.” Jess got hers fastened just as they reached a landing and were faced with a small opening.

Dev fastened the snaps on her hood and followed Jess out into a fierce downpour that pelted hard against her body and nearly knocked her backwards. She steadied herself against the rock face and blinked hard as water filled her eyes. “Wow.”

Jess turned and gripped her sleeve. “Careful. It's steep here.” She slowly worked her way down the rough cut steps they'd climbed up earlier, pressing herself hard against the cliff surface. It occurred to her that staying in the city might have been a wiser choice, but she'd started getting that itch between her shoulder blades and the last thing she wanted was a firefight in the middle of Quebec.

Probably end up with all of them in jail, those that didn't end up dead.

The storm suddenly cracked and thundered right over head, and with a yelp, she ducked as a landslide of sharp stones came cascading down on top of them. “C'mon!”

Dev scampered down after her, feeling sliding under her boots and an unsteadiness in her balance as the rock seemed to shiver under her. She half slid the last part to the bottom, then she joined Jess in a full out bolt for the carrier as a heavy rumble warned them of trouble coming down.

Rocks started to bounce past her, and she felt an impact on her back as they got to the bottom of the slope and then ran across the boulder strewn area in front of where they'd left the bus.

Jess looked behind her, and her eyes went wide. “Oh crap! Dev! Move it! Get to the bus!!! Move!!!”

Dev didn't bother looking. She bolted past her companion and triggered the hatch, ducking inside as Jess caught up to her and heading for her seat as a sound started coming around them that was louder than anything she'd heard in her life.

She heard the hatch seal behind her and got her harness in place as she was already reaching out to start up the engines and get the power systems up, her hands moving in programming boosted speed and precision she didn't have the luxury to think about.

“Better boost! We're gonna get creamed!” Jess bellowed, thumping into her own seat. “Or there isn't gonna be enough of this damn thing for Clint to.. ugh!”

“Hold on!” Dev didn't hesitate an instant. She kicked the landing jets in full force as soon as they spooled and took the carrier straight up for just long enough to clear the boulders before she cut in the mains, boosting clear of the ground as she heard the bump and clang of rocks hitting the outside of the hull.

No time even to put her headset on. She got away from the cliff at full speed for a minute, then she cut in the rear scan and the screens came alive with the sight of the entire face of the cliff sliding down and collapsing in a destructive rush that blasted over the tiny plateau they'd been parked on minutes before.

“Holy shit.” Jess stared at the screen.

Another crack of thunder and a blast of lightning rocked the carrier. Dev instinctively ducked and flinched as the forward screens whited out, then she adjusted the tint and cut in comp “We're getting weather warnings.” She said. “Too much interference.”

“Find a place to put her down.” Jess directed. “No one'll be out watching now anyway. Stupid god damned storms.” She pushed her hood back and raked the wet hair out of her eyes, as the carrier rocked back and forth between blasts of lightning.

Dev set up comp and searched the map ahead of them, spotting an overhang on the other side of the small valley they were currently coursing through. The carrier flashed over bare rock and dark pools of rain, the coated front window giving her a clear view of the sheets of water slamming against the carrier with intimidating force.

“Get her down.” Jess warned, as they both felt the engines hesitate.

Dev did, aiming for the overhang and slamming the landing jets on just as the mains cut out and they dropped hard. Lightning was striking all around them, multiple bolts coming on either side as she got the vehicle under the ledge and cut power just before a bolt hit them full on, making the power blank out completely for a few long seconds.

Then the batts came on and they were safe, the landing feet leveling the carrier as the storm came on in earnest. For a few minutes, the rumble and thump almost deafened them, but after that it steadied down to a dull roar and they both let out a breath of relief at the same time.

“I'll tell ya, Dev.” Jess let her body relax against her seat. “You really are worth your weight in gold credits.”

Dev turned her seat around, glancing down at herself, before she regarded her partner. “I think it's possible I might have to cash that in if I keep almost wrecking this transport.” She gave Jess a wry look. “Clint is going to be very disturbed.”

Jess started unzipping her jacket. “Probably.” She said. “But we made it. Now we just have to wait out the storm and then head off to North Station.” She stood up and hung her jacket on one of the hooks near the drop pack. “And hope no one's stupid enough to try and follow us in this.”

Dev undid her restraints and stood, getting out of her jacket as well. She hung it up next to Jess's and riffled her damp hair out. “So now we just wait?”

“Now we just wait.” Jess leaned against the drop suit, a faint smile appearing on her lips. “Of course, this could be the moment I tell you to take your clothes off.”

Dev met her eyes, and smiled. “Because we can wear our uniforms in the North place?”

“Well.” Jess pushed off from the suit and started unfastening the wrist catches on her jumpsuit “That too.”

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The storm was overwhelmingly violent. Dev had perched herself on the small ledge behind the drop suit with her back against the dispenser half hidden behind it. Overhead, she could hear the almost continual rumble of thunder, and the lightning strikes were going on around them in an eye blinking barrage of cracks and blasts.

She and Jess were in their gray under suits, the environmental systems in the carrier working well enough to keep the icy chill of the wind and weather from impacting them. It was comfortable and relaxed, Dev was reading a few pages of her book while Jess fiddled with one of the big blaster rifles.

She had halfway wanted Jess to tell her to take her clothes off. For a moment, she'd thought her partner was, but the fury of the storm had distracted both of them and Jess had seemed to turn a bit shy, her face twisting up into a wry grin as she folded her city suit and put it away.

That was all right, Dev decided. There was always time later to investigate the idea.

After a few minutes Jess set the rifle back into it's clamps and stood up, walking over and taking a seat next to her on the ledge. “Crazy outside, huh?” She braced her hands on the edge of the flat surface, her shoulder just brushing Dev's.

And then again, she'd been told there was no time like the present to do things. Dev peered at the big wraparound windows around her seat, which were solid gray with rain hitting them, only intermittently showing the blasts of lightning. “I've never seen anything like this, so yes, I believe it is.” She was glad to have the solid wall of the carrier behind her, instead of the glass.

Jess hitched herself back and leaned against the wall, folding her hands and letting them rest on her thighs. “Thats right, no storms in space.”

“Well.” Dev put her book down. “We do have storms, just not water ones.” She said. “We have sun storms and asteroid storms, and they're both pretty dangerous. I remember one of the asteroid ones when I was little that was so bad it knocked out power and grav.”

“Huh.”

“It was scary. We were all in class when it happened.” Dev went on. “All of a sudden we heard a loud noise, then it went dark, then we were all floating.”

Jess tried to imagine that, and really couldn't. “Wow.”

“It was really disconcerting.” Dev agreed. “Even the proctors were scared. You do go through training for emergencies but you don't expect one like that.”

Jess considered that in silence. “Space is kinda creepy.”

“It sometimes is.” Dev nodded. “Especially when they show you what explosive decompression does. No one makes airlock jokes after that.” She pulled her legs up crossed and leaned on them. “That's what they do to people who die upside.”

Jess made a face.

“Well, it's either that or put them in the solar furnace and you know, I think I'd prefer the spacing.” Dev remarked mildly. “I remember in basics class they told us in the long ago past they used to bury bodies in the ground. That sounded pretty crazy.”

“It was.” Jess admitted. “I guess we don't do any better, processing bodies and just dispersing them into the sea.” She said. “Gotta do something with all the mass, I guess and I always though it was sorta comforting to know you'd at least give a fish a meal.”

“I see.” Dev thought about that. “This is quite an unpleasant subject.” She said, finally. “Can you talk about fish instead? They live in the ocean?”

Jess chuckled wryly. “They do. They're the only thing that survived, after it all went bad. They learned to live on the venting algae, and we learned to live on them. That, and we learned to harvest the sea, to use the waves and the tides and the wind for power, and subsist on a lot less than we used to.”

Dev nodded. “I learned that in class too.” She said. “Except at the creche we used solar power for everything. They took us when we were kids up to the processing center to see the arrays. They were so pretty, all shining, and moving to follow the sun.”

Jess studied her hands. “I'd like to see the sun.” She remarked. “Maybe you could show me around up there someday.”

Dev made a picture in her head of that. She realized with some internal embarrassment that while she'd love to show Jess the sun, she wasn't really happy about considering going back to the creche. She tried to imagine returning to her life of classes and sleep pods, and felt an intense sense of discomfort over it.

It was a strange feeling.

“Except I'm pretty sure you don't want to go back there.” Jess said after a few moments of silence. “Do ya?”

Dev smiled, and glanced at her. “No.” She admitted. “I was just thinking about that.” She shifted a little, to face Jess. “I don't' want to go back there. I like it here much better.” She looked at her partner, watching the interesting shadows the overhead lights were casting on her profile.

They made her a little mysterious looking. There were sharp planes to her face that seemed stark in the half lighting.

Jess reached over and gently touched the exposed collar on Dev's neck. “Do they ever take these off?”

Dev could feel that touch, and she swallowed the faint lump in her throat from it. “What do you mean?”

Jess ran her thumb over the metal, and felt the thin, flexible edge. “You said it was for programming. So when they're done with that, do they take them off? When you don't need it anymore?”

Dev remained absolutely still for a moment. “No.” She said, resisting the urge to move away from her partner's hand. “Because the other reason we have them is so they can put us down if they need to.”

Jess sat up and moved closer. “What?” She said, a sharp note in her voice. “What do you mean, put you down?”

The bio alt shrugged slightly. “Sometimes things happen. I mean, we are humans, after all. Even bio alts can end up doing bad things and like any other human they can get dangerous.” She put her hand out and touched Jess's knee. “Its like those gates in the citadel, isn't' it? That's to stop people when they do bad things.”

Jess exhaled. “Yes.” She admitted. “It doesn't happen often, but it has happened, when someone just went nuts or.. “ She shrugged. “I mean, we are dangerous.” She indicated herself. “I am. Any of the agents are. Hell, you saw what Bain did.”

“So, it's the same for us.” Dev said. “They put a code into a system, and it tells the programming interface to send a signal up into our brains and makes us.. well, it makes your heart stop.” She said. “And your breathing.” She watched Jess's face, seeing the emotion and tension cross it. “And trying to take it off would do the same thing.” She finished quietly.

Jess shifted her fingers from the collar down to Dev's shoulder. “That's why you don't like anyone touching it.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “But I don't mind if you do.”

“Why?”

“I trust you.”

Jess looked at her. “Well, NM-Dev-1, I'm sure glad you told me about that damn thing before I tried to get it off you.” She patted Dev's cheek. “I”ll keep my paws off it though. I don't want to freak you out.”

“You won't.”

“I won't?”

“No.” Dev reached up to touch Jess's hand. “I like when you touch me. It feels good.”

Jess felt a curious sensation steal over her and the sound of the storm outside faded as she focused on those pale, gentle eyes facing her. “I'm glad. Feels good to me too.” She murmured, letting her hand lay flat against Dev's cheek and feeling the shift under her fingertips as the bio alt smiled in response.

It did feel good. Seeing that smile felt good, and she felt herself smiling back, her skin feeling warm and sensitized as Dev's thumb gently stroked the back of her hand. “Yeah, I like that.” She stroked Dev's cheek. “Glad you do too.”

Dev's eyes were twinkling a little. “Oh, I do.”

What next? Jess felt a little short of breath. “Um... Want to try that kissing thing again?” She suggested hopefully, seeing the instant interest in the pale eyes watching her.

“Yes.” Dev responded positively. “I really would.”

It was crazy and insane and there was the storm and... Jess leaned over and tilted her head and their lips brushed. And who cared? She made a more solid contact and it grew into something sweet and familiar and she felt herself losing her balance and the next thing she knew they were

tumbling together against the back wall of the carrier. “Oof.” She grunted, as her head hit the metal surface. “Ouch.”

Dev chuckled softly, and righted herself. “That was interesting.” She said, clearing her throat a little. “A bit easier in the water I think.” She shifted a little and laid down on her back, folding her hands over her stomach. “I do like it though.”

Jess slowly straightened, rolling onto her side and extending her legs out. It put her right next to Dev and she propped her head up on her hand and put her other one on Dev's arm. “Me too. C'mere.”

Dev rolled over to face her and they kissed again, this time in a somewhat safer position. She felt the good feeling start up again, and she touched Jess's face, feeling a little heat under her fingertips as Jess's hand came to rest on her hip. When they paused, she was short of breath and so was Jess, and they looked at each other at close distance.

Jess reached up and traced one of her cheekbones. “Ever done this before?”

Dev shook her head.

“They teach you about sex upstairs?”

Dev half shrugged. “They showed us a vid in health class.” She said. “It wasn't anything like this.” She said, quietly. “And they didn't say anything about what it would feel like.” She felt her heartbeat start to settle. “Maybe they should have.” She added, almost as an afterthought.

“Maybe.” Jess smiled a little. “Does it bother you?”

Dev sat there quietly for a little while, thinking about the question. “I don't think so.” She finally said. “I like how it feels. I just didn't expect it.”

“Expect... kissing? Or that you and I would .. or..” Jess fished a little. “We do this sometimes.” She added. “Ops teams, I mean. With each other.”

“That's what Doctor Dan said.” The bio alt said. “I asked him after we did it the first time and he told me that sometimes it happened, and about how it wasn't okay with us but that it was okay for me because I was doing this job.” She studied Jess thoughtfully. “But even if he hadn't said that I would still want to do it.” She admitted, with an almost bashful look.

Jess looked at her in some mild fascination. “Even if it was... what do you call it, incorrect?”

“Yes.” Dev smiled. “I told you that you were really attractive.” She said. “You really are, to me.”

Jess felt herself grin. “Likewise.” She admitted.

“So I would have broken that rule anyway.” Dev said. “Even if I'd known about it before.”

“Ahhh.... I knew I liked you.” Her partner's eyes twinkled gravely. “They call me a rogue, y'know. I don't always play by the rules, and that gets me in trouble sometimes.” She traced one of Dev's eyebrows. “I knew about the rule regarding bio alts.” She said. “but I had no intention of obeying it with you.”

Dev's head tilted a little. 'Really?”

“Unless you had a problem with it.” Jess concluded. “And I don't think you do.” She glanced up as the thunder overhead calmed, and the lightning strikes started to taper off. “We can talk about it when we get back to base. It's more comfortable in bed anyway.”

They both sat up and then regarded each other. Then Dev hopped off the ledge and shook herself a little, reaching for her flight suit and taking it down off the hook.

Jess reached around her, and then, unexpectedly, ducked her head and gave Dev another kiss. Then she took her own suit and winked, backing up and shaking the suit out in preparation to donning it. 'I'm glad you're okay with this. It's been a while for me... Joshua wasn't into girls.”

Dev felt quite flushed. It was an interesting feeling. “I see.” She got into her flight suit, and went over to the dispenser for a container of water. Her lips were still tingling, and she could taste Jess on them, a little.

Also very interesting. “Are you into boys?” She asked, glancing over her shoulder.

Jess blushed visibly. “Are you?” She turned the question back.

“I never really thought about it either way.” Dev answered straightforwardly. “Class made sex about as interesting as sweeping out the kitchen, so no one really talked about it much.” She hopped into her seat and started bringing systems online. “But I know one thing.”

“Yeah?” Jess gave herself a shake, and dropped into her chair.

Dev turned around and looked at her. “No one ever made me want to kiss them like that before.” She turned back around and started syncing the comp, slowly bringing the power online and running checks to make sure the lightning strikes hadn't fried anything.

Jess slowly pulled her restraints around her and buckled them, her eyes fixed on the pilot's chair. “Well, we're even.” She finally said, as she clicked the catches in place and hit the toggle to retract them. “Because no one's ever made me want to say screw the mission, lets go find a cave somewhere before.”

Dev looked over her shoulder again, her pale eyebrows lifting, and then lowering in some confusion.

“Never mind.” Jess started laughing. “Boot the engines up.”

Dev focused her attention back on her job. The rain had lessened to a degree that she could, with some confidence, activate the landing jets again and ease out from under the ledge. It was hard to concentrate though, and she had to take a few long breaths and release them before she set her hands on the throttles and gently ignited the main engines. She could feel them rumble into life, a bit rough as she trimmed the power leads.

She sort of felt like that too, like there were things surging inside her that needed to be trimmed a little. Dev pulled her headset on and settled the ear cups, flicking through the settings and scanning the comp to make sure they hadn't gotten any messages relayed after the storm.

After a moment, her eyes flicked up to the mirror mounted over her position and she found Jess looking back at her in the reflection. Then she had to look forward, and inched the throttles to bring the carrier around the edge of the escarpment and back around in the other direction.

They would pass to the west of Quebec and then up into the northern archipelago to the North station. Dev had the coordinates locked in, and she let out one final deep breath before she nudged the throttles forward and focused in on her task.

Boy, it was hard. Dev took a drink from her container and put it back in it's swinging holder. She studied her consoles a couple of times, until her brain finally lurched out of it's bemusement and sharpened as the readings and panel displays triggered her programming in a somewhat belated manner.

She looked out the forward screens, seeing nothing much but gray sky and equally gray land. They were traveling over rock plateaus that were slick and wet with the falling rain, their tops scarred and shaped by the continual impact with the water.

After a few minutes traveling, Dev felt her shoulders relax and she was better able to focus. She ran through her checks and had the systems rescan for damages, her mind running over the readouts as she took in a weather report. The heavy clouds they'd huddled under had passed over, but she could see on the out scan there was another storm moving in.

Dutifully, she reported that to Jess, feeling a prickle between her shoulder blades as she heard the soft click and slither of her partner's restraints coming loose. She flexed her hands a trifle as Jess came to stand next to her, anticipating and getting the friendly pressure of a hand on her shoulder. “There.” She pointed at the out scan.

“I see.” Jess mused. “Damn it.” She looked at the powerful lines, the dark reds and oranges telling their own tales of the strong electrical forces buried inside them. “These storms are getting outrageous. We used to have two, three days between them. Now we're lucky if we go twelve or twenty hours.”

'Why is that?” Dev asked.

“No one really knows.” Jess leaned on the back of her chair. “We've lost so much damn science.” She grunted. “Huh. Well, we'll have to either make it a very short stop at North or find a place on the ice to hole up if that line comes in fast as it looks like.”

Dev's brows hiked up a little. “Hole up on the ice?” She inquired. “In the carrier?”

“Sure.” Jess glanced back over her shoulder. “I packed cold kits. Includes lined sleeping bags in case we get caught out.”

“I see.” Dev trimmed the carrier's flight, taking them around a tall peak in a gentle curve, very aware of the hand casually resting on her shoulder as Jess studied the comp.

Ahead of them she could see a long line of craggy bluffs, and the western edges of them had thick gray clouds draped over them. She checked her navigation readouts and let her elbow rest on her chair arm, feeling a bit of warmth through her pilots suit as she pressed against Jess's thigh. “Thirty minutes.”

“Mm.” Jess gave her shoulder a squeeze, then she retreated back to the back of the carrier, starting to rummage around in the equipment locker. “Once you get within ten, they'll contact you on sideband twelve.” She said. “Then ask you to switch to a mainline channel for traffic control.”

Dev peered at the empty sky. “Is it a busy place?”

“No.” Jess said. “They're just regulation sticklers. Just move to whatever channel they want, and let them call the numbers for you when you go in. They've got a carrier bay like we do, only smaller.”

“All right.” Dev said. “May I ask you something?”

Jess stopped rummaging. “What makes you think you have to ask permission?”

Dev cleared her throat. “I didn't mean to cause you discomfort.” She said. “I was just wondering if the people at the location we're traveling to know I'm a bio alt.”

Jess came back up to the front of the carrier. She leaned on the back of Dev's chair. “Why?”

Dev risked a glance up and almost didn't look back down at the console. “I just wondered. It's interesting to see how different people react.”

Jess looked thoughtfully through the rain lashed window. Would they know? Dev had only been at the citadel for a few days, and the stations were by tradition autonomous from each other. The less you knew about the structure of the organization, after all the less you could tell anyone about it.

Only the old man knew it all. “Unless Bain messaged them, they probably don't k now.” Jess admitted. “But your creds will tell them when you come into the complex. Does it bother you?”

Dev shook her head. “Does it bother you?” She again turned the question on Jess.

“No.” Her partner said. “But the Norther's are old fashioned. It might damn well bother them.” She smiled, in a not entirely nice way. “And that could be a lot of fun.”

“Fun?” Dev glanced up at her again.

“Fun.” Jess gently ruffled her hair, then she went back to her seat and dropped into it, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. “Almost as fun as an ice cave might be.”

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Dev wondered about the ice cave, as she piloted the carrier along it's assigned route towards the North station escarpment. She could already see it on the horizon, a lonely pinnacle of rock that was an island in the surrounding storm tossed seas. It was stark and forbidding, on the outside not really different from the citadel they'd come from but smaller, and more remote.

A soft chime sounded in her ear cup. “Approaching vehicle, identify.” The voice demanded, low, and with an interesting lilt to it.

“BR27006 approaching from the southwest.” Dev answered. “Requesting entry and landing.”

“Stand by.”

Dev kept the carrier on course, but slowed her engines a bit as she flicked off the auto nav and took possession of her throttles. She saw the alert on comp as they were scanned, imagining that she could feel the beam as it passed over them. She acknowledged the alert, and keyed in their ident beacon in response that would provide the encrypted codes to the stations comp.

“Probably keep us circling out here for an hour.” Jess was leaned back in her seat, her hands folded over her stomach and her eyes half closed.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Just jerks sometimes.” Jess said. “They're the furthest on the edge, makes them a little nuts.”

“I see.” Dev studied the readouts of their own scan, which was picking up transports closer in to the station, and the signatures of turbo generators near the bottom of the cliff. “Do they think we might hurt them?”

Jess shrugged. “Meh.” She wriggled into a slightly more comfortable spot on her surprisingly comfortable new seat. “Sometimes between stations there's a lot of ego. You know what that is?”

“Yes.” Dev said. She trimmed their angle of flight and slowed a little more, not wanting to approach too close or too fast before the station responded. She glanced at Jess in the mirror, wondering if it was just the reflection that made it seem that way or if Jess's legs were really that long.

“BR27006, ident confirmed. Please approach and switch comms to channel 23, sideband 5.”

“Ahahaha. We got lucky.” Jess said. “They don't have a prick on duty this time.”

Dev couldn't match her programmed definition of prick to anything applicable so she merely settled her ear cup and keyed the mic on. “North station, this is BR27006, acknowledge. Switching channels.” She made the adjustment and reacquired the station signal, then saw the landing beacon start to transmit and locked onto it.

So far so good. She ran a set of checks to make sure all the systems she'd need to land the carrier were functioning, and that they hadn't taken any damage during the storm. Everything seemed nominal, so she boosted up the speed a little and headed towards the gaping hole in the side of the pinnacle where the beacon was leading her. “The entrance isn't on top like ours.” She observed.

“No. No flat surface up there.” Jess agreed. “That's a natural cavern entrance they modified. Smaller, but at least the rain doesn't kick you in the ass when they open the doors like in ours.”

Ours.

Dev liked hearing that. Ours. We. Us. She descended to the level of the landing bay opening and centered her approach as the big doors started to open. She could see the pale blue light inside the cavern and she focused on the opening, where a dim blue tracer was indicating an in path.

She cut in the landing jets and put the engines in idle as she came into the cavern, seeing carrier landing pads below her not that different from the citadel's. “North landing control, this is BR27006, requesting pad assignment.” She cleared the entrance and let the carrier slide to one side of it, putting solid rock at her back.

“You fly nice.” Jess observed. “You never bounce my kidneys.”

Dev flicked a glance in the mirror. “Thanks.” She said. “I think?”

“BR27006. Landing assignment D23.” The comm brought her attention back. “Stand by after landing for security scan. Remain sealed until notified.”

“Mph.” Jess snorted. “Oh look the jerk woke up.”

Dev located their assigned pad and gently lowered the carrier onto it, spooling down the main engines and cutting off the landing jets as the bottom skids touched and the carrier came to a halt. She secured the power systems and safed the weapons, glancing outside as she did so. “Oh.”

Jess lifted her head and peered out the windows. A ring of security guards were surrounding them, heavy rifles pointed at the carrier. “Ugh. Idiots.” She relaxed and let her eyes close again. “Just chill.”

“I'm pretty warm, thanks.” Dev sat back and loosened the chair restraints. She copied the logs to storage, and did the rest of her shutdown checklist, doing her best to ignore the ring of muzzles facing her outside. She saw a light come on and she studied it. “Jess, they are asking for a comp interface.”

“Yeah?” Jess released her restraints and got up, coming forward to lean on Dev's chair and peer at the board. “Anything in comp?”

“No. I hadn't even plotted our next destination. Just this one.” Dev said. “Some weather reports, is all.”

“You know how to set a trace?”

Dev smiled. “Yes.” She touched her keypads in a rapid sequence. “Let them in?”

“Yup.” Jess leaned further, watching as her partner set up the connection. She studied the screen as the North systems linked in, watching the request for information intently. “Want to know where we've been eh?” She glanced outside at the security guards. “Good thing we didn't take a joyride into the arctic first.”

After a moment, the connection shut down, and the audio came live in Dev's earpiece. “BR27006, you are cleared. Please prepare to egress.”

“Aw. Guess we told the truth.” Jess, said, with a mock pout. “Next time remind me to slip in a trip to space in there, see if they catch it.” She pushed herself upright, and went to the weapons rack, sliding her handgun into it's holster tucked under her arm and picking up the heavy blaster and seating it into the flexible web system that went down her right leg. “Let's go, partner.”

Dev had stood and made sure her insignia was straight, then she uncoupled her leads from the carrier and clipped the ends in place as she walked over to join Jess. She paused behind her as Jess also paused, her hands on the hatch controls. “I'm ready.”

“Don't let them freak you out.” Jess said. “Just ignore what they say if they start talking crap.”

Dev nodded, and then she twitched a little as Jess triggered the hatch and it popped outward with a thump and hiss. The ramp extended and they walked down it, just as two jump suited figures appeared from between two other carriers and approached them.

The security guards had withdrawn, save two that were stationed on either side of an inner door. Dev kept Jess's face in her peripheral vision, watching her reaction to gauge what was going on. She seemed relaxed though, so Dev relaxed and waited just behind her as the welcoming party approached.

It was two men, and the one in front was dressed as Jess was, the one behind him was in a standard jumpsuit in a dull orange color. Neither of them looked particularly friendly, but neither of them looked like they were about to start fighting with them either.

“Drake.” The man said, as they came up even with them.

“Hello, Sydney.” Jess drawled a little. “How are ya?”

'Very busy as always.” The man said. “What can we do for you?” He glanced past her and looked at Dev, then returned his eyes to Jess's. “We don't have much in the way of spare parts or supplies to offer.”

“Just looking for local info.” Jess said. “The bus just got overhauled. We don't need anything.” She half turned. “This is my new partner, Dev. Dev, this is Sydney Lang. He's the senior agent here at North.”

“Like you are in our place?” Dev asked, mildly, not missing the sudden jerk as the North agent focused on her. “How interesting. Nice to meet you.” She addressed Sydney, extending her hand out.

Warily he took it and pressed it, then released her, returning his attention immediately to Jess. “Did you get promoted? We hadn't heard.” His eyes shifted to her collar insignia. “Oh, yes, I see you have.” He extended his hand. “Congrats.” He indicated the waiting figure behind him. “Luke Turloute, my chief mechanic. In case you needed anything done to the carrier.”

Jess nodded at the man, who nodded back, but said nothing. “Shall we get a cup of kack and chat?” She suggested. “Don't want to take much of your time. The bus doesn't need anything, does it, Dev?”

“Everything is optimal.” Dev said. “We're fine.”

“Okay, certainly.” Lang's manner had changed completely. “Let's go to the my lounge. I'll ask Dom to join us. He was just assembling the daily recap.”

He turned and led the way to the inner door. It opened as he approached and Dev felt the familiar tickle of scan across her skin, noting that Jess's hands were clenching slightly at her sides as she passed through it. The hallway they emerged into was familiar looking, granite walls and the smooth cut floors, though a slightly lighter shade of gray.

Jess was on edge, it seemed. Her right hand was gently resting on the stock of the big blaster, a casual grip that wasn't entirely casual.

“So. When did you get promoted?” Sydney asked. “Really strange we didn't hear.”

Jess smiled with no humor evident. “Just recently. I did a long run on the dark side and did a bit of damage. Impressed someone I guess.” She said.

“Really. Last thing I heard you all were having serious problems there.” Lang lead them into a small lounge and the door shut behind them. He gestured to a drink dispenser then took one himself, and sat down in one of the chairs. “That's what I heard, anyway... matter of fact, I heard you almost got skunked.”

Jess took a drink and handed it to Dev, then took one for herself and perched on the arm of a second chair. “We're always in some kind of trouble, aren't we?” She asked. “We had some changes up top, and a new class come in. Nothing more than the usual.”

Sydney's eyes flicked to Dev, who had seated herself and was merely watching and listening. “I see.” He said. “So what can I tell you? Nothing new here but more and more storms.”

Jess nodded. “We noticed. I was just telling Dev here, that it seems they're coming in every half day. I can't remember a single day lately without one.”

“She doesn't know about storms?” He looked intently at her.

“She's spacer born.” Jess said, casually. “So no. But what I was really interested in is any word you have of snow pirates.” She added. “We got intel they've been infiltrated by the other side.”

Dev had to school her face quickly not to react, since certainly that bit of information was as much a surprised to her as it apparently was to Sydney Lang. His eyes opened wide and he put his drink down, straightening up in his chair as he looked at Jess.

“Snow pirates?” He said. “Are you kidding me? Those people haven't' been seen in these parts in years. They're all dead, Jess. Where did you get that crazy idea from?”

Jess leaned back against the back of the chair. “Not according to the intel we got. We only thought they were gone. Two fishermen were found dead frozen in a berg with their gear stripped and a head cut in their chests not two weeks gone.”

Lang's jaw dropped.

The door opened and another man entered, this one in a tech jumpsuit. “Sydney, you called?” The man glanced warily at Jess and Dev, circling them to come up on the other side of Lang. “Hello, Jess.” He said. “Didn't know you were here.”

Lang shut his mouth with a click. “Sit down, Dom.” He said. “Jess is looking for intel on ice pirates.”

Dom chuckled as he sat down. “Want some on Santa Claus too? There are no ice pirates anymore.”

Dev studied the two of them. The newcomer was tall and very thin, and had brown hair and eyes, where Lang was more heavily built and shorter, with black hair and gray eyes. They were both older than Jess, and she got the impression that Lang was far from pleased about her partner's promotion.

Jess seemed to find that funny. Dev made a mental note to ask her why later.

“Apparently either that's not true, or someone's imitating them.” Lang said. “But that's news to us, isn't it?”

Dom snorted. “I'll say.” He folded his arms and looked at Jess. “Where'd you get that wild tale from?”

Jess smiled. “Can't share the source, sorry.” She said. “But anyway, me and Dev are going out to do a recon over the ice fields. See how true the story is.” She leaned on the arm of her chair. “So I was just wondering if you had any word of them.”

Sydney focused suddenly on Dev. “Where in space?” He asked.

Dev studied Jess's face in her peripheral vision, but her partner seemed both relaxed and inclined to let her answer her own questions. “Biological Station 2.” She answered promptly. “I've just been downside a week. I'm still learning all the differences.”

Dom blinked. “You're the damned bio alt.”

Dev nodded. “Yes.” She agreed. “Biological Alternative set 0202-164812, instance NM-Dev-1. But please call me Dev.” She concluded. “It's short, and it's what they painted on the carrier.”

The two North agents stared at her as though she'd grown another head. “Are you kidding me?” Dom looked at Jess. “You really went along with this?”

“I did.” Jess appeared to be enjoying his consternation. “I had my doubts but Dev's grown on me.” Her eyes twinkled a little. “She's a kickass bus driver. Matter of fact, she helped put the damn thing back together after we blew apart Gibraltar a couple days back.”

Dev produced a mild grin. “It was the least I could do.” She said. “Since I banged it up doing that.”

“I thought that was just a crazy rumor.” Sydney finally spoke up. “Something I heard on the ops report. She's really a bio alt?” He stared openly at Dev. “She doesn't look like one. Not one I've ever seen anyway, and most of the sets cycle through here for ice experience.”

“I'm an experimental set.” Dev offered up her general statement. “Developmental. That's what the Dev stands for.”

Both North agents looked very uncomfortable. “Well” Sydney said. “No telling what comes out of Base 10.” He twitched a little. “I did see the report on Gibraltar. Bet you made some enemies with that one, Jess.”

“Bet I did.” Jess got up. “But, if you all have nothing to share, we'll be on our way. Can I get the latest met?” She looked at Dev, who had also stood and was watching her. “And you said you had a daily recap?”

Dom got up and went over to a console, sliding behind it and into the chair. “Sure.” He said. “We sent a team to do ice measurement a few weeks ago. Looks like some glaciations building up again. Maybe drop the water table a little. Give you guys at 10 back your beach.”

“That trick at Gibraltar give you your gold bars, Jess?” Sydney asked.

“That and a few other things.” Jess smoothly replied. “Bain appreciated the effort.”

“Bain?” Sydney and Dom both looked up at her in surprise. “How'd you get involved with him? I thought he was busy in his fortress of solitude at Pichu.” Sydney said. “Haven't seen him in these parts in years. Is he at 10? What's up there?”

Jess shrugged. “Who can say what he's up to? He's the Old Man.” She said. “You'll have to ask him if you want to know. I'm not gonna speak for him that's for damn sure.” She held her hand out for the films Dom had retrieved. “Who knows? Maybe he'll drop by here next.” She winked at Sydney, who managed a sour smile in return. “Thanks. C'mon, Dev.”

“Nice to meet you.” Dev told the two men, then she turned and followed Jess out of the room, and back down the hallway towards the carrier bay. “That was interesting.”

Jess chuckled. “Yes it was.” She guided Dev back through the scan, and ducked past a team of bio alts who were in exposure suits with the helmets removed, their hair damp with sweat. They were standing around a big block of ice, and Jess paused as she was almost passed them and turned back. “Whatcha got there, boys?”

The bio alts looked at her warily. “Agent.” One said. “This is an ice sample.” He glanced at Dev. “Tech.”

Dev cocked her head and studied him. The group of bio alts were older, possibly twice her age, and she wasn't familiar with the set. Apparently, the bio alts weren't familiar with her either. “Hello.” She returned the greeting. “Why were you taking a sample of the ice?” She asked.

“We were told to.” The man said. “Do you require something?” He looked from one to the other. “We are assigned work.”

“Thanks.” Jess clapped her hand on Dev's arm. “We were just curious.” She nudged Dev ahead of her and they crossed the carrier deck and wound their way between the landing pads. “We can talk after takeoff.” She lowered her voice. “Not before.”

“All right.” Dev led the way onto the pad, surprising a bio alt technician who was examining part of their engine pod. “Is there something irregular?” Dev asked him.

He jerked, and turned. “Nothing.” He backed away. “Just looking at the new intakes.” He pointed at the front of the engine. “Never saw them before.” He was an engaging looking man, almost Jess's height with curly red hair and freckles.

“Decco!” A voice rang out. “What are you doing over there? Get back to work!”

The bio alt turned and rambled down the steps, ducking past a re-generator and disappeared into the shadows quickly.

“Hm.” Dev reached out and triggered the hatch, the scan tickling her palm. “That was also interesting, but in a different way.”

Jess chuckled under her breath. She followed Dev up into the carrier, slapping the door lock and just barely clearing the door before it sealed. She felt better, the moment it had. The itchy spot between her shoulder blades eased, and she could feel some of the tension come out of her as she un-holstered her guns and put them back in their racks.

“Those men were not.. ah.” Dev sat down in her seat and started up her checks. “They were in some discomfort with us being there.”

“Oh yes.” Jess laughed and dropped into her chair. “Sydney hates my guts. He's at North because of me.” She said. “That's a long and sordid story I'll be glad to tell you after we get our asses out of here.” She swung her own console around and fed the films into it. “I loved doing that. Stuck up jacktard.”

“What's a jacktard?” Dev got her restraints on. “And.. what are ice pirates?”

“Hehehe. They're an old fisherman's tale, Dev. There is no such thing.”

Dev started up the power systems. “But you said there were.”

“I lied.” Jess cheerfully told her. “But I bet they now send out six teams to find the bastards because they think I know something they don't.”

Dev turned all the way around in her chair and peered at her partner. “Excuse me?”

Jess got up and came over, crouching down and resting her hands on Dev's knees. “What I was here for was to find out what they knew, and what they didn't.” She said, in a suddenly serious voice. “What I found out was, they don't have an ear inside Base 10. They didn't know about Bain, and they didn't know he offed Bricker. “

“But they did know about me.” Dev said, resisting the urge to get lost in those close by pretty eyes.

“They did know about you.” Jess said. “So their latest news is about a week or so back, right? They heard about Gibraltar because everyone on the damn planet's probably heard about that. We blew up half a mountain. But they didn't know the inside stuff they would know if they were in contact with anyone inside our base.” She reached up and put her fingertip on Dev's nose. “And that, is, interesting.”

“Hm.” Dev thought about that. “Should they know?”

“Something as big as Bain showing up? That's gold plated prime gossip, Dev.” Jess said. “The kind of thing the night ops revel in sharing in those little wee hours when it's just them, and the boards. You know what I mean?”

“Sort of. I know what gossip is.” The bio alt said. “We had to be really careful about that. If they caught you telling tales about people, you could get punished.” She watched Jess's expressive face react, her eyes narrowing and a bit of chill coming into her gaze. “So we used to find sneaky ways to talk about it that no one would figure out.” She smiled. “Some of us, anyway.”

“The smart ones.” Jess said, resting her elbows on Dev's thighs. “Right?”

Dev hesitated, then she smiled a little wryly. “I think so, yes. There were some of us there that understood more. Like me and Gigi.”

“Okay, so – it's the same with Interforce.” Jess said. “There are some really smart people around there, and some people not so smart. The not so smart ones we can use for our purposes. The smarter ones, it's harder.”

“Must be very hard with you then. You're very smart.” Dev let her hands drop and rest on Jess's arms. “That man, the other agent, was angry about you being senior. Why?”

“Ah.” Jess exhaled, and stood up. “Let's get on track and then we can talk about that.” She patted Dev's shoulder and went back to her seat, strapping herself in as she glanced at the console. She scanned the daily report, noting the un-obvious gaps in it and shook her head. “Hope the met data's worth the plastic it was printed on.”

Dev settled her comms onto her ears and dialed in the landing channel. “BR270006 to control. Requesting lift.” She got her systems ready as she waited for the response to come back. As the silence went on, she glanced outside, half expecting the men with guns to be back surrounding them.

But the carrier bay was empty. “BR27006 to control, are you receiving this? We are requesting lift permission and egress.” Dev said, glancing into the reflector and seeing Jess watching her, a quietly alert look on her face.

“Give me juice.” Jess said.

“If I activate the weapons systems, they will detect that.” Dev said.

“I know.”

Dev ran her hands over the controls, bringing up the power to the engines, and then opening the links to the weapons, lights and readouts coming online as she heard the hum rising on either side of her. She looked out the front screen again peering around to see if anyone was going to react to it.

After a moment, a crackle in her ear gave her the answer. “BR27006 you are cleared to lift. Outer doors are open.”

Jess chuckled behind her. “Jerks.”

“Would you really have shot something?” Dev ignited the landing jets and lifted off the pad.

“Yes, and they know it.” Jess responded. “Anyway. You have the coordinates up there? Lets get out in the white. With any luck, we'll run headlong into a storm and have to find a place to hide until it passes.”

“If we're lucky?” Dev glanced in the mirror, finding Jess smiling at her. “I see.” She rotated the carrier and moved towards the outer doors at a stately pace. “This should be interesting.”

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The ice field astounded her. Dev saw the edge of it approaching as she came in low over the waves, feeling the tug of wind against the carrier's outer shell she had to compensate for. The water seemed very dark here, a deep almost black color under the gray skies that contrasted starkly against where they were heading

She glanced into the mirror. Jess was slumped in her seat, her eyes closed, and her body relaxed and after a moment, she realized her partner was sleeping. She had her hands resting on her thighs, and her chest was moving with a slow and steady motion.

Well, that was curious. Dev returned her attention to the screen, though she had the autonav on. She checked the chrono, and saw they still had two hours of flying left and decided to let Jess get some rest since she always seemed to have that just slightly drawn look Dev always associated to the programmers and the people who worked with Doctor Dan who had too much to do and too little time to do it in.

Doctor Dan himself looked tired sometimes, and Dev knew he worked very hard at the station doing all the calculations that made bio alts like her what they were. He took his work very seriously, and as far as any natural born cared about the results, she believed that he did care not only about his results but also about them.

He seemed a little sad sometimes, like Jess did. Dev knew Doctor Dan didn't seem to spend a lot of time with any of the other natural borns and she'd often seen him just quietly watching the stars in the small private lounge in the upper levels when she passed by there on her way back from classes down to the dorm.

He never seemed in discomfort, really. In her few, cherished classes with him he always seemed content, if very busy, but there was also a sense she had that there was something he often thought about that was sort of somber.

She had a feeling towards him that she didn't have for any of her other teachers. She'd talked about it to Gigi once, and Gigi had agreed in her serious, thoughtful way that while she liked her proctors, she wanted to always do especially well for Doctor Dan because she, too had this feeling inside towards him that she didn't have for the rest of them.

So there was that. But as Dev took another look at her mirror, and watched Jess sleep, she had a sense that in a way, she had a different feeling in her for this new friend of hers that was a bit like the one she had for her favorite teacher. It was a funny sort of sensation in her chest, a fullness of the heart as she'd once heard the term.

She focused on the console. The scan had just retrieved some new data and she studied it, noting the meteorological component that seemed to indicate lines of strong thunderheads approaching from the west. That was interesting – she recalled the last couple of days and it seemed to her that storms did tend to approach from the west, and flow east. They'd followed one right into their last mission, in fact.

Why was that? Dev hadn't gotten much instruction on downside weather patterns, and she resolved to find some labs about them when they got back. Jess seemed to be concerned about the storms, so she decided to find out what she could about them so she could maybe provide some helpful information.

She checked the scan, which had come back empty of targets to it's terminus. The carrier had far more limited systems than either the station they'd just left, or the citadel they'd come from but still it surprised her to find the scope so empty of anything.

Ah well. She settled down to fly and monitor, letting the time pass as she studied the information the carrier's systems had on their destination. After a time, a very soft chime sounded, and she returned her attention to the screen.

The ice line was approaching, and Dev sat forward a little, looking out at it with great interest as they left the ruffled waters and skimmed over the white surface. It was not as flat as she'd thought from afar, it was full of folds and rises, and as she glanced down between them she saw bits of reflected blue in the hollows, a rich and bold color that surprised her.

It was pretty. It was also bright and she blinked a bit as her eyes refocused after so many hours of going over the dark sea. It reflected some of the wan, gray light up too, and she shaded the screens as she didn't want it to wake up Jess.

A quick glance behind her reassured her it hadn't. She checked her coordinates and resumed looking out the window, fascinated by the beautiful contrast of white, gray and blue. Far ahead of her, she could see a line of mountains, and she knew their course would take them up near them before they turned and went east.

She settled her ear cups on and turned on the outside sensors, sending the output to her panel so it wouldn't hit the inside speakers. At once she could hear wind outside buffeting the carrier, and beyond that, a soft, irregular crackling. It sounded odd and strange, and then a flicker of motion caught her immediate attention and she tracked to it, seeing a moving form cross the ice and disappear behind a big crack.

She inhaled slightly in surprise, not really sure of what she'd seen. It had been small, and fast, and she hoped the scan had caught it so she could show it to Jess later since she was confident her partner could identify it.

The wind started pushing against them a little harder. Dev took the throttles into her hands and curled her legs around the mounts of her chair, requesting another scan and looking to her left, seeing the already tightly clouded sky growing darker in that direction.

Reluctantly, she half turned, then she released the restraints and got up, crossing back into the back of the carrier quietly. "Jess?" She called softly. "Jess?"

Her partner's eyes remained closed. Dev eased up next to the gunner's chair and put a hand on Jess's shoulder, pressing it lightly. "Jess?"

For a moment there was no response, then she saw Jess's body take on tension and her eyes fluttered open to blink at her with some bewilderment. "The weather's getting worse. I thought you needed to look at it." Dev said, in an apologetic tone. "Sorry about waking you."

Jess raised her hand and rubbed her eyes. "I fell asleep?" She asked, in a disbelieving tone. "Are you kidding me?"

There didn't seem to be a reasonable answer to that, so Dev merely went over to the dispenser and retrieved a container, bringing it back over to her partner. "I think maybe you were tired?" She suggested, handing it over. "Nothing occurred of interest."

Mechanically, Jess took it. "It's not that." She looked bemused. "There's nothing I like better than a good catnap but I don't usually do it in the middle of a damn mission." She opened the container. "Must be the fault of your extra comfy chair here."

Dev smiled and went back to her seat, resuming her headset.

Jess sipped at her drink and studied the pale head just visible over the seat. She could still feel sleep's hold on her, faint wisps of some formless dream drifting out of her awareness as she took stock of her surroundings. Had she been that tired? She sighed, acknowledging the fact that her body still hadn't truly recovered yet. "How long was I out?"

Dev glanced behind her then looked back at the console. "I didn't notice when you went down." She said. "But at least two hours."

Went down. Jess wrinkled her nose at the statement, not entirely sure it was comfortable. What had been comfortable though, was the fact that she apparently without much conscious thought about it had determined that Dev was completely and honestly trustworthy in a way she hadn't really expected.

Maybe that had started when she'd unlocked the portal between their quarters. She'd been trained to such an instinctive degree that the sound of the door opening would wake her, as it always had when Josh had done it. She'd never slept in the carrier with him driving.

Never.

Now, this bio alt had been her bus driver for what... a week? And here she was going completely out without any care in the world apparently on her second flight with Dev. What the hell was that? Was she that convinced Dev was so totally on her side?

Really? What was her subconscious saying there? And more importantly, could she trust that? Could she trust her own judgment when she'd been so damn wrong about Josh? Jess studied the reflection she could see in that mirror up front, the pale eyes watching through the window, so intent, and so serious.

Was she just fooling herself? Or was having her tech be another woman changing the dynamic so much? Less competition? More? Different?

Dev looked up and their eyes met. Jess felt a sense of warmth spread across her chest and the uncertainty faded before the unambiguous steadfastness she saw in that expression. This was not a Josh. Jess smiled and watched Dev smile back. This was a construct that had been designed and developed to be able to be trusted. That's what the difference was. Josh – they only knew what he decided to reveal to them, and the background they were able to check.

Dev?

There was nothing they didn't know about her. Kurok had handed over her programming to them the day they'd gotten there, and she'd already leafed through it. Jess's shoulders relaxed, and she took a longer sip of the kack. Her falling asleep just proved it. She could think whatever she wanted but her instincts were bred in and bone deep and if her battered subconscious, which had kept her on a hair trigger since the ambush allowed her that level of trust then she had little choice but to accept it.

So now that she'd talked herself into believing what she really wanted to believe, it was time to get the hell up and work. She unlocked her restraints and stood, stretching her body out, aware at some level of an ironic understanding that there was something a little out of control going on with her.

It felt good. She'd always been attracted to risk and somehow, this new and uncertain change in her life was flushing out the recent dark memories in a surprising way. If she went back and tried to recapture her gloom of just the week prior, it felt old and faded.

She didn't want to feel old and faded anymore. Life had pitched her out back over the cliff edge. “So what do we have here.” Jess went over and leaned against Dev's console, peering not at the readouts but out the window. “Ah.” She studied the line of clouds racing towards them. “That's not good.”

“No.” Dev agreed. “I didn't think so, but I wanted to see what you said.” She trimmed the carrier's flight again, adjusting the side jets to compensate for the stiffening wind. “The autonav's having a problem keeping level.”

No, Jess could feel it in the shift and motion of the craft. “Get me a topographical.” She said. “Can you kick the speed up a little?”

“Yes.” Dev keyed the report back to Jess's station, and rocked her head from side to side to release a little of the stiffness from her concentration. She adjusted the throttles and keyed in the change to the autonav, inhaling in surprise when she felt Jess's hands come down on her shoulders and start to squeeze them.

It was warm and strange feeling and for a moment she went still and wasn't sure what to do.

“I”m not hurting you am I?” Jess asked. “You looked a little stiff.”

Dev thought about that. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a massage.” Jess said, in a mild tone. “Usually it's supposed to relax you and make you feel better.”

“Oh.” Dev felt the squeezing pressure intensify and she focused on it, letting her head rest back against the back of her seat. The pressure worked the tension out of her neck, and she found the sensation really very nice. “I like that.”

Jess chuckled. “Paybacks for my cushy seat.” She said. “Besides you've been working here the whole afternoon while I sacked out.” She finished her massage and gave Dev a pat on the shoulder. “Let me go see if I can find a route for us that doesn't involve getting this thing blown ass over teakettle.”

Dev would have been content to have the squeezing go on longer, but she shifted a bit in her seat and retracted the restraints, the gimbaled chair moving forward as she reached out to put her hands on the throttles and Jess retreated back to her station.

Of the last statement, she had to regretfully discard understanding most of it. She knew what a teakettle was, but that was about it and she seriously doubted actual tea had anything to do with what Jess was talking about. She considered the context, and decided it probably had something to do with the storm.

“All righty let's see what we got here.” Jess said, from her position. “Oh, Dev, Dev, Dev... this ain't good.” She sighed. “Damn it. I wanted to get past the big wild before we ran into that storm... son of a bitches in North skewed the data.”

“On purpose?” Dev felt a little shocked. “I thought they were on our side?”

Jess snorted. “They wouldn't deliberately send us into hell but if they could screw up my pitch or embarrass us they would. It's not about sides, Dev, it's about status.” She scanned the limited met they were getting from the carrier's sensors. “If I had to call for rescue? Get lost? Sure. They'd love it.”

“I'm not sure I understand.” Dev adjusted the trim again, then took the carrier off autonav as the buffeting became more pronounced. She could feel the engines struggling against the wind, and a fast look at the console made her eyebrows hike up. “We are in force 12 conditions.”

“So I feel.” Jess tapped at her pad. “Hang on, just keep her steady, Dev.”

What, again was she supposed to hang on to? Dev got her boots settled on the thruster pedals and studied her options, noting the winds were driving the carrier off it's course to the east. She altered the angle and tuned the jets, flying the craft off it's axis to counter the pressure.

Then something caught her attention. “Jess?”

“Hm?”

“It appears a large cone is coming towards us. It looks like it might b..” Dev stopped talking when Jess hit the back of her chair, thumping her forward and nearly sending her into the console. She worked hard to keep control over the carrier as Jess leaned next to her, looking out the front window. “Yes, there.”

Jess stared at the cone, then looked forward. “See those mountains?” She indicated the range they were heading for. “If you don't get to them before that cone catches us we're going to splat.” She pointed at the nearest of the cliffs. “If we can duck in there we might be okay.”

“I see.” Dev uncapped the triggers for the engine afterburners and adjusted the power to send all of it to the drive systems. “You might want to sit down.”

“I'm fine, g'wan.” Jess said.

Dev threw the throttles forward and hit the burners, dumping everything into the engines as a roar built around them and they slammed ahead at full speed. The force drove her back into her chair and detached Jess from the console, sending her partner tumbling back in a roll of long arms and legs.

“Okay, so maybe I wasn't.” Jess grabbed the base of her chair and hung on as the gravitational force increased against her, flattening her against the deck of the carrier as it picked up speed.

“Sorry about that.” Dev said.

“You did tell me to sit my ass down.” Jess agreed mournfully. “Let me know when it's safe to get up.”

Dev felt the air changing around them and she focused on the screen, checking the power levels and adding the side jets in a bit as she felt the carrier start to pitch. The outside sensors were bringing her the sound of the wind now and it was a rising roar.

Frightening. Dev saw the fold in the mountain that Jess had pointed out and she laid in a course directly for it, hearing thumps and bangs as debris started hitting the craft and she saw a huge chunk of ice flash past them from behind. “I would stay down there for now.” She advised Jess. “I'm not sure we're going to make it in time.”

Jess untangled herself from her chair and squirmed around to face forward, moving towards Dev with a powerful, sinuous motion. She ended up next to her boots, and wrapped her arms around Dev's seat base, turning over onto her back so she could watch the bio alt pilot. “In that case, we'll go to Hell together.”

The distraction was almost lethal. Dev yanked the steering back as the carrier almost turned on it's side, following her body motion as she found herself attracted to the tall form now practically hugging her feet. “Woah.” She muttered. “What's hell? Is that where we're heading?”

Jess snickered. “In ancient mythology, it was a place you went when you died if you were an amoral bum like me.”

Dev focused on holding the carrier steady, feeling it jerk through the air as it was buffeted from behind. “Is that sort of like the incinerator?” She asked, distracted. “Why would it matter … wait, what's a bum?”

Jess patted her calf, not helping matters any “Relax. We can talk about it later once you make it to that canyon and if we don't maybe you'll find out the hard way.” She took a tighter hold on the chair and relaxed otherwise, crossing her ankles as she looked up past Dev's knee at her face.

What a nice clean profile she had. “C'mon, Dev. I know you can do it.” She saw a faint line of color work it's way up the bio alt's neck, and a faint smile appear on her face. She took a hold with her free hand on the catch bar bolted to the console and reveled in the feeling of uncontrolled motion as the carrier was suddenly thrown sideways.

Dev was working hard. She could see the lines of fine tension in her body and the narrowing of her eyes as she leaned forward as if it would help them go faster. She had both throttles gripped in her left hand, and she was trimming the side jets with her right hand, and both boots were controlling the thrusters with a frantic intensity.

Jess could drive the carrier. She'd done it on more than one occasion, for a number of different reasons but watching Dev, she had to admit this was a kind of skill she really didn't have. Josh had always mocked her a little about that, and she'd always had the sense that he felt himself to be a more complete agent than she was.

“I'm going to have to go high G.” Dev said, apologetically. “Really, really hang on.”

Jess did, then her eyes nearly came out of her head as the carrier banked hard right and went on it's side and the only thing that kept her in place was her dual grip. She muffled a curse as her back protested, her recently healed injury sending a bolt of pain down her spine into her lower thighs.

Then she was slammed back to the ground and the craft arced upward, the g force holding her in place until Dev crested something, then dove down abruptly just as something hit the carrier with tremendous violence from behind. Then they righted just as abruptly, and the speed cut to almost nothing, the roar of the engines reducing to a low rumble.

Jess looked up. “Are we dead?”

Dev looked at her for a brief fraction of a second, then went back to her piloting. “I don't think so, since we're in the canyon.” She remarked. “Unless this is Hell. You'll have to tell me.”

Cautiously Jess rolled over and eased up to her knees, peering over the console top. They were between two rock walls, moving at just over idle, over a covering of ice covered in blue streaked crevices. It seemed very cold, and very desolate, but at the same time heartstoppingly welcome in it's shelter. “Good job.”

“We probably need to look at the back of the carrier.” Dev said, with a plaintive sigh. “I'm getting all kinds of damage alerts from there.”

“Okay.” Jess pointed at a looming darkness ahead and to their left. “We're going to have to squeeze through that pass there between the walls, then scoot into that cave.”

Dev regarded the gap. “Is that an ice cave?”

“Yes.” Jess chuckled. “It is. Are we at..” She inched over and studied the map. “Ah yes.” She nodded. “Real good work, Dev. Not only is that an ice cave, but it's one of our ice caves, and it's safe.” She paused. “I hope.”

“Me too.” Dev was nursing the engines. “Please hold on. We need to go sideways to get through there.”

“Tip right.” Jess felt the craft move and she let her body move with it, ending up wedged against Dev's chair with her ear just within reach. She blew in it and heard Dev laugh lightly as she got through the narrow spot and righted the attitude. Then they were sinking down and entering the cavern, a wide, open space that featured a floor of solid ice.

It was dark. Dev switched on the running lights and turned the carrier around in a complete circle to give them a chance to see what else was inside. It seemed to be empty, but she spotted a ledge halfway in that was chipped clear of ice and was ringed with tech casements. “Oh.”

“Set er down.” Jess exhaled in relief, since a glimpse outside had shown her a heavy wall of snow falling. “We made it.” She pushed herself to her feet and went back into the back of the carrier, going right for her service locker and opening it. She removed a small bottle of painkillers and shook four of them into her hand, closing the bottle and putting it back.

Back in her seat, she swallowed the pills with a swig from her drink container and waited, feeling the gentle bump as the carrier seated itself on the pad and Dev cut the engines.

“Is there service tech here?” Dev was peering outside.

“Basic.” Jess confirmed. “And an emergency stock of food and water. This area isn't really owned by anyone, it's wild, and getting caught out is dangerous. We've got ten or so of these caverns scattered around up in the ice fields just in case.” She waited a minute for the pills to start kicking in then she got up and went to the equipment locker. “I”m going to check it out. Can't be too careful.”

Dev privately didn't think Jess was careful at all, but she nodded and released her straps, glad she'd been able to get them away from the cone. She joined Jess at the locker, and copied her in donning the heavy jacket and gloves. “How long will we stay here?”

“Long as we have to. Storm's got to go past, for one thing and you need to fix your burners, and.. “ Jess leaned against the locker and regarded her. “We can relax and talk about our plan.” She smiled faintly. “Or just talk.”

Dev felt a pleasant mixture of anticipation and confusion fill her belly. “Okay.” She said. “I like talking to you.” She leaned next to Jess and looked up at her. “Sorry the ride was so rough. Did it give you any discomfort?” She asked. “I thought I heard you.. um.. “ Yell? Scream? Grunt? “Make a noise before.” She concluded.

Jess's eyes dropped and then lifted again. “Bumped my back. Maybe you can look at it when we get back inside.”

“Of course.” Dev agreed gravely. “Maybe you can show me how to do that massage thing.”

“Of course.” Jess winked. “So let's go and get this over with so we can get all this personal investigation done all the sooner.” She turned and keyed the hatch open, nudging it all the way when it was reluctant to fully retract.

A blast of icy cold air hit them, and at once their breath became visible as the environment inside the craft released outside and crystallized on the edge of the door. “Brr.” Jess blinked her eyes. “Don't lick your lips, and keep your tongue away from any of the metal.”

With a cautious look, she stepped out and down onto the pad, since the small ramp didn't want to extend either. One look at the outside of the carrier explained why. “Wow.” She put her hands on her hips. 'What the hell hit us?”

Dev hopped out and joined her, eyes going wide at the dent in the side of the craft. “Oh no.” She said. 'We just fixed it!”

Jess draped her arm over her partner's shoulders. There was a long crumpled crease in the outer skin and part of the engine guard was completely missing. “Nothing we can't make better.” She said. “But it'll take a little while so it looks like we're stuck here for now. Interesting, huh?”

Jess released her and went over to the other side of the pad, down a set of steps that had been chiseled into the rock. She drew her blaster and started around in a circle, searching the shadows cast by the carrier's outside lights.

Dev watched her for a moment, then she stuck her hands in her pockets and wiggled her rapidly chilling nose. “Getting more interesting every minute, actually.” She remarked to herself. “But I better close that door or where to put my tongue is going to be a much bigger problem than it is right now.”

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Jess got to the edge of the cavern in time to see the storm redouble, sending a mixture of heavy snow and ice pellets rattling against the stone all around her. She checked the entrance carefully though, finding nothing much to interest her save the fading light and the worsening weather.

Behind her she could hear the steady, light hammering as Dev banged the creases out of the carrier's alloy skin, and as the snow fell harder, and the wind started to whistle through the ice canyon she fell back, content that no one had used the place at least very recently.

As expected. There were a million slot canyons and a million caves and crevices in the wild ice, she knew about this one only because of it's mapped coordinates and the chances of someone happening on it by accident were extremely limited. She hadn't told anyone at Base 10 she was intending on landing here, except for Dev, and therefore she hadn't expected the information to have gotten out to anyone else.

It was bone chilling cold. Even with her heavy coat, and the thermal gloves on her hands she could feel herself shivering a little and she pulled her lined hood up, fastening the throat flap. She walked across the ice surface, her boots crunching and the tough steel spikes she'd extended on the bottoms preventing her from slipping.

She detoured around the edge of the cleared platform and unlatched the storage shed, the temperature making any automated system impossible to maintain. Instead, you had to know how to unlatch the catches, a metal puzzle system designed to frustrate anyone who didn't know the sequence to unfasten them.

This was her fifth or sixth time using the ice cave, so Jess was well aware of the puzzles answer. She bumped the door open and pushed her way inside as it scraped to over the layer of ice on the floor. Inside were neatly packed and labeled rations, spare parts, ammunition, and other supplies all quietly waiting for use. She made a mental note of the stock, then she backed out and closed the door, turning as she heard a thump and a latch coming home.

Dev had just re-seated the engine cowling and was stepping back to survey her work. She had her hood up and her collar sealed and now she tucked her hands back inside her gloves then tucked her hands under her arms.

Jess promptly trotted over. “How's it going?”

“I think that's all right now.” Dev said, her breath visible in a steady stream. “But I think I need to get warm before I start working on the back. My hands are really cold.”

Jess could see the blue tinge on the skin of her face. “More than your hands.” She triggered the carrier hatch. “Let's get some hot stuff in us.”

They got inside and Jess sealed the hatch, reaching over to her own console to start up the internal environmental systems. “Guess you didn't have cold like that up there, huh?”

Dev kept her arms wrapped around her, her entire body shivering. “Actually we did.” She said, after a moment to make sure her teeth weren't going to chatter. “Space is a lot colder than this, and you could feel it, through the airlock glass sometimes. But never for a long time.”

Jess walked over and opened her arms. “C'mere.” She folded Dev in them, pulling her close as she felt the shivers working through her body. “Let me give ya a hug. We'll put our thermal under suits on before we go back out there again.” She rubbed Dev's back. “But it's getting dark outside, so we should set up camp in here anyway.”

Dev was finding this whole hug thing absolutely delightful. She was perfectly content to forgo the thermal under suits, and the outside, and just remain encircled in Jess's arms, her shivers already abating. She feel warm blood surging to pretty much her entire body, as a matter of fact, and after a moment she gave a sigh of relief. “That feels excellent.”

It did, didn't it? Jess smiled, as the carrier internal systems warmed up and she had to reluctantly release her hold. She took a step back and started unfastening her jacket. She watched Dev take off her gloves and stick them into her jacket pockets, then undo the catches with slightly hesitant fingers.

As if she sensed the attention, the bio alt looked up. “All this clothing's a little strange.” She admitted. “It's kind of hard to move around in.”

“It is.” Jess stripped hers off and hung it up, then took Dev's. “It's always a pain in the ass operating up in the white. But here, there's no people to have to worry about watching you and the fields wide open, as they say.” She went over to the provision area, aware of Dev trailing along at her back.

She felt stiff from the cold. There was an ache in her bones that bothered her, and she looked forward to the warm beverage and a refresh of her painkillers. She set the dispenser cycling and stood waiting, her arms crossed, thinking over the next step in her plan.

Dev's hand touched her shoulder blade, and the plan evaporated effortlessly. She looked sideways and saw that her companion was watching the dispenser, but after a second, those light, clear eyes turned to her. “Can I interest you in a ration pack, some hot seaweed tea, and a nice bunk made out of survival bags?”

The bio alt considered that for a bit. “Yes.” She finally said. “That would be excellent.”

“C'mon.” Jess left the tea heating and went over to the storage locker, popping it open and sticking her head inside. As she'd asked, there were two ice kits in there and she turned and hit a latch to one side of the locker releasing a shelf that came down to cover the back section of the carrier.

It hooked into the other set of storage lockers, making a platform that was just large enough for two people to sleep on and it had a few inches of padding on the top. “Not as comfortable as our beds.' She turned and removed one of the kits, loosening the velcro straps and opening it up.

Inside was a sleeping bag, and survival tent. She left the tent alone and pulled out the bag, turning to spread it out over the platform.

Dev removed the second kit and did likewise, copying her. She smoothed down the surface of the bag and surveyed the platform. The soft plush of the bags and the snug space reminded her a little of her sleep pod in the creche, and that made her smile. “I like it.”

“You do?” Jess eyed her.

'Yes.”

“You're weird. I like that about you.” Jess went back and retrieved two ration packs, and pulled down another ledge between her seat and the dispenser at knee level to make a small table. She set down the packs, and retrieved the tea, and motioned Dev to join her on the floor.

It wasn't nearly as nice as lunch had been, but they shared the contents of the ration packs, and sipped their tea. Outside, the light faded completely, only the dim emergency LEDs of the carrier casting the faintest of glows against the windows. Jess adjusted the interior lights to match, and she leaned back against the lockers, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. “So.”

Dev looked up from nibbling on her crackers. Despite the terrible weather outside, she found their present location actually sort of nice. It was quiet and warm in the carrier, and the cramped surroundings were familiar to her from station – making it seem more homelike than she'd felt in the citadel.

And, of course, it was nice having Jess there without even a hatch to separate them. Dev suspected the night would be interesting, and she was definitely looking forward to it. She took a sip of her seaweed tea, finding the taste mild and astringent and just a bit sweet.

“Not like real tea, huh?” Jess spoke, having been silent for a while apparently deep in thought.

“It's nice. Its like green tea.” Dev licked her lips. “It tastes like theres a little bit of honey in it”

Jess smiled. “A little.” She said. “Wish I could have brought that bottle of honey mead with us. Should have looked for some in Quebec.” She studied her glass. “So, from here we go find the fisherman's village.”

“You didn't give me coordinates for that.”

“It's on an iceberg.” Jess said. “It moves I know.. basically where it is but we'll have to land the carrier off one of the ice escarpments on the Greenland cliffs and then hike.”

“Hike.” Dev said. “That sounds like it might be difficult, if it's as cold as it was here today.”

Jess nodded. “We'll take ice axes. It wont' be easy, especially for my aching old bones.” She looked up as she felt a touch on her knee, and saw a look of concern on Dev's expressive face. “Cold's murder when you've been kicked around as much as I have.”

“I think you would like the sun.” Dev said. “There was a place in the creche where the ceiling wasn't all polarized, and you could feel how warm it was when the sun hit your skin. I remember I was up there after gym one day, and my shoulders really hurt. It felt so nice when the sun was on them.”

Jess released a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh. “Warm would feel nice right now.” She admitted. “It's never really warm. Not outside, not up here in the wilds, not in the citadel. Only place I ever get warm is in bed.”

A little silence fell. Then Dev looked over at the padded platform, one eyebrow lifting as she turned her gaze back to Jess. “Would you like to get warm?”

The thought of climbing into the survival bag and having Dev next to her put a flush of another type across her skin. But at the same time, she suddenly felt a little shy. “We should get some sleep.” Jess said, after a pause. “It was a long day today, and tomorrow'll be worse. Those fishermen...they're long off kin of mine but that doesn't mean they'll cooperate with us.”

Dev packed up her rations and took the remains of Jess's. She put them in the trash container strapped to the edge of the carrier frame and turned, offering Jess a hand up. Her palm was gripped and she leaned back to brace herself against her partner's weight, tilting her head back as Jess got to her feet. “If we're staying here until the morning, we have good length time to get some rest.” She said. “And get warm.”

Jess undid the wrist catches on her suit and let them hang open, then loosened the seals at her throat. “I think that's a good idea.” She agreed quietly. “The boats go out at dawn, and come back in at dark. So we should leave before it gets light to catch them. It's not far from here.”

Dev tried to make a picture of that in her head as she took off her outer suit and it was difficult. There was a very tiny, very cramped sanitary unit in the carrier and she used it, wondering briefly how Jess or the muscular Jason managed. “This is a very restricted facility.” She commented when she rejoined Jess.

“Ugh.” Jess seemed to relax a little. “One of our biggest gripes about these old model carriers. Most of the guys just open the hatch and go freestyle.”

Unfortunately for Dev, she could make a picture of that in her head and she grimaced a little. “Unfortunate for anyone beneath you.”

Jess started laughing. “You're probably the only one in the corps right now who can fit in there without bending something. Enjoy it I guess. The newer model of this bus has a better internal arrangement.” She was in her gray under suit and she removed her boots. “Let me suffer and get it over with. I end up with a lump on the top of my head or a bruise somewhere whenever I use it.”

Dev hopped up onto the sleeping platform and scooted back, laying down flat and evaluating the relative comfort of it. It wasn't was, as Jess had said, as comfortable as their beds in the citadel but it wasn't terribly uncomfortable, and she thought they could get a reasonable amount of rest on it.

Jess emerged, rubbing the top of her head and giving Dev a wry look. Then she joined her up on the platform, laying down next to her and dimming the overheads.

They both exhaled a little, and looked at each other.

Jess cleared her throat and pulled a control pad on an arm next to her over to review some information. She keyed in a few things, and then studied the results. “Want to make sure the sensors are reading right. Storm or no storm, wild or no wild, I want to know if anyone's trying to sneak up on us.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” Dev regarded her own data pad, which was displaying the technical information about the carrier, and it's internal systems. She could see the skin temperature reading, which made her shiver a little, and she was glad she'd connected the carrier up to the embedded power cell in the pad to make sure their internal heating systems would continue to cycle and not drain off their internal batteries all night.

Where did the pad get the power, she wondered? “Jess?”

“Huh?” Jess jumped a little. “What?”

Dev turned her head, surprised at the reaction. “I just wanted to ask you about the pad. I know we had a power lead, where does it come from?”

“Oh.” Jess scratched the bridge of her nose. “Um.. let me think.. here... there's some geothermal activity I think. They use temperature energy exchange to store in the embedded cells.” She clipped her pad to the locker wall and folded her hands over her stomach. “Damn useful.”

“Very.” Dev clipped her own pad down, then she let her head rest on the built in soft puffy area the survival bag used as a pillow. It was very basic, but she felt her body relax. 'Otherwise it would be really cold in here.”

“In the old days, they'd have burned trees for warmth.” Jess eased over onto her side and propped her head up as she regarded her partner. “I saw that once.”

Dev turned her head. “Really?”

“When I was little. They found some old, dried up driftwood on the beach near our house.” Jess said. “My father gathered it all up and set it on fire, and we sat around it and grilled some fish over it.”

Dev now turned onto her side, her face alight with fascination. “Really?”

Jess held her hand out in front of her. “Yeah. It was...” She rubbed her fingers together in memory. “It was warm and it had a good smell to it. I've always remembered that. It always... “ She hesitated. “It was kind of a link back to the past.” She let herself call up that image, the cool breeze off the water and the smell of salt and sand and the family all there.

Last time, really. She'd gone to basic camp five or six months later and they'd never managed to all get together again. But for that night, they'd enjoyed the moment and it had left her with a mental picture of melancholy happiness. “We cooked marshmallows.”

“What?” Dev reached over and touched her hand, clasping it gently.

“Marshmallows. It was a really old package, I guess my father had been hiding it for a very very long time or maybe... “ Jess chuckled. “Maybe he got it from someone but they were these puffy

sweet things, like tiny pillows, and when you put them in the fire they got all brown on the outside and soft and gooey on the inside."

Dev wasn't really sure what that would be like, but she could tell by the smile on Jess's face that it must have been good. "I've never had anything at all like that. It does sound interesting."

Jess exhaled. "Anyway. So here's the thing with tomorrow." She was aware of Dev's fingers, lightly clasped around hers. "I was going to leave you with the carrier, but I think it'll be better for me and safer for you if you come with me."

"Okay." Dev looked pleased.

"I just have to figure out what the hell I'm going to tell them you are. Spacer I guess, but why are you here?" Jess pondered.

"Well, you could tell them that I'm a scientist who wants to take sea measurements" Dev suggested, clearing her throat a little. "Maybe I'm looking for a new kind of fish."

"Hm."

"You could say I was from Bio Station Beta. They do all kinds of experiments there." Dev warmed to her subject. "I remember we had one of the scientists come and give us a speech at the creche, about how we could be assigned there and help them find new ways to use the ocean, or breed special fish."

"What about me?" Jess asked, an intrigued look on her face.

Dev studied her. "Do these people know who you are?"

"They know who I am, but not what I am. They're cousins of my mother's." Jess said.

"So maybe the station hired you as a guide. They did that, when they came downside." Dev said. "I remember Doctor Dan telling me about going downside with some people from the fabrication station and they hired some guides who took them someplace."

Jeff smiled. "You know what, Dev?"

"What?"

"I think you've got a talent for fabrication."

Dev considered that. "You mean lying?"

"No." Jess squirmed a little closer, pulling the light cover from the bags over her and tossing the other end of it over Dev. "You make up good stories we can use in the field. That's a big plus." She said. "Not everyone can do that. Josh couldn't. He had the imagination of a rock."

Dev smiled, and felt a surge of happiness at the unexpected praise. "Thank you." She squeezed Jess's hand and then released it, as she stretched out her body and put her head down on the raised, pillowish area. She watched her partner do the same, and then reach out and turn down the already dim lighting.

Beneath the light cover she was suddenly aware of the warmth coming from Jess's body and she felt her heart start to beat just a little bit faster. She had never been this close to another person for this length of time before, much less with the prospect of spending the night next to them.

It felt strange. She wondered if it was strange for Jess, but then, she figured, Jess had probably had many such experiences before.

Hadn't she? Dev had spent her entire life alone. "Jess?"

"Yes." The taller woman's voice came quietly through the gloom.

"Why is everyone so afraid of you?" Dev asked. "I don't understand."

Jess exhaled. "I told you. Because I'm crazy."

Dev rolled over an tucked her arm around the pillow area. "I don't think you're crazy. You don't act crazy, at least not like they taught us about."

"No, well. Not crazy. Just..." Jess squirmed a little closer. "I don't have a conscience. I don't... it doesn't matter to me what I do to people." She plucked a bit of the survival bag, making a soft

sound. “So people are scared of me.. and the other ops agents I guess, because we can and will kill people just like that.”

Dev reached out again and put her hand on Jess's wrist. “Is that really true?”

“It's true.” The quiet response came back. “I've killed thousands of people in my career so far. They were either the enemy, or just people who got in my way when I was on a mission. I didn't care. I don't care. You saw Bain. That guy he blew away was his nephew. He didn't care.”

“But – even Clint was afraid. He isn't your enemy.”

“Ah.” Jess smiled and it was audible in her voice. “That's a different thing. He's known me a long time, and he knows I have a wicked temper. He's seen me lose it. I guess he thought I was in that space the other day.”

“Were you?”

Long silence, there in the dim light. Then Jess laughed very softly. “Maybe I was. I didn't like him messing with you.”

Dev remained quiet for a time absorbing that. “Me?”

“You.” Jess gave in to the craving and leaned forward, finding Dev's lips in the darkness without any trouble at all. “You're my partner. He thought I thought he was poaching.”

Dev was losing interest in the explanation. She was much more engaged with feeling the electric buzz in her guts at Jess's touch, and the sense of wanting that erupted in her. She felt Jess shift a little closer, and she mirrored the motion, her breathing going unsteady as their bodies pressed together and Jess's hand came to rest against her hip.

Oh. That felt so interesting.

“He thought I might hurt him because of that.” Jess broke off for a moment, watching Dev's eyes track to her. “Maybe I would have.”

“He didn't do anything besides work on the carrier with me.” Dev said. “I don't understand why you would be upset.”

The mixture of innocence and desire facing her was making Jess's breath come very short She kissed Dev again and felt the bio alt's hand touch her thigh, gently stroking it. That sent a rush of passion through her, and she welcomed the wash of energy, driving back both the aches and her fatigue.

It felt clean, and good.

“I didn't find him attractive at all.” Dev went on, pausing between kisses. “Not like you.”

Not like me. Jess felt a lightness in her heart she hadn't for a very very long time. Dev was so honest and open it made her a little giddy. “I didn't want him to mess with you because I felt the same way.” She admitted. “I think he knew that.”

Dev thought so too. But she wasn't very worried about it at the moment. She felt Jess's lips touch her neck, and then nibble softly at her earlobe and she was sure she wasn't worried about Clint, or the citadel, or the mission for that matter.

Doctor Dan had been right, of course. She wanted this feeling, and she wanted it to keep going just like he'd told her she would.

There was, however, one minor issue. “Jess?”

“Hm?” Jess shifted closer and ran her fingers through Dev's hair. “Still got questions?”

Dev blinked at her. “Well, sort of.” She admitted. “We just got that one vid. I really don't have any idea what to do next.”

Jess's brows drew together and she paused, her thumb brushing Dev's cheekbone. “You're not programmed for this?”

A faint smile appeared on the bio alt's face. “Jess.” She reached over and put her hand on Jess's chest. “They program our heads. They can't program our hearts.”

Hearts. Jess felt hers start to pound. “Ah.” She replied faintly. “This is a heart thing.”

They both regarded each other.

“I guess they just thought we'd figure it out.” Dev said, finally. “But I really don't know where to start.”

Jess exhaled, and closed her eyes. Then she opened them and gently drew Dev closer. “We'll figure it out.” She said. Then she looked briefly down at Dev's hand. “And you've already got a pretty good idea where to start.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

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Dev almost didn't hear the signal. She was very engaged in that kissing thing, with Jess's tongue doing something weird and heart stopping that was making the blood hammer in her ears and it was only on a raggedly indrawn breath that the sound of the alerter penetrated her consciousness.

Alert?

She really wanted to ignore it. Her hands were gently exploring Jess's strong body and she didn't really care much about what the sound was, except that there was a tiny part of her brain that was telling her to pay attention to it. Then Jess's hand brushed her breast and that brought a whole new distraction to her attention.

The alert sounded again. “J.. jess. “ She managed to stutter.

“S'matter? Am I hurting you?” Jess lifted up a little and focused on her.

“Comms.” Dev said. “I can hear it.”

“Comms?” Jess's pale eyes stared into hers for a long uncomprehending moment before she cursed and shoved back, slamming her head into the decking covering their bed space. “Ouch. Shit.” She yelped. “Augh!”

She dropped back down onto the padded surface, but twisted to one side. “Get it!”

Dev squirmed out past her, tumbling out of the alcove and nearly tripping over her partly unfastened jumpsuit on her way to her console. Her knees felt rubbery and she had to work very hard to get enough coordination in place for her to hit the keys on comp and get an ear cup in place. “BR27006, echo twelve.”

She licked her lips, tasting Jess on them, and peered at the console, seeing the comm signal flashing there without really looking at it.

She was sweating and breathing hard, and she blinked a few droplets from her eyes as she waited for the response. The deck felt very cold against her bare feet and she lifted them up, resting them on the thruster pedals as she flexed her toes. The cup returned nothing but a slightly static filled silence, and she rested her head against her hand as she continued to wait.

She felt very shook up, but not in a bad way.

“Who the fuck is calling us on mission?” Jess growled. “Should have shut that stupid thing down.” She added. “Ow. Gonna have a lump from that damn overhead.” She was feeling the top of her head gingerly.

“Sorry about that.” Dev glanced over her shoulder. “I didn't mean to startle you.”

Jess was in her under suit, the top half undone and hanging down at the waist and her hair was in total disarray. With most of her upper body exposed, and the stark overhead lights shining down on her she was an odd and almost scary figure that Dev found amazingly attractive.

“Glad it didn't break skin.” Jess grinned briefly at her. “That'd been an embarrassing scar to explain.” Her eyes flicked past Dev. “Call em again.”

“Okay.” Dev was catching her breath, her heartbeat finally slowing down. “Comms, BR27006 copy.” She spoke into the mic, keying it manually. “Re trans ident please.” She was very grateful to her programming now. The codes and processes came to her automatically, undeterred by her internal chaotic state.

A soft crackling echoed into her ear. “BR27006, squirt, endit.” A low, mechanical voice sounded, then clicked off.

“Confirm.” Dev hit the buttons that would capture the encoded transmission then she eased the ear cup off, glancing down as a gust of chill wind came in through the outer vent and made tiny bumps go across her exposed skin. “It's an automatic broadcast.” She fastened the catches on her under suit with one hand, her other still holding the commslink.

“Even worse.” Jess poked her head around the edge of Dev's chair. “If that's just a rules squirt or some other piece of shit I”m going to find and kick whatever automated ass that sent it.”

Dev felt that she probably agreed with whatever that was. Her body was wanting very much to go back to exploring this whole sex thing, which had just started to become really, really interesting. “I”ll decode it.” She said, doing just that. The carrier's comp ingested the message and chewed over, as Jess leaned against her chair back and watched.

“So whatdja think?”

Dev stared at the comp, then turned her head and regarded Jess in some bewilderment. “It's not done yet. I don't think anything about it.”

Jess chuckled, and blew gently into her ear. “I didn't mean the message.”

“Oh.” Dev felt herself blushing, which felt warm and strange. “It was good.”

“Good?”

“I really liked it.” Dev explained, in a soft voice. “Though I really don't know what it's all about yet.”

“You will.” Jess leaned over and kissed her neck, then gently caught a fold of skin in her teeth. She released her, then tilted her head, watching her with a mischievous look.

“Oh.” Dev felt a prickle of desire run up and down her spine, ending up as a teasing ache in her groin. “I really hope so.”

Jess chuckled.

The comp finished it's run and displayed the message. Dev tore her attention from those twinkling eyes and studied it, letting her mind run over it at least twice before the words made any sense. “It's weather.” She said, after a long pause. “But I”m not sure what it means.”

Jess obligingly leaned over her to look at the screen. After a moment, she came all the way around the chair and braced her hands against the console as her eyes flicked over the information. “Wow.” She murmured. “Storm that came over us is slamming the ice pack. They picked up distress signals from the fishing fleet must be driving the seas up.”

Dev looked at the wire line map, filled with bumps and arrows. She could see two white crosses on the edge of the map, and they were slowly blinking. She reached out and put her finger on one. “Is that who we were going to see?”

“Maybe.” Jess said. “The fleets pretty big. Might not be the boats we're looking for.” She checked the chrono on the console. “They're expecting it to last another twelve hours.” She grunted. “We maybe could get out in ten and chase it.”

“Like we did on the last mission?”

Jess nodded. “Get behind it and come in as it passes. Might make up some time.”

Dev studied the map, seeing the lines of weather clustered close and tightly packed over where they were. “I see.” She said. “Will we go help them?”

Jess leaned back against the console. “No.” She said. “That's not what we do.” She said. “We get the squirt so we don't fly into it. Interforce isn't the coast guard. They go help them. That's their job.”

“I see.” Dev digested that. “So they'll get this information too?”

“Yes.” Jess said. “Well, they'll get something like it.” She amended. “Our met tends to be a little better than theirs.” Her lips twitched a little. “Not that they'll admit it. They lost a lot when the government collapsed and they had to depend on regional bosses for money.”

“I see.” Dev said, who really didn't.

“We'll go see what their status is, the ones we're looking for after the storm passes.” Jess went on. “If they can't help us, I'll have to come up with another approach. Happens sometimes.” She regarded the report. “On the other hand, if they need help we could use it as leverage to get what we want from them.” She looked thoughtful. “They can be hard assed bastards.”

“But we can't go until the storm is over?” Dev asked. “It could be too late to help anyway.”

“Yeah, we're stuck here.” Now Jess turned her entire attention back to her pilot. “What a shame, huh?”

Dev managed a mild, rakish grin. Her skin prickled as Jess reached over and removed the ear piece from her head, tracing the edge of her ear with one finger. It made that sense of wanting erupt in her again, and she closed her eyes as the touch continued.

But the message disturbed her a little. She opened her eyes again and glanced at it. “What will happen to them?”

“To who?” Jess tilted her head, then followed her pilot's eyes. “The fishermen? I don't know. Depends where they were I guess. Might have gotten caught in a cracked flow and trashed or been washed overboard.”

Dev's brow creased. “That will hurt them?”

“Kill em, most likely.” Jess said, offering her a hand. “C'mon, let's get back to our investigation.”

Dev tried to imagine what it might be like for the fishermen, but found she didn't have enough information to even make a picture in her head about it. So, regretfully, she closed the message and stood up. “It's too bad we can't help. I think it would be a good thing for us to do that.”

“Why?” Jess asked.

Dev looked at her, but there was honest interest in her expression. That made her stop and think about the question. “They teach us it's good to help people.” She finally said. “Everyone does, in the creche. It makes you feel good.”

Jess folded her arms over her chest and regarded her for a minute in silence. “People you know.” She clarified. “Not just anyone.”

“No, anyone.” Dev said. “Even sets we didn't know.”

“Huh.”

“So I think about those people in the storm and it makes me feel bad we can't do anything to help them.” Dev clarified. “Even though I know we can't, because of the weather.” She watched Jess's face intently. “Is that disturbing?”

Jess uncrossed her arms and let them drop. She eased into Dev's chair and hiked one knee up, resting her elbow on it. “I don't know. I never thought about it before.” She tentatively did just that, imagining the boats out in the ice, and how cold it would be for them.

She'd spent a few days out there, when she was much younger. She remembered the sting of the wind against her face as she'd watched them steer into it and remembered her once removed uncle slitting the throat of the first fish they'd caught and letting the wind take the blood as a superstitious offering to whatever ruled the winds and waves.

Grisly, she supposed. But it hadn't bothered her and now, thinking of them out there possibly being killed by the storm didn't bother her either. The fact that Dev was bothered baffled her. “I'm not sure what the hell that is.”

“I didn't mean to cause you discomfort.” Dev was at her side, putting a hand on her arm. “I”m sure you know the right thing to do.”

“Do I?” Jess mused. “Depends on how you look at it I guess.” She sighed. “They don't care about us, so I don't know why you'd care about them. But the weather's the weather so it's a moot point anyway.”

“Okay.” Dev rubbed her arm gently. “Just my programming I guess.”

Jess studied her. “Well.” She got up from the chair and put her arm around Dev's shoulders. “Let's get some horizontal time while we can.” She guided them both back to the crude sleeping platform and eased onto it, watching the overhead as she scooted back.

Dev hitched herself back, leaning against the wall of the carrier as she lifted her drink canister out of its holder and took a swallow from it. Then she set the canister back and laid down flat again, as Jess adjusted the lights and settled down beside her, not without giving the overhead an evil look. “Did you really hurt your head?” She reached over and touched Jess's hair, feeling a faint lump under her fingers. “Oh. You did!”

“My pride more. My head's like a rock. ” Jess admitted. “I'm fine. Just not used to having a ledge over my pillow.” She slapped the overhead. “Now.” She shifted into a more comfortable position. “Where was I?”

She watched Dev turn to look at her, that faint, half embarrassed smile appearing on her face. “Is this freaking you out?”

“No.” Dev answered instantly, then she paused. “Well.” She made a face. “Yes, but it's okay. I like it.”

Jess chuckled. “You're so damn funny.”

“I'm not trying to be.” Dev said. “There's just so much happening.” She relaxed onto the padding, watching the dim lights make shadows over Jess's body. “Its a little confusing.”

“Confusing. Well I'll try not to confuse you any more.” Jess casually undid the top fastening on her under suit, peeling it back to reveal bare skin. “Want me to stop?” She paused at the second fastening, and raised an eyebrow.

“No.” Dev eased over onto her side and leaned forward for a kiss, hearing the soft sound as the second catch was undone and she felt the light puff of air as the suit was gently pulled down off her shoulders. “I don't.”

“Good answer.” Jess moved closer, keeping her lips engaged as she slipped her hand around Dev's back. She undid the catches on her underwear, feeling them come loose as Dev shyly did the same for hers. She relaxed, and felt Dev do the same, as they brushed against each other skin on skin.

Oh that did feel nice. Jess continued her exploration. She found her new pilot's body sexy and interesting, a mixture of delicacy and power that continually surprised her. Her short stature and relatively slight form were very deceptive, and as she ran her fingers along Dev's side she could feel muscles contracting under her touch.

Nice.

She felt a sudden electric warmth as Dev somewhat hesitantly touched her breasts. She returned the attention, feeling the tiny intake of breath through Dev's lips as she teased her nipples, getting an immediate reaction from them. “Like that?”

“Ah, yes.” Dev copied her motion, and seemed a little surprised at the growl of approval Jess uttered. “Is that okay?”

“Very okay.” Jess forced herself to go slowly, remembering that Dev had no experience at any of it, not wanting to scare her new partner or creep her out. “If you don't like something say so.” She whispered into Dev's ear. “Okay?”

“Y... yes.”

Thus encouraged, Jess nudged her over onto her back, rolling over herself and getting her weight up onto one elbow as she started to work her way down Dev's body, nibbling and tasting as she went.

So far, so good. She could feel Dev's breathing increasing as she let her fingers trail down the centerline of her navel, and come to the last set of catches on her under suit.

She undid them, unsurprised when her own came loose around her hips. She could feel a touch at her ribs, and then lower and she went ahead, sure now of her reception. It didn't seem like Dev was going to freak out, and from what she could tell, her partner was enjoying her attentions.

She'd never been anyone's first before. Definitely was an odd sensation. She hoped she'd do right by Dev and she'd come out the other side liking it, because she suspected she was going to enjoy the process and she wanted the first time not to be the last. “Here we go.”

Dev hardly knew what to do with herself She tried to copy what Jess was doing, but what Jess was doing was so distracting it was really hard to concentrate The gentle touches and snips sent sparks of pleasure up and down her body and as Jess kept up her attentions she had to keep clenching her jaw to keep from crying out.

Her body had never felt like this before. There was a growing craving in her guts that made her want more and more of it, every touch making the sensation deeper and stronger.

She wanted to touch Jess back, and somehow she managed to keep focused long enough to undo the stays on her suit, feeling warm skin under her fingertips and the motion as Jess drew in a deep breath.

A bit of cooler air hit her hips as she felt her under wraps come free and then that was replaced by heat as Jess's touch slid over her lower stomach and gently eased between her legs.

It was an explosion of wanting then. Dev forgot completely about where they were and what they were there for her entire attention focusing on the fingers that touched her and teased her, making her own hands nerveless as they rested against Jess's belly unable to move.

A pressure was growing inside her, an aching, building pressure that made her short of breath and sent pulses of red against the back of her eyelids. She clamped her jaw shut as the sensation got stronger, and then Jess changed the pressure, and did something else that sent her rapidly into a whirl of pleasure, making her hold her breath and open her eyes in surprise as it crashed over her in a long, rolling wave.

It was wonderful, and scary, and overwhelming. Dev could feel sweat dripping off her and her entire body was shaking, her eyes wide and amazed as she stared over Jess's shoulder.

It took at least a minute more, with Jess gently stroking her, for her to be able to catch her breath, her body relaxing back onto the padding with a tiny thump.

For a moment, there was silence. Then Jess cleared her throat softly “You okay?”

For another moment, Dev stared at her mutely.

“Hello?” Jess reached up and gently tapped her on the forehead. “You there?”

Dev exhaled. “Okay.” She said. “I now understand why this is such a big deal to you natural borns.” She exhaled. “I get it.”

Jess started silently laughing.

“But wow, did they ever leave a lot out.” Dev went on, in mournful tone. “That sure would have made class a lot more interesting.”

Jess continued to laugh, rolling over onto her back and holding her stomach.

“Wow.”

Dev blew the damp hair out of her eyes and studied the bulkhead over them. Her body was still tingling,and she slowly shook her head back and forth as she went over what had just happened.

It felt amazingly good. Her body felt like it was humming to itself inside her and she now had an insight into why the natural borns were so interested in this. She was glad that Jess seemed to like it too, and now she really wanted to learn what it was that Jess had done, so she could do it back.

The thought of making Jess feel this good was very, very attractive. It was exciting and absorbing, and now she was really glad the storm was going to take as long as it was, so she could find out more about this before they had to go off and do their mission.

Doctor Dan had been right. This feeling was rich and overwhelming and it made her want to do it more. Very distracting. "Jess?" She turned her head towards her partner. "I want to do that to you."

Jess's face broke into a frank, happy grin. "Glad to hear that."

Dev grinned back. "Are you still angry at the weather?"

"Nope. You?" Jess reached over and traced a line down her partner's exposed belly. "Want to start learning now?"

"Yes."

"Don't need a break?"

"No."

Jess chuckled and pulled her closer. "Good answer."

**

The soft chime woke Dev up at once, and she opened her eyes to find herself curled up next to Jess, the taller woman's long arms draped over her, the agent still deep in slumber. After a moment of bemusement she relaxed, remembering what theyd' done before going to sleep.

Amazing. She tilted her head a little, looking up to study the tall figure next to her.

Jess had a very interesting face. Asleep, she appeared relaxed and her usual skepticism was smoothed away but the strong lines were still evident, a somewhat squared jaw and high cheekbones, that outlined deep set eyes and spare, yet well shaped lips.

She had a scar under one eye, faint and almost invisible, and another along her jawline. Dev only just restrained herself from reaching out to touch them, settling instead for wrapping a bit of Jess's dark, straight hair round her finger and stroking it with the edge of her thumb.

It was soft. So few things about Jess were. Dev thought about all she'd experienced now in such a short time, and had a sense that her life had become so intense and compressed that each minute was packed full of stuff that she had to sort through and ingest and figure out what to do with.

Now this sex thing, for example. Dev felt her face twitch into a grin. That was an awful lot of intensity to absorb in a short period and she thought perhaps they might take some time when they got back to the citadel and explore it further. Would Jess want to do that? Dev thought she might, since after some trial and error she reasoned she'd done pretty well with her sex lesson and her partner had seemed to enjoy it.

It would take practice, she'd told Dev, but there had been a distinct smirk on her face when she'd said it, just before they dimmed the overhead light completely and fell asleep.

Dev had absolutely enjoyed it. However, she figured they could do that in a spot that was more comfortable and less dangerous to Jess's skull than the alcove.

Their beds back in the citadel for example. They were nice and big and comfortable. But Dev would also keep a kind memory of this little padded alcove because this was where she'd gotten to learn about it for the first time. Right here, in her … in their carrier.

There was something she really liked about that. Though lacking in comfort, it was quiet, and very private in a way she'd never really known before. She thought about the fact that she and Jess were probably the only beings for a long way around them and realized this was as alone as she'd ever been in her life.

Very alone. Very private. She looked up at Jess's face. Very personal.

A quick look at the dimly lit chrono told her they still had hours before the end of the storm, and she eased her hand out to shut off the chime before it sounded again.

The motion woke Jess though, and she felt her body shift and take on tension, just as her eyes flickered open and she swept the small alcove in a brief, mild confusion before she focused on Dev. “Ah.” Her expression brightened.

“Ah.” Dev amiably responded. “Alarm just went off.”

Jess's pale eyes lifted to the overhead, then she settled back down on the padding. “So I see.” She mused. “Interesting to dream about something and wake up to.. “ She paused. “Anyway. Sleep good?”

“Excellent.” Dev said.

Jess rested her chin against Dev's head. “We can have some rations, get the bus warmed up, and see if we can get out of here. Get this show on the road.” She mused. “Sound like a plan?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Good.”

Dev ingested this. Jess didn't seem to be inclined to immediately put her plan into action, and she found it quite pleasant to remain where she was, enjoying the comforting warmth of the casual embrace they were in. She had never felt anything like it before, this close contact to another being, and she decided she could easily get used to it.

Another new thing to absorb. She studied Jess's arm, her eyes tracing the dark patterning on her skin and thought about the mission they were on. Would Jess get a new mark for it?

Could she get one? Would she be allowed to? Did she want to?

Hm.

Jess finally started moving, rolling over and stretching her body out, then easing forward and standing up to continue the process. Dev followed, adjusting the inside lighting before she set about collecting all the bits and pieces of clothing that were scattered about.

“Messy process huh?” Jess said, in an amused tone. “Hope you had as good a time as I did.”

Dev looked up , and smiled. “I think so.”

Jess squeezed herself into the sanitary unit, chuckling as she did. “Start some kack going, huh?”

“Yes.” Dev had gotten her under layer on and was working the dispenser. She felt well rested, and she sidestepped over to her console while the dispenser was churning to key up the carrier's status reports and start them running.

The sensors powered up and started scanning, and the windows de-tinted and showed the dim interior of the ice cave they were parked in. The batteries had recharged, and Dev was very pleased to see that the repair work the carrier had undertaken had completed, so far as it was able.

She still had some work to do on it, but she considered the results and decided the carrier would indeed lift when she asked it to, and she would be able to reasonably steer it.

“Bus not immediately falling apart?” Jess came up behind her and peered down. Then she ducked her head and looked out the window. “I'm going to go out and make sure we're clear.”

Dev glanced at her. “Like that?” She frowned. “I should probably turn the outside heaters on then.”

Jess looked down at her naked form, then she delivered an extremely droll look at her pilot. “Wonder if we paid extra for that sense of humor.” She tweaked Dev's nose. “No. I'm not going outside and freezing my nipples solid, no matter how entertaining that would be for you.”

The dispenser finished and they got their hot drinks along with a ration pack and sat down to consume it in companionable silence. Jess had thrown her under suit on and she was sitting on the low bench with her long legs splayed out as she chewed the seaweed wrapped roll. “Last time I was in these parts I got to taste bear jerky. That's something different.”

Dev studied her. “Bear?”

“Polar bear.” Jess clarified. “Only large mammal left on the planet and it only survived because it's a fish eater like we've become.” She finished her fish roll and tucked the remains of her pack into the compactor. “Let me go make sure we didn't heat up the skids and get us frozen to the deck.” She winked at Dev, and went to the slim compartment their over suits were hung in and got into hers.

Dev took the last remains of her own meal over to her console and sat down in her chair, pondering what Jess could have meant about those skids. She set her drink in the holder and paused, remembering blinking sweat out of her eyes the last time she'd sat there

Then she felt her face warm as she figured it all out. She turned her her chair and watched Jess put on her coat. “You don't really think we could have melted the ice down there do you?”

Jess looked up and grinned. Then she put her gloves on. “Be right back.” She picked up her big blaster and hit the door controls, ducking out and closing the hatch behind her so quickly only a small blast of frigid air made it's way in.

“Yeesh.” Dev rubbed her face, and returned her attention to her console. The scan had picked up a collection of intelligence and she put it on the display, settling into her seat and keying on all her systems. She finished her fish roll and dusted her fingers off, washing the roll down with a sip of her drink before she started bringing everything up live.

She keyed the diagnostic panel for the engines, looking up every few moments to watch Jess making her slow way around the cavern. She had her blaster cradled in her arms and she was turning in circles as she walked, watching everything around her intently.

Her hood surrounded her face with insulation, but as Dev watched, she pushed the hood back and stood still, her head cocking to one side as though she was listening to something.

Dev keyed in the sensors and turned up the gain, hearing a soft crackling and a gentle popping noise she couldn't identify. She could almost hear Jess's breathing, watching the vapor issue from her partner's nose, and she tuned the sensor a little higher as she watched Jess's eyes slowly scan and rescan the area, her body still and tense.

Operating on some instinct, Dev started bringing systems online. She ran the external diagnostics and then triggered the unlock for the umbilical that was tying them in to the cave's systems. She heard it retract, the rattle and snap sounding very loud and making Jess turn to look at the carrier.

Thens she got up and went to the small closet, getting her flight suit out and getting into it. The fabric constricted around her, and she picked up her boots and went back to her seat to sit down and get into them.

Not without another look out the window, though. For a moment she didn't spot Jess, then she did, finding her over near the platform edge where the carrier was perched, carefully examining everything there. She still had her hood down, and as Dev watched she turned her head and their eyes met through the window.

Oh, that was interesting. Dev felt a jolt of reaction deep inside her. At the same time, a smile appeared on Jess's face, and she turned in a circle then continued her inspection.

Dev got her boots fastened and went back to bringing the carrier into a flight ready state. She hooked up the control leads to the ports on her suit and got her comms set in place, studying the readouts and adjusting levels as everything came online. The carrier started making sounds all around her, leveling a little on the pad and thumping as she turned on the engine heaters.

After a moment she initiated the pre-start, and once the engines reported online she shunted some power to Jess's weapon systems. Their backup boards came up on her station as the hatch popped open and Jess entered. “Are we frozen?”

Jess chuckled, as she shed her outer jacket. “No, but there's something here I don't like. Can't put my finger on it and I want to get out of here so... “ She looked around at the interior of the craft and Dev's already suited figure. “So I guess you read my mind and we're about ready huh?”

“You seemed unsettled.” Dev agreed. “I thought it would be a good idea to get things going.”

Jess seated the blaster and went to her own console, shaking her head and chuckling under her breath. “Boy was I wrong.” She sighed. “I remember sitting on my ass back on base and saying something stupid like there's no way you could train someone to be a tech in a week.”

Dev reviewed her panels, a smile appearing as she absorbed the indirect compliment.

“Not only can you, they give me one that reads minds, wants me to teach them sex, and has already picked up on my field signals without me having to say a word.” Jess reviewed her station, pulling her restraints around her and buckling them. “How did you know to bring up my guns?”

Dev buckled her own harness, her smile growing a bit wider. “I thought it would be correct.” She said, modestly. “Things seem dangerous in this place, and they did teach us that when things are dangerous, it's best to make sure the weapons are ready.”

Jess chuckled audibly. “Well, there's training, and then there's aptitude. I have a feeling you got a big helping of both, my friend.” She cracked her knuckles. “Get us out of here, Dev. Something doesn't smell right.”

Dev wasn't really sure what that meant, but she pulled her seat forward and locked it into flight mode and got her hands and feet on the engine controls. She peered around through the windows and checked the back scanner and then she ignited the landing jets and felt the carrier shift.

So apparently they weren't really frozen to the pad. Dev smiled a little, as they lifted and she touched the side jets, rotating the carrier in her typical circle to check position and her surroundings before she went further. She touched the carrier's external lighting and the cavern interior came into raw relief as the powerful beams bounced off the inside walls.

“Give me forward view please, Dev..” Jess murmured.

Dev transferred the view back, then she tickled the engines and started them forward, heading for the opening to the cave. The inside of the cave seemed very empty, and she didn't spot anything moving, but there was a certain relief in her gut when they cleared the cave entrance and moved into the crevasse that it was buried in.

Outside, it was gray and still stormy. White snow was scattered all around them, but the winds had dropped and she had no trouble maneuvering. She cautiously lifted up out of the crease in the ice and emerged over it, again turning in a circle to survey the space before checking her coordinates and moving off.

“Who taught you to do that?” Jess asked. “The circle thing? Was that programmed?”

Dev thought about it. “No.” She said, after a moment. “I used to watch the mechs who serviced the outside of the station sometimes. They would always do that when they came out of the service bay and I thought it was a good idea, to see what was around you. They wanted to make sure they didn't have any leads or umbilicals hung on them anywhere that could get ripped off.”

Jess tilted her head a little. “How would....oh. Everything floats up there, right?”

“Outside the grav field, yes.” Dev agreed. “Everything does.” She looked forward and prepared to bring the engines up to full speed, then paused. “Oh! Jess! What's that!”

Jess nearly ejected herself right into the ceiling as she hit the release and leaped up, bounding forward to collide with the back of Dev's seat. “What?”

“There!” Dev pointed. “That thing moving there!” She slowed the carrier and brought it around in a lazy circle, watching the thing below them race along.

Jess stared in silence for a long moment, blinking. “Oh.” She finally said. “I think... yeah, that's a bear.” She leaned forward. “I've never seen one alive before.” She admitted. “But I've seen pictures. Bigger than I thought it would be.”

The thing was big. It was white, and roundish, and it had a black point on it's face and Dev watched it in utter fascination. It was moving fast, using all four of it's limbs to run over the white and icy surface. It was completely strange but also, oddly beautiful. “Wow.”

“That is pretty cool.” Jess admitted. “The ice people hunt them, but they don't find them often.” She reluctantly tore her attention away from the bear. “Not sure I would want to be on foot near that thing. They have claws the size of my hand.” She held hers up. “And fangs like this.” She held her fingers up with her thumb and index ones extended.

The bear disappeared behind some ice hillocks, and Dev returned the carrier to it's course, thinking about the creature. What was it doing out on the ice? Was it a boy or a girl? Did bears have boy and girl or were they just bears? She made a mental note to look them up once they were back at the citadel and checked the flight recorders, glad to see the cams would have caught the bear and she maybe could get a still image of it.

Jess went back to her seat and resumed her restraints, bringing her console up closer and starting a thorough check of the weapons systems. She was pretty sure she wasn't going to need them until they got a lot closer to the border but it never paid to take a chance out here in the ice wild.

So many things could kill you out here. The weather and the ice, and closer to the edge, the freezing sea spray that could coat the carrier with ice in minutes. Now, she supposed, she also had to add encountering a bear to the list. “That was cool.”

“Excuse me?” Dev glanced in the mirror.

“Seeing the bear.” Jess said. “Good catch.”

Dev settled into her seat, watching the auto nav as she tested the repairs the carrier had made overnight, and finding herself very pleased with both herself, and the way things had gone the past couple of days. Things were going really well, she thought, and now she also had finding a bear to her credit.

Life was pretty amazing at the moment.

With a smile, she studied her readouts, pausing briefly to glance up at the mirror to find Jess's eyes watching her in it. She felt her throat go a little dry and an image of the pleasure they'd shared surfaced, making her want to experience that again. A soft chime distracted her though, and she went back to studying the control sets, picking up her drink and taking a long swallow of it.

After all, it was time to work now. She snuck a glance at the mirror again though, and saw Jess looking at her own systems, but with a smile on her face that didn't look like it had anything to do with the blaster energy readouts.

Yes, time for work.

**

Two hours later they were coming up on the storm edge. Dev felt the winds increasing, and she snugged her restraints a little tighter, trimming the engine power to keep them on course.

“Met's getting ugly.” Jess confirmed the increasing buffeting. “Let's slow down I don't want to run into the back of that line of nasty.” She sent the met scan up with the storm line circled in light pen. “Stay clear of that.”

“Okay.” Dev agreed. She cut power and took the carrier off autonav, taking the controls and turning the craft into a shallow curve to run parallel to the storm line.

Ahead of her she could see the roiling clouds, and, in one spot, one of the big cone spouts they'd run from. It looked big and dangerous, and she could see down at the bottom there was white ice and debris being thrown everywhere. The last time they'd run in behind the storm it had been full dark, and she'd seen very little.

This was different. She could see the power of the storm, and it made her think of the people in the boats that maybe were inside it. She remembered what it had been like when the storm had come up over them, and hoped the boat people would end up okay. “Jess?”

“Hm?”

“Is there a place for the people down there to hide like what we found, when the storm comes?”

Jess remained silent for a bit, only the sound of her touching keys and relays echoing softly. “I don't know.” She finally responded. “Maybe... if they have a sea level cliff, or a pocket in an iceberg or something. Why?”

“I just wondered.” Dev said. “I wonder what the bears do.”

The clicking stopped, and she looked up in the mirror to see Jess looking back at her, with a puzzled expression. “They're alive too, so I just wondered.”

Jess shook her head and went back to her console.

Dev figured bears probably didn't mean much to Jess, even if they were cool to see Then she remembered that Jess hadn't really much cared about the boat people either, and it reminded her of what her partner had said, that she had... what was it? No moral sense? Did that mean she just really didn't care about anything?

Hm.

She slowed the carrier further, and dipped lower towards the ice, scanning it's surface to see if maybe she could see another bear. The ice seemed very disrupted though, there were big chunks scattered everywhere, and as she ran along the storms edge she started spotting dark lines in it.

The ice seemed to be moving. As she slowed down, she could see it shifting, and then she realized that the dark lines were open water between huge chunks of the ice showing through. As she observed, the chunks moved, and the water splashed up between them, sending a spray high in the air.

“Stay clear of that.” Jess said. “The water coming up. It'll coat the outside of the bus.”

“Yes, I see.” Dev checked the skin temperature of the carrier, which seemed all right for the moment. “How far should I go?”

Jess glanced up. “Go to open ocean. Let's see if we see any debris if those ships got caught.”

Dev increased her speed, keying the scan up and checking to see if any other squirts were pending. Comms had been completely silent since the last one though. She tipped the carrier into a little bit of a down nose attitude and waited, as she saw a much darker line coming up on the horizon.

That was open sea, according to scan. She nudged the craft into a bit of an arc, coming up over the line between ice and water and heading out in a shallow circle. The buffeting from the storm was lessening as it moved on ahead of them, and she felt the carrier level and the pressure gradients ease.

Jess came up behind her again, leaning on the back of her seat as she looked out the window. Dev thought that was a just a bit odd, since she got a perfect view from the console display, and in fact, since that was augmented by the forward scan she could see more than just by looking.

Yet, here she was.

Dev concentrated on flying. She watched the scan return, seeing nothing at the moment but ice and water, and the rough and scalloped edge of the storm itself. The sea surface was wild and surging, white waves crashing over the ice and sending up spray almost to where they were.

She turned up the outside sensors, and the carrier was filled with the noise of it, the roar and thunder of the waves, and the snapping and crack of the ice being battered along with the wind's howling. It was very wild and a little bit exciting, but Dev was glad she didn't see anything that might have been the boats in trouble floating around.

“Hey. There.” Jess said suddenly, pointing over Dev's shoulder at the edge of a tall iceberg. “Look. See the opening?”

Dev certainly hadn't, and even if she had she suspected she wouldn't have known what she was looking at. “I see it.”

“See if you can get down in there. I want to see what's in that crack.”

Dev studied the space, then glanced at her partner. Then she shook her head a little and complied, dipping the carrier down and heading for the sea's rough surface. She kicked the engines on and

skimmed over the water, weaving in and out of the waves as they exploded up on either side of her.

“Guess we get to see if those heaters work after all.” Jess let her elbow rest casually on Dev's shoulder.

“I think we will” Dev felt the spray hit them, and in an instant, the window was covered in ice. She pumped energy to the skin of the carrier and it cleared, only to be washed over again as another wave came from a different angle. “I'm glad comps up.” She studied the readout, piloting by it's return and ignoring the visual distraction.

“I”m glad you're driving.” Jess said as they skimmed between the ice and the sea and dropped into the crack she'd seen from the outside. The front window cleared again and now that they were in a somewhat protected space, it stayed clear as Dev dropped the craft down towards the opening. “You might want to hold on.” She warned. “I think I will need to go sideways.”

Jess pulled a standing restraint from it's wall pocket and snapped into one of the weapons hard points on her suit. “Go baby go.” She said. “Let's see what this hunt gets us. “

Dev tilted the carrier nose down and put it on it's side, skimming between the two ice walls as she narrowed in on the opening Jess had spotted. She directed the outside lights into the crack, and in a moment they both had a brief sight of a craft, stubby figures, and the glare of a plasma blaster as it opened fire on them. “Oh!”

“Shit!” Jess agreed. “Get us.. whoa!”

Dev swiveled the craft on it's axis and took the hit on the bottom of the carrier, then she kicked the engines to full power and pointed them back towards the sky, the gravity pressure slamming her hard in her chair and throwing Jess against the bulkhead. “I don't think they wanted us to see them.”

“Ya think?” Jess grimaced, as she pulled her head away from a door handle. “Remind me to rig up a rubber padded suit for flying with you.”

“Sorry” Dev pulled them out of their steep climb and arced over, going from two gravs to near null and sending Jess floating away from the wall. “Hold on.”

“Need a damn bungy suit... can I hold on to you?”

Dev felt her face heat up, but she got the carrier level without sending her partner flying again. As a reward, Jess leaned over and kissed her, then unclipped from the wall and bounded back to her seat, dropping into it and pulling her full set of restraints around her.

“Now” Jess licked her lips. “Let's try that again, only this time, with me on the forward guns.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Dev asked.

“Oh yeah. No one shoots at me and gets away with it. Go baby go.”

Dev suspected this might possibly end up to be a very long day.

**

They were at sea level again, coming in hard towards the ice cliff. Dev could feel the weapons systems humming around her, and she could see on one of her aux screens that Jess was running targeting projections.

She could see that the crack they'd gone down before had widened a trifle, and she ran a very quick calculation, bouncing a probe off the opening and decided they could go in right way up this time. The hit on the bottom shields had done no damage, and comp was telling her the blaster that they'd hit them with wasn't that powerful.

She wondered what Jess was going to do to them. “Stand by for entry.”

Jess was whistling happily under her breath. “All right you piece of shit bastards, let's see how you like these apples.” She got her hands on the targeting controllers and slipped her heads up view in place, the glare of the ice replaced with wire line grids showing her the planes and angles instead.

She let off a tiny burst to test the guns, pleased at the response. She unlocked the gimbals on her seat and concentrated, her eyes looking past the crevice Dev was rapidly heading towards to the potential targets beyond.

A moment later, they were in the fold and coming through a burst of spray that thundered up from below them. The cavern came up quickly on the right hand side and she put her fingertips on the triggers, feeling her breathing slow and her body relax as she waited.

Then they were down and at the opening and she spotted the gun swinging at them and she let off a full power blast, seeing the energy bolts hit the plasma platform inside and blow it up in a whirl of flinging metal.

She could see figures running, and the cavern dock beyond where two big ships were docked. “Slow down.”

Dev did.

“Take us in.”

Dev looped them in a circle and came back square on to the cavern, slowing to almost station keeping as she eased the carrier inside the space. She could see bodies lying on the ice below, and a spatter of red, and figures diving behind ice ledges and away from the big things floating in the water.

Boats? They must be.

“Well.” Jess sighed. “This is going to be awkward.”

“Excuse me?” Dev didn't want to tear her attention away from the flight controls. There wasn't much space inside the cave and she wasn't sure if there were more guns around.

“I think I just blew up some cousins.” Her partner remarked. “But on the other hand, at least they didn't croak in the storm.”

“Oh.” Dev studied the view. “These are the people we're here to see?”

“Uh huh.”

She could see figures now lined up behind the ice ledges, with weapons pointed their way. Dev risked a glance in the mirror and saw a bemused expression on her partners face. “The ones you wanted to help us?”

“Uh huh.”

“I see.” Dev held the carrier steady. “Interesting.” She said. “What would you like me to do?”

“Take your clothes off.”

Dev turned her head and looked at Jess, both her blond eyebrows hiking up almost to her hairline.

Jess smiled. “Just kidding.” She said. “Use the shortwave sideband, scan the channels. See if they're interested in talking to us now that they know who we are.”

“They do?”

“They know we're Interforce.” Jess said. “These buses are pretty distinctive.”

Dev kept one hand on the throttles and keyed comms with the other, switching from the long range system they used to receive messages from base to one that would only be useful at close range. She started a scan, sending out a blip with their generic ident on it to see what would happen.

She jumped a little, as the guns on either side forward of the engines flared a little, and looked back at Jess in question.

“Just want to make sure they know the lights are on.” Jess said. “So they don't just start shooting at us with those hand blasters.” She exhaled. “Damn it, this'll kill my cover too. Son of a bitch I hate when plans blow up in my face.”

Dev concentrated on controlling the carrier, watching the figures facing them down on the ground. After a moment of silence the comms crackled. “Who are you?” A male, rough voice asked.

Dev glanced in the mirror. “Should I answer?”

Jess drummed the edges of her thumbs on her triggers. “Yeah.” She said. “Give them our designation. Tell them we want to talk to them.”

Obediently, Dev keyed the comm. “This is BR27006. Requesting open comms.” She said. “Standing by sideband twelve, endit.” She looked back, but her partner was remaining locked into her station, her eyes flicking over the screen over her head with fierce intensity.

It was confusing. She wasn't really sure what Jess was going to do. Adjusting the throttles a little she eased the carrier slightly to one side, giving the forward scan a better look at the inside. It was a lopsided cavern, the water a deep and vibrant green blue and there was just enough water for the two boats to fit inside.

Around where they were docked were narrow ledges of ice, and towards the back where the ceiling was very low were piled rocks and dark clothes, evidence of people living there.

The comm crackled again, and a different voice came on. “What do y'want?” A low, male voice issued from the console. “We don't want nothing to do with you lot. Take yourself off.”

Dev turned in her seat and looked at Jess in question.

“Gimme comm.” Jess sighed waiting for the lights to come on her console before she fitted her ear piece in and keyed it open. “Don't be so hasty Uncle Jacob. You fired on me first. You don't want to end up on the blacklist do ya?” She clicked off, and waited .

Could go either way. The fisher families were fiercely independent, and they didn't generally take any crap from anyone – not from Interforce, not from the other side, not from any of the regional leaders who cropped up from time to time. Jacob hadn't seen or heard from her for years, might not even remember who she was.

Or he might. Jess thought she'd impressed him, all those years back, with her work on the boat and her resistance to seasickness.

“Jesslyn.” The voice returned. “This where you landed up?”

“Yep.” Jess responded. “Just want to talk. That's all.”

The silence now went on for a protracted time. Jess kept her systems up, and kept scanning the area, despite having offered up her identity. You just never knew with people. She had no idea who she'd blasted down there, and the fishermen were known for taking revenge when they could against anyone that hurt them. Jess didn't blame them for that. She respected them in fact.

“Alright.” The voice came back. “Drop. Quarter hour, that's it. I have fish to catch.”

Jess chuckled wryly under her breath. “Endit.” She put the comms down and released her harness. “Okay, Dev. I'm going down there.” She got up out of her seat and went to the locker. “Keep this thing hovering. I'll signal you for a pickup and when I do just come down and open the hatch and I'll jump in.”

Dev was watching her in the mirror, and Jess could tell now from her careful lack of expression that she really didn't like the plan. There was something a little charming about that. “No, huh?”

“It sounds like it's dangerous.” Dev acknowledged. “But I will do my best to keep you safe.” She adjusted the jets. “Where do you want me to let you off?”

Jess snapped the catches on her suit and seated her guns in their holsters. “Right on that ledge down next to the ships.” She said. “Turn us around so I can just step out of the hatch – show off a little.”

Show off a little. Dev flexed her hands and lowered the carrier, until she could hear the faint hiss as they impacted the water. “Ready?”

“As I'll ever be.” Jess stepped up to the hatch and waited, pulling her hood up and snugging the neck closure tight. She felt the carrier move and she opened the hatch, grabbing hold of the heavy bars on either side of the opening as the carrier turned on it's axis, and at the same time, slid sideways to end up right next to the ledge she'd pointed out, the edge of the craft a bare foot from the ice. “Nice.” She complimented her partner. “Be right back.”

“Be careful, Jess.” Dev called out.

With a smile, Jess stepped out of the hatch and onto the ice, feeling the tiny spikes on the bottom of her boots grab into the surface. She stepped away from the craft and it lifted clear, moving back out over the water and turning again so it's nose was facing her.

The forward windows were shielded and mirrored and she couldn't see past them, but she knew Dev was there, watching her, with that adorably serious look on her face.

With a smile, Jess turned and made her way up the icy slope, towards where a small group of people were waiting for her. They were all tall and spare, and though she hadn't seen them for many a year, she recognized her far off kin easily. “Uncle.”

Jacob was very tall, and had close cropped gray hair that outlined a square and grizzled skull. He was wearing a thick hide jacket and trousers and boots that came up to his knees. He was weathered and his face was scarred and he didn't look at Jess with any real fondness. “Jesslyn.”

He looked past her to the carrier, hovering patiently over the water. “How long you been out of school”

“Ten years.” Jess supplied. “I posted to Base 10.”

He nodded. “What do you want?” He glanced to his right and left, where several men were just waiting, hands on long knifes and the big hook poles they carried on the sips. “Only reason I'm talking to you is we did shoot first. Otherwise I'd gut you. No family here.”

Jess merely nodded, unsurprised. “Never is, with us.” She said. “We got a squirt on a mayday from the fleet.” She said. “We were in the area, so we thought we'd look for survivors.” She let her hand rest on the butt of her heavy blaster, in it's holster along her left leg. “Didn't expect to get fired on.”

Jacob relaxed a little. The men around him also shifted, some glancing back towards the boats. “I heard it.” He said. “Figure two, maybe three of Jan Henry's boats got caught in a crush.” He gestured to the men. “Go get the ships ready to ride out.”

The men turned and left without any comment, heading down the ice slope towards the slips where the fishing boats were waiting. Jacob watched them for a moment, then he turned back to Jess. “Sit.” He pointed to an ice ledge covered in a thick fur.

They walked over and sat down and Jess rested her elbows on her knees. “Glad the boats weren't yours.” She said. “That was a hell of a storm, it caught us coming over the rim and we nearly ditched.”

Jacob glanced at the carrier. “Hunting?”

“Maybe. We saw a bear.” Jess grinned briefly.

“Yeah?” Now her once removed Uncle looked interested.

“Big one. On the way out here.” Jess said. “Thought we saw other things moving but the storm blocked scan.” She looked squarely at Justin. “So what was that firing all about? You always shoot before you ask around these parts now”?

Jacob studied her face for a long moment. “Been attacked twice” He said finally “Lost two boats in the last three months.”

Jess straightened “What?”

His eyes met hers. “You didn't know.” he said. “Been raiding up here a lot. Looks like pirates.”

“Pirates.” Jess said. “As in, ice pirates the phantom ghouls of the arctic?”

“Lost thirty men to them ghouls.” Jacob said. “Don't know if they are the pirates of old, or just new raiders who took on that flag, but that's the answer for the quick trigger. Weren't sure what you were, weren't taking chances.”

Huh. Jess was internally startled to find a silly story she'd dredged out to taunt Sydney with was now plonked live and real in front of her from the lips of her kin. She'd pulled that pirate thing out of her ass... hadn't she?

Now Jess had to wonder, and maybe doubt a little where she'd gotten it from. Could it have been something in a report she'd read without thinking too much about it? “Haven't been reported around here for a long time.” She temporized. “Same scheme?”

Jacob shrugged. “Sounded like the old tales. Show up either in a hovercraft or ship, pulled you to, wanted your catch or be blasted. Two of my ships resisted, and they blasted.”

Now, the unwarranted attack made sense. Jess pondered the information. “Attacks increasing?”

“Yes.”

Intel pivot. “So, how about this. How about you let me ride with you, and if they show up, we can do something about it?” Jess offered. “Worth a shot?”

Jacob stared at her. “You'd come out on the boat?”

She nodded. “If it's pirates, we want to know. If' it's the other side, we really want to know. Worth me getting my feet wet and my face slapped with fishtails.” She added offhandedly. “What do you think?”

The old fisherman turned his head and stared off at the ships. “Don't know that the crew'll buy that.” He said. “Most of em don't trust your side any more than the other, but you know that.”

Jess nodded. “No offense taken.” She said. “It is what it is.”

Jacob grunted. “Let me see what the weather is.” He stood up. “Wait here.”

Jess leaned back against the ice seat and spread her arms across the back of it, the thick fur protecting her skin from the hard surface. She extended her legs out and crossed them, regarding the cavern as she listened to the thunder of the waves outside.

A glance to her right showed the carrier still hovering patiently, and she wondered what she was going to tell Dev about this new change to old plans. This wasn't the fish camp, she couldn't leave Dev there while she went on the boat. She didn't think her pilot would be welcome either, and in fact, having the carrier be her backup was probably a good idea.

But she didn't want to leave Dev behind. Even sitting here, knowing her pilot was watching her through the window, she wanted her here with her and besides – would Dev really know what to do if she had to take on these so called pirates?

Jess almost chuckled to herself. Given what Dev had done so far, there was no telling what she would do if she had to take on pirates. It was certainly possible that she'd fly the carrier right down on top of them and smack them into the water. Or she might even hit the water with the craft and make a wave big enough to swamp them all.

Or would it be better if she talked Justin into taking both of them? At least then she wouldn't have to worry about something happening to her outside her own ability to intervene.

Jess paused. Was she worried about that?

She could hear the sounds of the ships being prepared for sea, and she folded her arms over her chest and watched the motion, gingerly probing the idea that what happened to Dev mattered to her.

Well, the bio alt had turned out to be unexpectedly good, after all. She now had a competent bus driver, who really seemed to have a talent for the tech work and who was engaging and funny too. So sure she wanted to keep her around. Right?

And she was a pretty good kisser. With an exhale of mild relief, Jess looked up to see Jacob returning, striding up the slope towards her with a non committal look his face. She kept her relaxed pose though, working hard to make it apparent that she didn't really care one way or the other what his decision would be.

He sat down next to her. “Crew's all for it.” He said, sounding as surprised as Jess actually was. “Didn't expect that. Maybe they like the idea of someone with a gun on.”

“Huh” Jess grunted. “Could be.”

“Need to be fast though.” Jacob said. “Going out with the tide.” He looked over at the carrier. “And what's with that? You can't leave it here.”

“My techs aboard.” Jess got up. “Let me go pack a sack and go over a plan with her.”

“Her?” Jacob snorted. “They not getting enough recruits these days?”

Jess looked at him, then down at herself, then back up at him. One of her dark brows lifted.

“You're a generation. You don't count.” Her uncle said. “Wouldn't have mattered what you were.”

Well, that was true enough. “My partner's damn good. Didn't really matter what sex she was either.” Jess said. “Corps doesn't care. You should know that.”

He shrugged. “Get your kit.” He said. “We've no time.” He got up and headed back towards the ships, raising his voice and motioning to a group of men standing nearby.

Jess stood up and brushed her hands off. She turned and made her way down towards the edge of the ice, feeling the shift in air pressure as the carrier lowered and swooped over to meet her. She ambled down the slope and continued steadily towards the water, pausing as the craft settled next to the ice and the hatch opened.

She hopped inside, and slapped the door controls. “Well.” She quickly unbuckled her overcoat and pushed the hood off her head.

Dev backed the carrier up and lifted it, turning it so they could see the ship harbor. “Did it go well?” She set the auto nav and pushed her comm set back, turning in her seat to look at her partner.

“Better than I figured.” Jess came up next to her and leaned against the console propping her boot up on the base of Dev's seat. “Seems they've been being attacked by pirates.”

Dev blinked. “Pirates?”

“Pirates.”

The blond woman pondered that a minute. “You mean, the story you told those people in the other place was true?”

“Apparently.”

“Did you know that?” Dev asked. “I thought you said it was just a story.”

Jess shrugged both shoulders and produced a charmingly sheepish smile. “Sometimes I just get lucky.” She leaned forward unexpectedly and gave Dev a kiss on the lips. “Like with you.” Her eyes twinkled. “Anyway, I janked them into agreeing to let me go with them on the ship so I could protect them against the pirates.”

Dev studied her very gravely. Then she cleared her throat a little .”How can I help?” She asked. “It sounds dangerous and I want you to be safe.”

Strangely, that touched her. Jess felt an odd warmth fill her belly as she absorbed the look Dev was giving her. “Well.” She said. “I”m not looking to get hurt. I got enough of that my last mission.” She studied the ground briefly “It would make more sense for you to take the carrier and shadow us, but...”

She looked up and met Dev's steady gaze.

“Take me with you.” Dev said, after a minute of silence.

Jess smiled at her, without really knowing why. “You're a little crazy y'know.” She remarked. “I like that.” She straightened up and gave Dev a pat on her side. “Okay, let's find a place to put the bus down. We'll go fishing together” She went to the locker and pulled out a backpack, setting it on the shelf and starting to sort through supplies to put in it

Dev turned around and thumped back into her seat, feeling a sense of buoyant happiness that made her smile. She settled her comms more solidly and started to sweep the carrier around, looking carefully at the inside of the cavern.

It wasn't big, and there wasn't a lot of places she could pick but after a few minutes she thought she saw a spot in the back the craft might fit in. She boosted the jets up and got as close to the

roof of the cave as she could, then started across the open space over the dock the ships were parked in.

There wouldn't be much clearance. Dev concentrated hard, and handled the throttles delicately, watching the scan as she skimmed over the tops of the ships, the tops of them just clearing the bottom of the carrier. Through the sensors, she could hear people yelling, but she ignored the distraction and then started down towards the back section. “Hold on.”

She heard Jess grab hold of the locker as she tipped the craft sideways, going down and to her right in a balanced descent that eased between the ships and the descending roof, sliding into the one spot she could have parked the carrier and still have a chance of getting it back out again.

She extended the skids and settled onto them, checking the scan on all sides before she cut the power to the engines and let them wind down. “There.” She glanced up through the window and found a lot of people outside staring at the craft, then she turned around to find Jess leaning against the wall, also watching her. “Was that correct?”

Jess walked over and unlocked her restraints “C'mere.” She gently pulled Dev up and into her arms, spending a very long moment giving her a frankly passionate kiss. “You are the bomb. Let's go kick their asses.” She said, when they finally separated. “Let's get your bag packed and we'll go see where this takes us.”

Dev felt like she was floating, a well remembered sensation from the creche now happening to her down planet. She got up and trailed after Jess, happily wondering what pirates were like, and whether she'd get to see live fish.

Or more bears.

Without a doubt, it was going to be very, very interesting. “I wonder what a bomb is?” She muttered, as she pulled her gear out and started packing it. “Hmph.”

**

Jess led the way down the dock to where the ships were preparing to depart, her pack on her back fitted neatly over her new jacket. She had a pair of ice gloves tucked into the pockets of it, and she was aware that she and her companion were possibly getting themselves into a good bit of trouble.

Dev didn't – the bio alt was bopping along behind her looking at everything with keen interest, unfazed by the slippery walk or the looming fishing vessels.

Jess chuckled softly. She had her jumpsuit on under the jacket, and her weapons seated in the holsters in the hard points, along with a long knife strapped to her forearm. Her heavy blaster was slung over one shoulder, tucked in alongside the pack that held tools and some spare underclothes.

At her tail, Dev ambled along, her slim frame encased in sharkskin, and her profile much narrower than Jess's since it lacked anything in the way of weapons. She also had her pack on her back, and it had an extra section on the bottom of it made it seem almost over sized on her that held her portable scanner and tools.

“So here's the deal.” Jess said, as they reached the dock. “We'll stick with the story about you coming from Bio Station 2, okay? They don't know much about what goes on topside. There aren't any bio alts out here at all.” She glanced at the waiting crew. “Some of them, if they've been to Quebec might know about them, but they won't tie the ones they've seen to you.”

“Okay.” Dev agreed. “I guess in this case it's good I was the only one in my set.”

“Yep, one of a kind.” Jess patted her on the back as they approached the boarding area. “But keep quiet when you can. “They'll try to pump you for info.”

“Info?”

“About Interforce. How we do things. Why we do things.” Jess said. “We're not really friends, and not really enemies.”

Dev considered this. “I don't know any of that stuff.” She said. “So I can't tell them much, except the color of the walls and how much I like my shower.”

Jess muffled a laugh. “Atta girl.” She praised her pilot “If you have to say, tell them you're part of the last class that came in, which is just about true. I'll tell them you're a newbie.”

“Also true.” Dev craned her neck to observe their destination. “Those are big”

The ship they were approaching was indeed large, at least ten times the length and breadth of the carrier and solid metal in a green gray color with rust stains everywhere. It had a taller section in front, with glazed windows and the middle and back were full of equipment and nets.

Jacob was standing next to the boarding ramp, with another man next to him. The second man was shorter and wiry, with flaxen blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He studied them intently as they arrived.

“Uncle.” Jess said. “This is my partner, Dev.”

Jacob gave her a brief nod. “Tech.” He greeted Dev gruffly, then turned to the blond man. “This is Sigurd Rolafson, captain of the Northern Star.”

“Captain.” Jess nodded at him.

“Hello” Dev added.

The captain cocked his head at them, heavy blond brows twitching. “Got enough guns there, Agent?” He asked, in a low, almost rough tone. “They'll be welcome if you can hit the broad side of the bastards.”

“Do my best.” Jess said, mildly. “Glad to have a chance to put them to use on your behalf.” She added, in a courteous tone.

“We'll see.” The captain next looked at Dev, and a faint grin appeared. “Where ya from, Tech?”

“Bio Station 2.” Dev answered dutifully.

“Spacer?” The captain looked surprised.

“Yes.”

He chuckled. “Good to know some Viking blood got off the planet after all, eh?” He pointed to the boat. “Let's cast off. Wind's coming down.” He swarmed up the ramp himself, clearing expecting them to follow.

“Good luck.” Jacob said. “Nice piece of landing there, tech.”

“Thank you.” Dev said. “It should be fine there. If it starts making odd noises, don't go near it.” She advised. “Its still due some repair after that storm.”

Jacob stared at her in bemusement. “Right.”

“Thanks.” Jess said. “I may need to relay through the carrier from out there. I'll trigger the relay remotely.” She started up the ramp, with Dev a step behind her. They crossed onto the deck and as the did, several of the crew pulled the boarding ramp onto the ship and with a loud metal clang, the grapples holding them in place let loose.

Immediately the ship moved, backing away from the pier and swinging around the second ship which was still grappled at berth.

Jess put a hand on Dev's shoulder and aimed for the spot the captain had headed for. “Hope you don't get seasick. Forgot to ask you about that.” She said “You know what that is?”

Dev cleared her throat gently. “I guess it's like being space sick, in null.” She said. “It involves a lot of regurgitation. Not something you really want to deal with in zero gee.”

“Ah. No.” Jess made a face

“You get past it when you're about two.” Dev went on. “Or... at least I did.” She added.

“Good.” Jess squeezed her shoulder.

The crew stared at them as they moved across the deck. “Jess?” Dev lowered her voice.

“Mm?” Jess ducked her head a little.

“What did he mean about.. vickings?”

“Ah” Jess paused, as the captain did, and turned to face them. “Hang on. Tell ya later.”

“So.” Rolafson said. “The old man said you'd been out before.” He addressed Jess. “True?”

“Short tour.” Jess said. “I was a kid.”

The captain studied her. He had sharp eyes and a rugged, interesting face. “Drake, eh?”

Jess nodded.

“Service family?”

Jess nodded again.

“Boats my family.” The captain said. “S'why I told Jacob I'd let you on. Warn you though, deal with them pirates or I'll throw you overboard. I got no real use for the force.”

Jess cleared her throat, but didn't say anything.

The captain smiled. “Your kin to the old man?”

“Something like.” Jess admitted. “Couple times removed. My grandfather's brother.”

Rolafson grunted, then he turned and motioned them to follow. “Get you berthed while we pull out of here.” He palmed a hatch and it slid open “Watch your head.”

Jess ducked through, and then they were inside the front structure of the ship, as it started moving underneath them. Inside the area was lit by dull green lamps and they moved down a very narrow corridor with hatches on both sides.

Dev looked around carefully, absorbing the motion and the smells and sights with a sense of deep fascination. The hatches and inside passageways reminded her a little of the creche, but here she could smell fish, and brine, and a heavy scent of machine oil.

It was exciting. She could feel the rumble of engines and to either side hear people moving around and speaking. As they passed one of the half open hatches she peeked in, blinking as she saw three young children inside, playing with some kind of box.

They were oblivious to her passing, but they were slight in size, and had light blond hair very much like her own.

That made Dev think again about what the captain had said. Then she had to stop since Jess did, and they were in front of a small hatch that the captain was thrusting open.

“Not much. Hope you like sharing.” The captain said. “No room to spare on board.” He turned and backed away a step so they could enter. “Going to the bridge. We'll be out at sea in quarter hour, and past the coast on the hour. After that, anything can happen.”

He rambled off down the hallway, leaving them alone.

Jess bumped the hatch open with her knee and entered, ducking her head and moving inside. “Oh this is gonna be fun.”

Dev eased in after her. “Ah.” She observed. “Very restricted.” She put her back to the wall, as she looked at the space they'd been given. It was about the size of her old study space back on station, just enough room for Jess and her to stand and two iron bunks with deep lips bolted to the wall.

It was cold, and clammy inside, and it smelled of oil and metal. There were two tables attached to the wall and a single water dispenser to one side. Jess squeezed past her and looked out the hatch, then she pulled her head in and let the metal door swing shut. “Sanitary unit's across.”

Jess tossed her pack up onto the top bunk and pushed her hood back. “This is going to be a real picnic, partner.” She looked wryly at Dev. “Wish I'd left you back on the bus?” She hazarded, seeing that bland, noncommittal look she'd pretty much nailed as her pilot's not being impressed about something.

“No.” Dev shook her blond head definitely. She put her pack on the bottom bed and studied the space. “I'm really glad I'm here.” She took a seat on the bed and looked around. The floor was metal like everything else, but it had a covering of what appeared to be woven seaweed on it, which was giving up a musty green scent to her nose.

“Really?”

Dev turned to her “Really. It's all new. It's interesting. I've never been in a place like this, or on a boat at all.” She reached out and touched the wall as the sound of the engines increased and the motion became more pronounced. “And if we can stop the pirates, that will be excellent, wont' it?”

Jess sat down next to her on the bottom bed. “Yes.” She said. “It will be excellent, matter of fact.” She tapped the lower part of Dev's pack. “Better get settled.”

There wasn't much space to get settled into. Dev discovered that there was a small storage space under the bed's padded top and she knelt on the seaweed pad to get her few things arranged in it. Above her, Jess was doing the same, and they worked in companionable silence for a few minutes.

This constricted space was actually a little comforting to her, Dev realized. It was more like what she'd been used to all her life, and this spartan room with it's thin mattresses and plain steel surfaces made her think of the creche. Once she'd gotten her things in place, she took out her portable scan tucked into it's pouch and started setting it up.

Programming triggered instantly, and she felt the overlay as she looked at the parts of the unit, and her hands fitted them together. This was one of her first programs, she realized, the first set of labs she'd done after coming up after that long,long session.

Portable scanners and electronic scopes, to listen and analyze everything around her. She remembered being curious about the lesson, and now that she was assembling her gear, she sensed more programming surfacing.

Her fingertips moved quickly over the controls and she brought the scanner online, tuning the leads as the device started to listen and probe.

It detected her, of course. She registered her ident and let it continue. Then it picked up Jess, the sensors alarming as the picked up all of the weapons Jess had on her. Dev acknowledged the alerts and registered her partner as friendly, then she let the tuning continue.

Jess was ordering her guns, checking the charges though she'd done so prior to leaving the carrier. She seated both blasters and then removed the knife from it's sheath, sighting down it's length with an expert eye. “These people can be rough, Dev.”

“I assumed that.” Dev said. “The children in that room had knives on their belts.”

Jess stopped and looked at her.

Dev sensed it and looked up. “I thought it was interesting.” She said. “Did you see them?”

“Went by too fast.” Jess sat down on the bed. “Little kids?”

Dev nodded. She adjusted a setting. The scanner had scoped out the inside of the ship and drawn her a wiremap of it, pinpointing human figures and mechanical devices, the probes now working on the electrical components. “Here.” She pointed to the room with the children in it, showing three small heat signatures.

“I see it.” Jess glanced at the scanner, then at Dev. Then she shook her head. “Whoo.”

“What?”

Jess touched the scanner and sighed. “I remember how long it took me to learn how to use this.” She said. “Knowing you picked it up in a few days...” She let the words trail off

“It's intimidating, I guess.” Dev said.

“Yeah.”

“It's just how I always learned so it never seemed strange to me.” Dev said. “But I guess it is, isn't it?” She looked at her partner. “Can they do that with you?”

Jess remained silent for a long while. “Not.. “ She hesitated. “If you've been in something bad, really bad, they can do something to kind of.. change it. Make you not think about it. I've seen it done to agents once or twice.”

“Ah.”

“It's... scary.” Jess admitted. “They wipe parts of your memory out I think.” She blinked a few times. “They offered to do that to me, after I got back last time. Didn't want it.”

Dev reached out and put her hand on Jess's, squeezing it a little. “They can do that to us too.” She said. “Sometimes, when bio alts get older, they get.. they change. They argue and things like that so they take them and they... “ She paused, then looked at Dev. “They come back and they don't argue anymore. I think they're happier.”

Jess made a face.

“Yeah.” Dev nodded. “We think about that when we go down for programming. They can take stuff, you know? You never know what's going to be there when you come back up.”

Jess stopped cold, and thought about that.

“Programming is different.” Dev said, after a awkward pause “It's all skills and knowing things. But this is different. It changes you... it changes what's in here.” She touched her chest.

“I never want to have that happen.” Jess said. “To either of us.” She said, in a quietly fierce tone. “Someone tries that on you I'll shoot them.”

Dev smiled and gave her hand another squeeze. “It takes a registered programmer to do that.” She said, matter of factly. “Not just anyone.”

Jess leaned against her and returned her attention to the scanner. “So, what... thirty people aboard?” She changed the subject, feeling a sense of animal comfort as her skin warmed to Dev's. “Yeah, looks like it.” She traced the wire line with one long finger. “That's the engine room.”

Dev regarded the heat signature. “Yes.” She agreed. “Most of the people are here.” She pointed to one spot. “And the three I saw here.” She touched the smaller room. “Everything down below here is empty.”

“Fish tanks.” Jess agreed. “When they catch em they put them in there until they get to the offloading station. Then whoever they're selling to takes them and processes them. Back in the day they all worked for big processing companies – now there's much less fish, so they sell direct.”

“I see.”

“Families are competitive. Each one has a boat, maybe two, and they fight for fish out there.” The agent said. “Mostly live on the boat. Not a comfortable life.”

Dev looked around. “I can see that.” She adjusted a setting. “Should we go get a full scan?”

“Lets.” Jess stood up and offered Dev a hand. “We'll go to where everyone is. Chances are, they'll have a hot drink there.” She rubbed Dev's back as she stood and headed for the hatch. “Captain's family, way way back came from Norway.” She said. “That's where Vikings came from. They were ancient fighters who went out in boats and conquered places.”

“I see.” Dev said.

“Nordies mostly have blond hair and pale eyes.” Jess clarified. “Kinda like yours.”

“Oh.” Dev pushed the hatch open and stepped into the hallway. “Really?”

“Really.” Jess kept her light hold on her pilot as they walked along, feeling the motion of the ship become much more pronounced. “We're out in open water, I think.” She could hear voices ahead of them. “So that's the Viking connection. Don't discard it. If they think you're a long lost cousin it could be good for us.”

Dev thought about that. “If they start asking me about my ancestors we could be in trouble.” She admitted. “All my aunts and uncles are test tubes.”

Jess choked off a laugh. “Shh.” She pushed the big hatch at the end of the hall and they entered a medium sized room that had a metal table mounted in the center of it, and built in cabinets all around. About a dozen people were standing around, and they all looked at them as they came inside .

It was an awkward moment. None of them looked friendly.

“Hi.” Jess broke the silence. “My name's Drake and this is my partner Dev.” She said. “We're here to put our lives between you and whatever the hell's attacking people so lay off the screwy eyeballs and just tell me where to get something hot to drink before I risk my ass for you.”

Dev worked to keep a startled look of her face. She'd never really heard Jess talk like that, her voice all low and growly and rough. She sounded mean, and the rest of the room reacted to that, taking a step back away from her and looking alarmed. She noticed Jess also had her hand resting on her blaster grip and she eased back behind her and out of the way.

Most of the people were of middling height, save two men who were around Jess's length. One of them pointed at a rust stained dispenser and actually walked closer to them. “Cups in the top.” He said. “We appreciate you being here, agent.” He said. “No need to be a jackass.”

Jess gave him a droll look. “You mean the bitch you were referring to before I walked in wasn't me?”

The man actually blushed, a vivid flush of color on his pale face.

“Hello” Dev gently eased from behind her partner. “I don't think Jess wants to be a jackass.. “ She paused. “Whatever that is, but we know we're not really exactly welcome.”

The man studied her. “Tech.” He said. “We just don't like outsiders on the ship.” He answered stiffly. “No offense was intended.”

“I'm sure.” Dev said. “Could you explain how all this works?”

The man unbent visibly, responding to Dev's gentle inquisitiveness. Jess took a step back and watched her pilot work, wondering how much of what she was doing was programming and how much was just her. It made her think again about what they'd talked about in the room, and she felt a sense of discomfort when she thought about someone messing around now in Dev's head.

She thought that Dev herself had seemed a little uncomfortable thinking about that too.

Jess took another step back and leaned against the table, letting Dev become the center of attention as the ship people drifted over. They were all pale haired and her pilot fit right in with them, nodding somberly as the tall man pointed out the consoles over the cabinets and explained them.

They seemed to accept her. They accepted her, and every one of them was giving Jess a wary look and she finally found it all just a little bit funny.

The inner door opened and the captain stepped in. He walked over to stand next to Jess, watching the rest of the group around the met scope. “Finding things?”

“Dev's doing a primary sweep.” Jess said. “So what's the pattern been? They wait for you to get fishing then hit you?”

The captain chuckled. “Nah.” He said. “Wait till we're hauling half full at least. Ain't stupid.” He said. “Hope your little friend there has a strong stomach. We're heading for storm edge.”

“I asked her.” Jess said. “She said something about null gravity, and regurgitation and the fact she'd gotten over that at age 2. So I suspect she'll be fine.”

The captain looked at her, then at Dev. “She's really a spacer?” He asked, his voice rising in surprise. “Born up there?”

Jess nodded.

“The Hell she's doing down here? I heard they got life good up there. Plenty of work.”

'She wanted some adventure.” Jess said smoothly. “You know how it is. You can have a nice safe, plush life but be bored to death.”

The captain snorted. Then he faced Jess. “I told the crew you're here. You can go where you want but if I were you I'd not go alone, and bring your hardware with you.” He said. “Nothing personal, agent. You seem a good sort. But we don't fly either flag, and we've had some of your kind do the same as those pirates.”

Jess stiffened. “What?” She asked, in a quiet and careful voice.

“You heard me.” Sigurd said. “Now, I know your family name, Drake. You've got history with us. But not all your lot does, and I've seen with my own eyes black and greens boarding a ship and taking from it.”

Jess stared at him. “I”ll shoot them as fast as a pirate.”

“Know that. It's why I told Jacob I'd take ya.” Sigurd squinted at her, then winked. “All right you lot.” He lifted his voice. “Let's get this tub ready to fish!”

The group broke up and headed for the big, sealed doors that led from the housing area to the ship's deck. Dev came back over to where Jess was standing and leaned against the table as the room slowly emptied and they were left alone. “You look unsettled.” She remarked to her partner.

“I am.” Jess said. “Just heard something I didn't really want to.” She sighed. “Why in hell did I have to make up those damn ice pirates? Next thing you know we'll find Santa Claus flying over a berg and he'll dump a load on top of us.”

Dev eyed her.

Jess sighed. “Let's go out on deck. Might as well get a view while we can.” She shoved away from the wall and headed for the hatch just as the ship pitched to one side and nearly sent her tumbling. She grabbed a rail with one arm and Dev with the other, and waited for the deck to right. “Oh yeah. Gonna be a picnic.”

“What is a picnic?”

“Later.”

**

Dev braced herself against part of the ships metal structure, leaning back as she watched the waves roll towards them and lift the vessel up. The motion was rough and impressive, and she was thoroughly enjoying it. It reminded her of the sim sessions for the carrier she'd run only this was real, and she was getting a faceful of cold wet spray when the ship plunged down into the waves.

Behind her, back past the structure on the flat part of the ship the rest of the crew were working to get things ready to catch fish. They were preparing cages and nets, but nothing they were doing triggered any programming in her so she had no idea what it all was for.

Ahead of them, she could see the darker, roiling clouds that were the front of the storm they'd escaped from, and from what she could tell the ship was going as fast as it could heading right towards it.

Why? She'd heard the captain tell Jess that storms brought the fish up, so they would go as close as they could to the front and see what they could get.

Interesting. Dev glanced down at her scanner, observing the cluster of returns around her, and then a few much farther out. She looked out over the ships rail, and squinted, as she thought she saw another profile on the surface heading in the same direction they were.

It matched scan. She extended it, and tuned the probes. The wiremap came back almost instantly, showing her a profile that was like, though not exactly the same, as the craft she was on. She heard a door close behind her somewhere, and then a moment later the captain crossed the deck and took hold of the outer wall, peering over it.

Then he turned around and came right over to her. “That thing comp?”

“Portable scan analyzer.” Dev acknowledged. “Is that another fishing boat out there?”

“That thing say it is?” The captain countered.

Dev obligingly showed him the screen. “It looks like it.” She said. “I could see the other ship, and I thought it might be like this one. Scan said it did.” She reviewed the results. “Here's a hires.” She tapped a control and the wiremap was replaced with a realtime image, bounced to the analyzer from an overhead met sat.

“Ah!” The captain leaned closer. “It's the Seagull.” He nodded. “Headed same place we are. Lucky for me we're faster.” He winked at Dev, and spoke into a comm clipped to his shoulder. “Bridge, put the fire on. Plane up.”

A moment later the ship surged forward at a higher rate of speed, and the front part lifted up out of the water.

Dev enjoyed that a lot. “Excellent.”

The captain eyed her. “Like that?”

“I do.” She said. “It's fast like when I pilot the carrier.”

He leaned against the structure next to her, bracing himself much like she was against the motion. “Must be real different from up in space.” He said. “Been down here long?”

Dev shook her head. “Not that long.” She said. “Have you always been on this boat?” She asked. “And your family? I thought I saw some children before we left.”

“Ah, yes.” The captain smiled. “My little ones. The latest generation in a very long line going back way before the end times. Long before the world took itself back from us, when there were still trees and grass back in the home country.” He folded his arms. “But my family's always been on the sea.”

“Wow.” Dev was impressed. She knew Jess talked about her family's long history but this was something else entirely. There was a sense of independence about the captain that was interesting. “That is a long time.”

“What about you?” Sigurd asked. “What does your family do up in space?”

Dev had thought a little about what she was going to answer that question with, since she and Jess both figured it would get asked. It was interesting, in a way, to get a chance to build a history for herself other than her real one. “I grew up on a bio station.” She said, since it was the truth. “I don't have a family. I never knew them.”

She could see the reaction in his face, a look of near dismay. “Now I”m a tech, so the people around me there are sort of like family, but it's not the same, is it?”

“No.” The captain answered. “Not the same at all.” He studied her face. “You could be kin of mine, y'know. I got a daughter looks pretty much just like you.” He added. “I can see it in the bones of your face. We probably share a great great somewhere way back.”

Dev smiled a little. “That's nice to think of.” She said. 'The one thing that really interested me when I came downworld was the water here.” She indicated the ocean, which was pitching and rolling around them full of whitecaps. “I thought it was amazing. It was one of the first things Jess showed me and I will never forget it.”

“It is amazing.” Sigurd smiled “And that's a sure sign your one of us.” He chuckled, turning slightly as Jess appeared and made her way along the deck to where they were standing. “Looks like we're in a race.”

Jess went to the outer wall and put her gloved hands on it. “Another fisherman?”

“Yup. I even know who it is, thanks to your tech here.” He said. “Not one of my bigger enemies. We trade met sometimes.”

Jess turned and came back over to them, rocking a little with the motion. She took hold of the grab bar Dev was leaning against and regarded the sea. “Aside from the obvious, how do you win the race? What do you do when you get there?”

Sigurd folded his muscular arms. “Thought you were out at sea?”

“Never saw any other boats, and besides I was six. You might have changed your methods since then.” Jess said, dryly.

The captain laughed. “We'll change our traditions when Interforce does.” He said. “It's a stake.” He went on. “You pick your spot in the ocean and you got that, plus the distance a boat can travel at 10 knots in ten minutes to fish in.” He spoke into the mic again. “Head for the banks. Drill it between the deep reef and marker 12.”

“How do you know where to go?” Dev asked. “To find the fish I mean.”

Sigurd winked. “That knowin's been in the bloodline for a good long time. You just know.” He pushed away from the wall. “Gotta get ready to work. Stay out of the way. Don't want to explain to Jacob if either of you get nailed by a hook.”

He ambled off, his body balanced against the movement in a completely natural way.

Jess waited for him to disappear, then she took up the spot against the wall he'd vacated. “So.” She said. “What do you think so far?”

“What do I think about what?” Dev asked. “I think this is amazing.” She indicated the ocean. “I really like riding on the boat.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” Dev showed Jess the scanner. “I showed this picture to him. I hope that was not incorret.”

Jess studied the live image, then she shrugged. “They know we bounce off the sats, so dont' see much harm in it.” She said. “Did he tell you anything interesting?”
Dev keyed off the image and reset the scanner to long range biological. “He does think I'm related to him apparently.” She said. “ Something about sharing an ancestor way back.” She pondered that. “He said I looked like an offspring of his.”

Jess studied her for a moment, then shifted her gaze to one side. “I can see it.” She said. “Might even be true. Do they keep track of that sort of thing up there?”

Dev waited for her scan to parse. “They keep very close track of the genetic arrangements, of course.” She said. “They mix and combine them for specific sets. But making that trace back to actual people? I don't think so.” She looked up at Jess. “You know all about your family, don't you?”

“Sure.” Jess responded. “I”ve got a family scrapbook in my quarters at the citadel. I”ll show it to you when we get back. Helps when you're in the out beyond sometimes, if you're from a known family. Like with the captain here – he knows my bloodline, so he knows what to expect from me.”

Dev pondered that. “Not that different from us then really, is it?” She said. “They know what to expect from us, because they know our genetics and programming.”

“Sometimes.” Jess said, slowly. “But not always. They don' program us..” But as she said it, she had to wonder. What then was the training she'd gotten since age six if not programming, just in a different way? She pushed the thought aside and bent over the scanner. “Whatcha got?”

“I was looking for bears.” Dev said. “But I don't think that's them unless they swim under water.” She indicated a mass below the surface ahead of them. “What are those?”

“How did you get it to penetrate the water?” Jess took the device from her. “I've never seen it do that. Usually we just get refraction waves back.”

“Oh.” Dev cleared her throat. “Well, I was going over the comp from our last mission and I was looking at the intel stream from when we were heading directly at the ocean and..”

“Those are fish.” Jess grabbed her arm and started across the deck. “C'mon. We can maybe make some major points with this.” She cradled the scanner in one hand and shouldered the door to the interior open. “G'wan with your story.”

Her story? “Oh.” Dev hurried to catch up. “Anyway, I though it would be a good idea next time to be able to see where we were going if we were heading for the ocean so I ran the comp through a backscatter decoder and figured out the sine wave differences.”

Jess stopped, and looked at her. “Wait.” She said. “This isn't something you were programmed for is it?”

Dev shook her head. “No. That's the genetic part. Doctor Dan told me he equipped me to be able to figure things out by myself.” She responded. “So I made a routine to bend the scan waves to match the ones in the water so we could see under it.”

Jess simply stared at her in silence.

“Was it incorrect?” Dev asked, hesitantly, after a long moment.

“You scare the shit out of me sometimes.” Jess said, mildly. “No it's not incorrect. C'mon.” She started moving again, hauling up as she almost plowed into Sigurd. “Ah. Just the man I was looking for.”

“For what?” The captain said. “I'm busy.”

“Want fish?” Jess showed him the display. “ Just off your port bow if you slow down long enough to catch em.”

Sigurd grabbed the scanner and stared at it. “That's 200 fathoms down how in the hell are you seeing them” He barked. “Nothing we have goes more than fifty anymore and all it can tell is rough relief not identify damn species.” He grabbed his comm. “Hold hold hold! Engines full stop get ready to deploy the deep nets! Move it! Move it!”

He tossed the scanner back to them and turned. “We'll see if you're not bullshitting. If you are I hope you like swimming.” He slammed back through the inner door and then they felt the radical motion as the ship went from full speed to nothing, and they were thrown roughly against the inner wall.

They could hear bells ringing outside, and a thunder and crash of heavy machinery.

“Sure hope that scans right.” Jess said. “I do like swimming but not in those waters.”

Dev had recovered her scanner and was adjusting it. The readings had come back with the same results and she was relatively sure they were accurate. “Can we go watch them?”

“Sure.” Jess moved gingerly through the hall, glad it was narrow since the motion of the vessel was now extreme since they'd stopped their forward motion. She stepped over the threshold of the hatch into the next section, keeping her head down to avoid slamming it into the overhead.

Dev followed closely, slinging the scanner around her neck so she had her hands free to keep her balance. The inside of the structure was all painted a green gray and every few lengths there were hatches that had be climbed through, with hatches that could be closed off if needed.

She wasn't sure what that was all about, but the walls were interesting too, she could see many places where something had been, and which were now empty, only the clamps and weld points remaining. There were also things written there, but most of them did not seem to make any sense.

She stepped over a last divider then followed Jess up a tunnel that brought a blast of fresh, cold air to push back the smell of oil and steel. A moment later and they were outside, on the back part of the ship. Jess pulled her to one side and back against the bulkhead, and they both stood there trying to make sense of what was going on.

The crew on deck were all in motion, dragging bins over to a huge wheel in the center of the deck that was wound around with netting. As they watched, a heavy hatch at the rear of the deck was lowered, and the roiling sea boiled past it and flooded everything.

“Holy crap.” Jess grabbed her and hauled her up onto a crate in a smooth motion, just as the backwash from the water thundered against the bulkhead wall, splashing and spraying everything in it's path.

“Go go go!” A man nearby yelled. He was standing on a rotating platform, his legs braced and his hands moving rapidly over a set of controls. “Nets going out!”

The noise was incredible. Dev resisted the urge to cover her ears and watched as the wheel started to turn and as it did, she felt the ship start to move forward, and at the same time, felt Jess's arms close around her to keep her in place.

It seemed to take a long time as they went around in a broad circle but then the loudest of the noise stopped and the boat rocked as they unhitched the end of the net and it went free into the water.

Then it was quiet, save the rumble of the engines and the sounds of the crew securing things on deck. The bell stopped ringing and some of the men started dragging the bins back to the overhang next to the bulkhead, shaking their heads.

The back hatch closed, and the water drained out and they climbed down off the crate and went back to the deck. The crew looked at them, then looked away, ignoring them as they went about their tasks.

Jess led the way cautiously into the open. The back deck of the ship had a low wall on the sides, then the higher gate in the back and the steel deck in between was weathered and beaten and had patch upon patch upon patch welded into it. On either side were huge cranes with grapples on them and in front of the wheel was a huge hatch with doors the crew was fastening the grapples onto.

“Least this'll be fast.” One of the men was saying. “No idea what cap'ns doing aint never been no fish here.”

“Miss out on our spot near the front.” His companion griped. “Crazy ass.”

The clouds roiled overhead, and the wind shifted, and the men looked up at the sky. “Now what?” The first one said. “Let's go check met. That didn' feel right.”

The ship swung around again, making a big circle around the bobbing floats that had been tied to the net. “See if they got em.” Jess nudged her partner. “Before this damn storm screws us up again.” She braced her hands on two of the desk supports, blocking the wind and the motion from sending Dev flying.

Dev appreciated that. She was now between a bulkhead and Jess, and she could use both hands to study the scanner, tuning it carefully and starting her program running. For a moment, it just blinked placidly, then the display shivered into a view of what was beneath them, giving a wiremap of the topography and showing a huge white mass just about right under them. Not knowing really what it meant, she showed it to Jess.

Her partner chuckled. “If they don't catch em they can't blame us.” She eased out from under the overhang and looked up. The clouds were getting darker and as she watched, rain started coming down, slapping her with cold, wet drops. She ducked back under cover and tugged her hood up as the wind increased, bringing it's chill with it. “Brr.”

Dev had stayed where she was, feeling the cold herself as the wind blew against her face.

The man on the platform was just watching a gauge, ignoring the rain as it dripped off his oversuit. It was made of some repelling fabric since the water beaded and dropped off it, but his face was exposed and he frequently blinked to shed the rain from his eyelashes.

Pale blond, like hers. Dev noted. The man was around the same age as the captain, she guessed, but he had close cropped facial hair and she wondered if it was because he had to stand outside on the platform all day.

Then the bell started ringing again, and the deck erupted into chaos, men bolting from the forward structure and heading for the big wheel, and the man on the platform working his controls and the cranes lifting open the doors to the huge hatch.

“What are they doing?” Dev asked.

“Pulling the net in.” Jess responded. “I think.” She said. “Got to be honest and tell you I dont' remember much from the last time except how cold it was, and how good fresh oysters tasted on the way in.”

Dev smiled,moving over just a little and leaning against Jess's tall body. She was holding onto a pole, but a moment later, her free arm draped over Dev's shoulders and there, in that rough and rolling sea in the rain Dev felt a sense of comfort she'd hardly expected. “What are oysters?”

“Shellfish.” Jess promptly answered. “You get them in the shallows, then you just open them and eat them whole in a swallow.”

Dev went still. “While they're still alive?” She asked, her voice rising in surprise.

“Yeah.” Her partner said. “I guess.” She said, after a brief pause. “They don't make noise or move around or anything.”

The bio alt looked up at her with a very dubious expression.

“Oh ho.” Jess laughed. “I think I finally found something that freaks you out in a bad way.”

Dev was momentarily quiet. Then she produced a pained grin. “I think you're right.” She admitted. “I sure liked the idea of that whole sex thing better.” She added in a mournful tone. “I don't think I'd like consuming live animals.”

They both turned when loud noise sounded, and got back under cover as the ship churned to a halt again and four men on the back wall started throwing metal hooks into the water, pulling them back at high speed and sending tails of wet rope skittering over the deck.

The first yanked a floating ball up over the top and ran with it to the wheel, as the back deck lowered hastily into the water. The second and third ball came over and were attached, and then the last came flipping onto the deck, the man who had hooked it grabbing it and running for the center of the deck.

The wheel started turning though, and he missed the hook for it, falling into the wheel and slamming away from it as it sent his body tumbling through the air.

Another crewman grabbed the ball and climbed halfway up the wheel, hooking it and then jumping clear, ignoring the man now lying on the deck. “Go go go!”

The wheel increased it's speed, and the net started coming back onboard the ship, as several more men gathered on either side of the opening with huge, long hooked poles.

The man who had missed lay still, then a blast of water washed over the deck and picked him up, throwing him further up the flat surface towards the overhang.

“Should we help him?” Dev asked, watching the tumbling body with some concern.

Jess considered in silence, then made a motion that was half shrug and half shake. “Wait here.” She jumped down off the crate and bolted across the floor, leaping over the next rolling wave and two bags it brough with it, keeping her balance across the pitching deck seemingly with ease.

She reached the injured crewman and grabbed his arm and his upper leg, hauling him up and onto her shoulders and then bracing her legs as the next wave sought to take them from under her. She waited for the water to roll back then she loped across the deck over to where a platform was bolted on the outside of the deck structure, gently letting the crewman down onto his back on top of it.

The man on the platform turned to watch her, his expression interested. Then he turned back around as the rest of the crew started yelling, and the boat suddenly changed its angle, going down at the aft as the wheel struggled to bring the net onboard. “Whoa!”

A woman came around the corner of the hatch, hopping over bins and hanks of rope as she skidded to a halt at Jess's side. “Svein! What happened to him!” She gave Jess a suspicious look. “What did you do to him?”

“She didn't do anything!” Dev had slid across the deck to join her partner. “He got hit by that big thing over there. Jess just got him from the water and brought him here.”

Jess eyed her, a faint smile crossing her face. “Don't worry.” She told the woman. “If I really wanted to kill him I would have just done it. I don' waste time beating people up.” She got up. “You a medic?”

“Yes.” The woman said stiffly. “Sorry. No offense.”

“None taken.” Jess answered promptly. “C”mon Dev lets..”

The both grabbed for something as the ship pitched upward violently, and high keening sound broke through all the rumbling of the engines. Jess slid against the bulkhead and grabbed hold of a steel strut, reaching out to grab Dev as she bounced over next to her. “What in the hell?”

The raucous yells of the crew rang out and they ducked their heads around the over hang to see the net being hauled back in, stuffed with brilliant wriggling forms. The draw was so immense it was nearly taking the aft of the ship underwater, and the excitement on deck was palpable.

The deck door popped open and Sigurd hopped out, a grin on his face. “C'mon you slugs! Get that damn thing unloaded before it drags us under!” He yelled at the top of his voice. “Bet we fill the tanks with one damn throw!” He reached out and slapped Jess on the arm. “Lucky little bastard you are, Drake. Haven't seen a haul like this in ten years.”

“Captain.” Jess's voice cut through all the excitement, and brought him around to face her. She was standing very still, her head cocked a little forward. “Don't hit me again.”

Sigurd looked her in the eye in silence for a moment. Then he lifted a hand up, palm outward. “Just treating you like one of the family, Drake. No offense intended.” He said, in a quiet, serious tone. “You did me a favor, you and your tech. We appreciate it.”

Jess relaxed. “Sorry.” She said. “Been in the field a while.”

He nodded. “Better warn your tech not to stick so close then.” He winked at Dev. “She'd look lousy with bruises.” He turned and started across the deck, heading towards the cluster of crew now working feverishly to get the fish out of the net and into the tank before the drag pulled the back of the ship under water.

Jess exhaled, then she turned to regard Dev, who was tucked against her with a puzzled expression on her face. “Don't worry.” She said. “You're safe. I only whack people I don't like or don't know.” She paused. “Or those who double cross me and nearly get me killed.”

Dev pondered that. “I”m really glad you like me then.” She finally said. “And I'm glad you helped that man.” She blinked against the wind driven rain. “Should we get out of the weather? I'm really getting cold.”

Jess relaxed completely, and smiled. “You bet.” She undogged the hatch and pushed it open. “We've done our good deeds for the day. Let's get something hot and check our intel so far before we get washed overboard.”

'That sure was a lot of fish.” Dev said, as she stepped over the threshold.

“Sure was.”

Dev paused, as they opened the inner door. “They don't eat them alive, do they, Jess?”

Jess chuckled.

“Do they?”

**

As it turned out, they didn't. Dev sat quietly on a low bench against the wall of the common room, cradling a mug of pungent seaweed tea between her hands as she watched the crew stream in and out as they finished their tasks, or started new ones, their high good humor very evident.

The net had hauled in a good catch, and after they cast it out again, they had been happy with the result and ended up with enough to fill up one of the tanks and now they were powering along in the waves heading somewhere else.

It was damp and cool in the common room but still a lot warmer than outside, and on one side three women were working on preparing some food for everyone. Unlike in the creche, or even in the citadel, they were doing this in the open, cutting up some things and putting them in a big container that seemed to be over a heat source.

Whatever it was they were doing smelled good. Dev was just glad there was heat involved, which meant she wasn't going to have to consume something either raw or alive, the thought of which was giving her quite a bit of discomfort.

Across the room Jess was talking to the captain, and everyone seemed to be ignoring the motion of the ship, even when the front of it seemed to be smashing into the water every few moments.

The bench she was on had a padded rail behind it, which you could hook an arm around to stay in place, and that was exactly what she had done, wedging herself into a corner to ride out the waves.

She was pleased her scan had resulted in success. It seemed to have broken the ice with the crew, as Jess had hoped it would, and now, though not really friendly to them, she didn't see people glaring at them anymore. That was good. She watched Jess carefully, seeing the agent's body posture relax and she reached out to casually grasp a hold bar against the wall as the ship pitched hard to the right.

Then she turned her head and their eyes met. Dev found herself smiling for no apparent reason at that, watching a responding smile appear on her partner's face. It was nice to see that, in this cold and strange place. Dev regarded her cup, then she looked back up to see Jess lifting a hand briefly to the captain and then head her way.

She had good balance, Dev noted. The motion of the ship didn't knock her offstride, and she ended up next to Dev and dropped down onto the bench without missing a step. “Hey.”

“Yes?” Dev responded.

“He wants you to use the scanner again.” Jess lowered her voice, though the sound in the common room with all the engines going blocked out most listening ears anyway. “I told him we can't run around catching fish for him.”

Dev considered that. “Of course I can do that.” She said. “But wouldn't it be better if I looked at their gear, to see if I could get it to do the same thing?”

Jess glanced around quickly. “Can you do that?”

“I don't know. I would need to look at their equipment.” The bio alt answered placidly.

Jess leaned on the back rail. “Interesting bargaining chip.” She remarked. “Keep quiet about that.”

“Okay.”

“We give that to them, they get a big advantage over the rest of the fleet.” Jess said. “We're not supposed to tip their balance.”

“I see.”

“On the other hand, they'd really owe us one.” Her partner mused. “And I'd wait until we're in more sheltered waters. I don't want you banging your head on their crap trying to rig it.”

Dev didn't really have much to say to that, so she remained quiet, sipping at her tea. The brew was strange and unlike pretty much anything she'd tasted before – the seaweed it was made from stronger and a soft purple color rather than the green she'd been used to.

“Sea grape tea.” Jess peered in the cup. “Haven't seen that in a while.”

Silently, Dev offered her the cup. Jess took it and sipped from it, rolling the liquid around in her mouth a little before she swallowed it. “Not bad.” She admitted. “They're making a stew back there. Mostly what they have since they can add to it and it stays pretty good.”

“And it's not alive.” Dev uttered softly.

'We made good progress.” Jess lowered her voice again “Now I've got to convince the captain to take this haul and sell it to the other side so I can get this mission moving before we get interrupted by pirates.”

“Aren't we supposed to be trying to find the pirates?”

“No. I just want them to think we are.” Her partner said. “I mean... “ She glanced around. “Hell, if we bump into the damn pirates I'll be glad to get in a fistfight with them, but we have to focus on the plan, Dev. I need to get that data.” She handed Dev's cup back and watched her take a swallow of it's contents. “That's the goal. Don't lose sight of it.”

“I won't.” Dev said. “I'm just trying to keep everything straight in my head.” She explained. “What can I do to help?”

The ship rolled at that moment, sending Jess practically into Dev's lap. “Holy shit.” Jess hauled herself upright. “Sorry about that, partner.”

“I'm not.” Dev replied in a straightforward way. “You can do that at any time.” She had moved her cup away and her skin was still tingling with the sudden connection. “It feels excellent.”

Jess eyed her, and a rakish smile appeared on her face.

The women finished their work across the room, and they rang a small, yellow metal bell that immediately made everyone else shut up and move towards them.

“We'll wait until they get theirs.” Jess said. “Even though we rank them, and don't have to.”

Dev cautiously extended her boots and crossed them. She was now relatively warm, and sitting next to Jess was making her feel even warmer. She had her back against the rail and she set the cup down into an inset tray before she hooked both arms around it, her shoulder pressing against Jess's.

The crew was watching them. Dev could see them glancing over, then glancing away, as they filed past the back counter and came away with steaming bowls clutched in their hands. Whatever it was smelled good, and she could feel her stomach growling in response.

It was near dark. The day had passed faster than she'd thought it would, and she found herself wondering what this group of people would do now. Would they continue to work? They did in the creche, after all. But in the citadel, when they had been there after dinner the night had been theirs to do whatever they wanted in.

She had used her time to study. She didn't have much to study here, but she did have her book with her and she wondered if she would have a few minutes to read some of it.

She spotted one of the women approaching and she glanced at Jess. “Are we expected to help?”

Jess laughed. “No.” She nodded at the woman, who had brought over two bowls with eating utensils stuck haphazardly in them. She took one and Dev took the other. “Thanks.”

The woman didn't say a word to them. She just turned and went back over to the work area.

Dev watched her go. “Did we do something to cause discomfort?”

Jess sniffed her bowl, then picked up the combination spoon and fork and fished out some fish nibbling it cautiously. “Nah.” She licked her lips. “These guys like their women, but they like them quiet and busy cleaning and cooking and taking care of the kids.”

Dev took a spoonful of the wet, lumpy substance and found it quite tasty. “I see.”

“They're fine with that, but they think we're freaks.” Jess went on. “I've been called everything from unnatural to a monster up here by the ice.” She shrugged. “Even when I was here as a kid, they tried to make me help them. I kicked one of them in the crotch and they left me alone.”

“I see.” Dev repeated.

“That's why they warned us when we came on not to go around the ship alone. Not that it worries me.” Jess said. “I”ve got more firepower strapped to my body than they could buy with a dozen hauls on this thing.”

“I'll make sure to stay close by you then.” Dev commented. “Because I don't have anything dangerous tied to me.”

Jess chuckled. “These guys aren't impressed by us being Interforce but Sigurd knows my rep and if he's got any sense he'll have told his roughnecks to steer clear.”

Dev ate what was in the bowl, watching the rest of the crew who were seated on the benches like they were, or were at the table in the middle with the captain. The ones there seemed to be the more important ones, the man who had been standing on the platform outside and a few of the others she had heard yelling orders.

What would they do next? She wondered how Jess would convince the captain to go where she wanted to go. Would she make him think there was fish there? Maybe she would. Dev thought about that, looking up when she heard footsteps approaching to find the captain and another man hunkering down next to them.

“I”m not gonna chase the storm edge.” The captain said. “I got word we had a big pack ice break north east of the divide. I'm going to take us out there, and you're gonna find me another haul. How about it?”

Jess considered his words, as she continued to eat. “Northeast.” She said, after a pause. “Sure that's smart?”

Dev blinked, since she'd figured in her head that northeast was exactly where Jess said she wanted to go.

The captain gave them both a reckless appearing grin. “Scared?” He said. “Fraid the abominable snowman's gonna getcha?” He looked mockingly at Jess. “I let the crew know you nailed that bait ball we pulled onboard. Now they want to see if it was a fluke.”

“Not my job to find fish for you.” Jess remarked. “You want to risk taking this tub into the ice pack? You can drop me off on a berg. Not my idea of fun.” She scraped the bottom of the bowl. “What makes you think you'll find any fish there anyway? Maybe you're just looking to embarrass us.”

Sigurd laughed. “Maybe I am” He said. “I guess we'll just find out won't we?” He got up and tapped the man with him on the head. “Let's go Lars. Tell the crew they got till mids then they need to start cranking.”

Jess watched them go, tipping her bowl up to drain the last of the liquid into her mouth. Then she let her elbows rest on her knees and licked her lips. “Nice.”

Dev just scratched her nose, having nothing really to add to that. She poked in her bowl and scooped up a bit of fish, chewing it thoughtfully. The meal was mostly that, with thick, well cooked pieces of seaweed in it and it was a little spicy. She decided she liked it.

From her peripheral vision, she saw the women take away their work materials, moving off through a heavy door set in the center of the common space. “What's in there?” She indicated the door.

Jess glanced at it. “That's where they live. Got some common crew quarters on the outer corridor, where we got put. In there's where the kids usually are, and where they bunk. I was surprised when you said you saw them outside.”

“I see.” Dev set the bowl down and picked up her scanner, adjusting it and directing the beacon towards the door. The wiremap came back quickly, diagramming a dense, compact space of three levels that had a number of hot targets scattered across the rooms.

Jess peered at it. “Don't let them see you doing that.” She warned, in a very low tone. “They take their private space very seriously.” She went on “But get as much detail as you can.”

“Okay.” Dev tuned the device, aware of Jess's body pressed against hers. After a few minutes, she turned the scanner off and let it hang from the strap around her neck. “What do we do now?”

“Wait.” Jess let her elbows rest on her knees. 'Wait for us to get into this back of beyond spot he's got his eye on.” She stood up and stretched. “Let's go get some rest, Devvie.”

Dev's brows twitched at this morphing of her name but she got up and followed her partner across the open space, her balance only slightly tested as the ship seemed to have found a less fractious path for a few minutes. She set her bowl in a deep sunken space with the rest of them and tried to ignore the intent stares from the men they were going past.

Jess seemed oblivious. She led them towards the side door in the bulkhead and worked the wheel latch that held it shut. She pulled it open and ducked inside, with Dev right behind her as they moved from the stale, flickering light of the common room to the dim, burnished orange glow of the corridor.

Here, the motion didn't matter as much as the space was barely large enough to admit Jess's shoulders when the agent was facing forward. The walls were rough and covered in old weld points, and the lights themselves were wrapped in steel and thick gritty glass.

They were alone in the corridor.

“What is this area?” Dev asked, as they went through a slightly wider space.

Jess looked. “Probably was an engineering station.” She said. “Most of these old boats are from that last big fight. When humanity realized they were so fucked they couldn't afford open warfare anymore and they abandoned everything.”

“Oh.” Dev examined the now dark consoles with some interest. “So the fishermen took them over?”

“Some of them, yeah.” Jess reached their little space and bumped the door open. “No locks.” She commented, as she entered, ducking her head to clear the hatch. “They were the very few who could get the creds to run them, since they had fish to trade.” She waited for the hatch to shut behind Dev and then she examined the latch, removing her long knife and wedging it in place to keep the mechanism closed.

“I see.”

Jess went over to where she'd lashed her pack and stood quietly for a moment, studying it. Then she touched the bio patch on the side and regarded the gentle green light that flashed briefly before she opened it. “Least they've got some brains here.”

Dev had done the same to her pack “Did you expect someone to come in and disturb our things?”

“Never can tell,” Jess started divesting herself of her weapons. “More expect the kids to come in looking for swag than anyone else. They're always looking for trade goods.” She unfastened and removed her jacket and hung it on one of the two hooks near the hatchway.

Beneath the hooks there was a metal grilled box split in two, and Jess deposited her boots in one side of it. “I remember hearing stories about those times, when this was a fighting ship. Remind me to look em up when we get back home.”

Home. Dev stood up and took off her outer coat, putting it on the hook next to Jess's and feeling the cool damp of the room penetrate her jumpsuit. She'd never really had much to call her own at the creche, so the thought of her quiet, spacious quarters in the citadel being home was surprisingly appealing to her. “Okay.”

“Cold?” Jess was watching her.

“A little.” Dev rubbed her arms. “I'm glad we brought these.” She indicated her dark green jumpsuit, which at least covered her pretty much from head to foot. “Jess, you seemed in discomfort when they said where we were going. Didn't you want to go that way?”

Jess had unpacked her sleep bag and was spreading it out on the top bunk. She chuckled softly. “I do.” She said. “I”m not sure I really want to enter the pack ice, but it's the right direction, and if he gets a good haul chances are he'll want to offload where we need to be.”

Dev copied her motions, snapping the hooks at the four edges of her bag to the bed supports. “Okay.”

“But I don't want him to know that's what I want.” Jess went on. She was now in her black jumpsuit and she boosted herself up onto the upper bunk and sprawled over her sleep bag, exhaling as her body relaxed. “You scanned for com, right?”

“Yes.” Dev was just putting her scanner into it's dock. She triggered a download of the scan, taking a seat on her bunk and extending her legs out into the small space of the room. “Most of the tech is in that central area. In this space, there's nothing really except for the lights and a comp in that place I saw the children.”

“Library probably.” Jess mused. “Kids were getting lessons.” She stretched and sighed again “One of the things they trade for in places like Quebec on our side, and Dover on the other side. Comp mods for the kids, and for nav and met.”

“It's an old comp.” Dev studied the readouts.

“Sure.”

“If I could mod our scan to find the fish, I”m not really sure why someone hasn't.” Dev commented. “We got sine wave mods as basic in school.”

Jess didn't answer for a few minutes, then she shifted a little, rolling over onto her stomach and peering down at Dev. “I never did.”

Dev looked up in surprise. “You didn't?”

The agent shook her head. “They teach us what we need to know. Sine wave manipulation wasn't on the curriculum for front line soldiers in the cause back in school.” She studied Dev. “There's a feeling too... I think that old fashioned goons like the ones here dont' trust tech.”

Dev blinked at her, obviously confused.

“You take tech for granted.” Jess said. “So do I, since my family's pretty stocked and I went from home to Interforce and there's plenty of that there. But out here, tech's like your crazy uncle. Know what I mean?”

“Not in the least.” Dev responded readily.

Jess chuckled. “These people rely on themselves. Not on outsiders, or tech, or comp.” She said. “They use it when they can get it, just like they're using us for their own purposes, but they don't trust it.”

“Or us.” Dev concluded.

“You got it.” Jess said. “So they might trade for something that could do something useful, like that scan, if you could set it to just do the fish finding, but they'd never waste their time learning the theory behind it. Does that make sense?”

Dev remained quiet for a brief time. “It makes sense as in, I understand what you said, but it doesn't make sense as in, how do they expect to make things better if they don't learn how it all works?” She settled the scanner into it's case, making sure the connection to the inductive charging system was solid.

Then she wriggled back and lay down on her bag, watching Jess's face hanging over the top bunk, it's dark and shaggy framing outlined in the low, orange light. “Don't they want to improve their future?”

“There is no future here.” Jess said. “Its' all short term, just like it is for us. You can't really think about what you'e going to be doing in a year, or ten years, or even tomorrow when you're focus is really on how to survive today.” She extended a hand down and smiled when Dev reached up to grasp it. “Let's get some rest while we can.”

Dev squeezed her fingers then let her go, squirming around and getting the bag's covering over her, relieved when the light, strong fabric immediately trapped the air around her and warmed it. She wished, briefly, that they were back in the carrier uncomfortable as that had been, since then at least they'd been able to sleep next to each other.

Warmer. She remembered the feeling she'd had when she'd woken up before, with Jess's arm draped over her. Warmer, and nicer.

She thought about the fishing people, living from day to day.

She thought about school, and all the things she'd learned and never wondered why and about the kids here who were only taught the things they needed to know to do what they did.

She wondered, a moment, about what really the difference was between natural borns and bio alts.

“Hey.” Jess's voice interrupted her.

“Yes?”

“Y'know, it's warmer up here.”

On the other hand, Dev now found herself appreciating the need to deal with the present. “Is it?”

“C'mon and see.”

Well. Keeping warm was important, wasn't it? Dev climbed out of her nest and lifted herself up onto the upper bunk, where Jess was already enfolding her in fabric and a tangle of long arms and legs and, she was glad to note, much warmer air.

Nice.

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They woke to chaos. The lights had gone completely off, and a klaxon blared suddenly, making the walls vibrate as it jerked them both upright.

Dev was glad they hadn't decided to meet up in her bunk on the bottom or else she suspected her partner would have been knocked out cold. She felt Jess shift and she quickly tried to get out of the way, as the sheets pulled tight against her.

“What the fuck?” Jess released the catches on the sleeping bag. “Don't move.” She planted her hands on either side of her partner. “Coming over.”

Dev pressed flat against the bed, her heart hammering in her ears as she felt Jess launch herself over her, landing on the ground with a thump of bare feet against steel. Once she was sure she was clear she reached down and grabbed the scanner, turning it on and using the screen to light up the cabin they were in

Jess was halfway into her jumpsuit, now outlined in the blue silver glow. “'Thanks.” She said. “Let me get this suit on then you grab yours. I want you with me.”

Dev had absolutely no argument with that at all. She waited for Jess to move towards her overjacket and then she slipped out of the bag and rooted around for her own clothes. She left the scanner leaning against the bedpost and jumped into her suit, getting the catches closed just as a voice blared on the speaker calling battle stations.

Battle stations?

“Looks like they kept the old com chips.” Jess had her coat on, and was seating her weapons in their holsters. “Once we get out to the deck keep that scan on and recording. If this goes way bad they'll want to pick up the comp.”

Dev was pretty sure she didn't really want to know what that meant. She got her jacket on and slipped the scanner around her neck fastening the outer closures as she reached down for her boots.

The klaxon continued. Jess got her boots on and headed for the hatch. “Stick close.” She yanked her knife free and sheathed it, and then she worked the latch and shoved the door open, ducking to get through it as she flipped on the light from her kit and slapped it into place along the axis of her blaster.

The hallway beyond was also dark, and the ship was rolling the water, sending them slamming from side to side as they made their way aft towards the working part of the ship. .

Dev could hear running feet, and the whine of machinery and the sound of men yelling. Above that though, she heard a roar that didn't seem to be part of the ocean. She put a hand on Jess's hip and stayed close by her, the sound of the klaxon making her grimace as they passed under one of the speakers.

They reached the door and Jess put her shoulder to the hatch and shoved it open, hauling herself back and sweeping Dev behind her as they were hit with a blast of light.

Then the light was gone and Jess surged forward. “I got a bad feeling about this.” She hopped out the hatch and onto the deck, and bolted for the bulkhead wall.

It was loud and chaotic. There were crew behind several walls and the pedestal, all yelling, the laser traces of hand blasters blinking in the darkness in multihued flares.

Dev followed, seeing the blast of light cascade across the deck, coming from above. She tipped her head back as she headed for where Jess was flattened, seeing a huge silhouette momentarily outlined in backwash against roiling black skies.

Programming triggered, and she sucked in a shocked breath as she reached Jess's side. “Jess!”

Jess unsafed her heavy blaster. “Yeah?”

“That's a carrier over us.”

“You got a look at it?” Jess turned and stared intently at her, going otherwise very still.

“Really fast one.” Dev said. “But it matched a pict image.” She touched the side of her head. “Older type, BM series, not like ours.” She recited. “Smaller engine cones, bench inside, multiple launch attack model.”

Jess sighed. “Fuck.” She gently pushed Dev against the wall. “Stand there, poke the scan out that square hole and just get good vid of what I do.”

“Okay.” Dev said, feeling unhappy and incorrect. “Take care.”

Jess smiled briefly. Then she closed her eyes, and took a breath in, letting it out slowly. Dev could see visible tension coming inot her body and when her eyes reopened, there was an intense, cold focus in them that shocked her.

Then Jess simply exploded into motion, coming around the bulkhead and onto the deck just as it lit up with a huge flare of white light, that outlined forms dropping from the sky.

Dev got her scanner in place and triggered the recorder, blinking her eyes rapidly to clear the light flare so she could see. The deck was alive with alighting figures and as they landed and rifles started swinging around Jess attacked.

It was awful and to her, scary. Jess was moving so fast it was hard to keep sight of her, blaster fire missing her on all sides as she twisted and turned, a dozen figures swiveling to target her as she calmly laid down her own fire.

Rifle tucked against her side, hand gun in her left hand, she was shooting in two directions at once while moving in a third, never pausing in motion for even an instant. She took down one of the enemy, then two,

then she leaped up onto the side wall of the ship as it pitched, jumping out and over two others who were rushing towards her.

Dev's jaw dropped a little, as she watched her partner flip over in mid air, shooting down at the two figures and blasting them into pieces just before she landed and turned and let off a barrage in a sweeping motion that took out two more descending figures and sent them spinning off into the ocean.

No hesitation. All smooth and deadly motion.

She was a deadly force, and the men facing off against her knew it. Dev could see their faces in the wash of the light, their eyes wide, pointing, diving for the deck, ducking away from her motion even though they wore the same uniforms and were cut from the same apparent cloth.

Through the roar of the surf and the carrier engines, she heard a wild yell ring out, high and bold that made the hair on the back of her neck lift. She saw one falling figure shift sideways and head right for Jess only to watch in astonishment as her partner took one long step and then crouched, shooting off the deck and colliding with the figure as she swung her free hand out and around and the light caught a thick spray of liquid as the figure seemed to come apart as she hit it.

Jess tumbled in the air and then righted herself and landed, dropping into a crouch as bolts flew over her head and slammed into the outer wall of the ship and ricocheted back almost catching her as she leaped again over them and tumbled lazily int the air before the deck came up to meet her and she landed square, turning in a circle with both guns outstretched.

Men were yelling. The carrier above them suddenly shifted from white to red lights, and a loud horn blared out. Dev had no idea what it all meant, but she kept recording, as Jess closed in on two more of the attackers, now too close to use blasters so it was hand to hand

She kicked the legs out form one and sent him into the fire of another of the enemy, his body blasting apart into chunks as the plasma bolt touched him. Then she grabbed the second, swinging him around as he aimed the butt of his gun at her head. He missed his target by a fraction, then Jess had her knife out again and slashing, and the red light caught a spray of liquid as the knife cut deep and then flashed free.

Her laughter suddenly rang out over the chaos. She slid sideways and put her back to the ship wall, head swinging around as she looked for her next target.

Hooks suddenly caught the light, and four figures hauled on to them, as the carrier started to lift off. Jess dropped to her knees and braced her rifle, sighting up as the figures lifted clear and the lower guns of the craft activated, and swung around.

“Jess!” Dev let out a yell, as she recognized the configuration. “Guns live!”

“See em!” Jess yelled back, squeezing the trigger and letting off a barrage at the muzzles moving her way. The carrier's shielding took the hit and she knew she was likely about to get blasted along with the rest of the boat when a fast moving body made her jerk around just as Dev hit the deck next to her, sliding across the icy surface and slamming into her with stunning force.

Her automatic reactions seized up, throwing her body into confusion as the kill instinct was unexpectedly stifled, and she went with the motion as they both ended up behind the big net wheel just as the deck lit up with an overhead barrage and she had to throw her hands over her head to protect her eyes from the flash.

“The'yre going to shoot you!” Dev yelped. “Get down!”

“The'yre going to shoot you too now!” Jess yelled back, as a line of blaster fire came right at them counter to the carrier's motion as it lifted away and headed south. With a curse she grabbed Dev and yanked her out of the way, rolling out of the line of fire as the blast hit the deck again and sent a cascade of energy across it.

The backwash hit them and Dev felt her ears pop and her body arch and cramp, an almost fire burning over her senses before it was gone and over, and the sky was dark again.

Every inch of her was tingling. Dev got her knees under her and straightened, twisting around to find Jess right behind her, gun muzzles still glowing faintly, a light that vanished as the ship recovered and turned on the outside lights on the deck, bathing them in a white orange glow.

The engines rumbled to life. Dev caught her breath, and looked at her partner. “That was interesting. In a bad way.”

Jess slowly put her guns down on the deck and sat down next to them, letting her hands rest on her knees, her fingers twitching in a jerky rhythm. Her breathing was coming short and hard, and after a minute, she looked up at Dev with cold, expressionless eyes.

Killer's eyes. Compassionless and remote.

It was stark, and terrorizing, seeing the cold and merciless machine behind those eyes and yet, Dev didn't either think or hesitate before she reached out and clasped her partner's shoulder, far more worried than scared. “Are you all right?” She asked. “You seem in real discomfort.”

For a moment Jess kept staring at her, then her eyes blinked, and the muscles under Dev's fingers relaxed and the breath came out of her in a long, trickling sigh. She lifted her hands and rested her head against them, fingers still twitching.

Dev forgot all about the bad guys. She put her back to the chaos on the deck, blocking the view of the crew of her partner. “Jess?”

“I'm okay.” Jess muttered. “Just coming down. Give me a minute.”

Dev wasn't sure what that meant, but she watched the planes of Jess's face ease after a moment, taking on familiar character and leaving behind that cold, hard mask that had put a chill down Dev's spine. “I'm sorry if I was incorrect.” She said, in a quiet tone. “You told me to stay behind.”

Jess blinked a few more times, then she looked up at Dev with a strangely wry expression. “We'll talk later.”

“Hot damn!” The captain's voice rang out over the deck. “Get the engines revved! Put us back on course and get this deck ready to fish!”

Jess lifted her head. “Don't... “ She scrambled to her feet and sucked in a breath. “Hold it!” She called out in a commanding tone.

Dev got up and stood, uncertainly, at her side. “What's wrong?”

“Go get a scan of the bodies, especially the hands.” Jess turned to face her. “Before the throw them over.” She added. “Need to know who the hell they are.”

Dev studied her for a moment. “Are you sure you're okay?” She asked, lifting the scanner up and keying it.

A very brief smile appeared on the agents face. “I'm fine.” She patted Dev on the arm. “G'wan so they can clean up.”

Somewhat reassured, Dev turned and made her way across the slippery deck towards the first of the bodies. The engines had steadied the course of the ship, but they were still plowing through white ruffled seas and she balanced carefully as she watched the crew back away as she approached.

Strange. She had no idea why they might be wary of her, since all she'd done during the fight was yell and slide across the ice like a crazy person.

She knelt down beside the body and started the scan, glad she'd put on her heavy coat when a blast of ocean spray coated her liberally. The scan chimed softly and she reviewed the results, then she passed it over the hands that were already freezing to the deck.

The body was in a typical black battle suit, the twin to the one Jess was wearing, right down to the blue trim on the collar. She finished the scan and got up, storing the results before she headed to the second, catching sight of the captain crossing behind her and heading in Jess's direction.

Dev circled around the body and knelt down, positioning herself so she could keep an eye on her partner. Jess had picked up and holstered her weapons, and was tucking her hands inside her jacket as the captain reached her.

She seemed all right, but Dev was still concerned. She set the scan up and reached out to grasp the stiffening shoulder, rolling the body over and straightening it. The fact that the man was dead didn't bother her.

Bio alts were programmed to be very pragmatic about life, and death. Dev herself had seen any number of her kind put down in the creche, for various reasons and she felt no emotional charge as she studied the dead man's face. He was young, and had very short cut blond hair, with a thick knotted scar that went across his face and through one lip.

Dev captured the details carefully, then she passed the scan over his hands, waiting to hear the beep as the device picked up the embedded chips under the skin.

The device remained silent. Dev redid the scan, but got the same results. “Hm.” She did it a third time, this time recording the result or lack of it and closing the cover. Unexpected. She got up and went to the other casualties and then she headed back towards where Jess was still talking to the captain.

Six bodies in Interforce uniforms, five of them without the chips Dev knew they all carried, including herself. She'd gotten her set the morning before she'd left the creche, and she remembered the bone deep tickle as they'd activated the programming for it.

She remembered seeing Jess getting hers reactivated, on her very first day at the citadel, and how she'd flinched, and flexed her hand in reaction. “Jess.” She paused, seeing the suddenly intent look from her partner.

“Done?” Jess said.

“Yes.”

“So, captain.” Jess put a hand on Dev's shoulder. “Did we deliver?”

Sigurd grinned. “Gotta admit, that was pretty slick work.” He said. “Bastards came down on top of us before we even caught them on radar. Looked like your side, huh?”

“It was a carrier.” Jess acknowledged. “Bet they won't be back though.”

“Not today.” The captain agreed cheerfully. “You done now? I need to clean my deck.”

“Done.” Jess nodded, watching him as he walked off, yelling orders at the crew. “Shit.” She exhaled. “Wasn't looking to have to report this today.”

“Jess.” Dev opened the scanner and called up the results. “I found something unusual.” She keyed up the second set of comp and showed it to her. “No ident.”

Jess took the scanner and peered at it. “None of them?”

“The first one had.” Dev reached over and switched the record, displaying it. “The rest didn't. I thought it was a bit unusual.”

“A bit?” Jess's voice lifted. “Those are reg uniforms. Here's the scan tag.” She pointed. “And that was a carrier, even though it was an older one. No one should be onboard it that isn't one of us.”

Us. Dev again felt just the tiniest prickle of pride at that, no matter how inappropriate the time for it. “What does this mean, Jess?” She asked, as her partner slowly started to move across the deck, still studying the scanner. They eased past the crew who were now dragging the bodies to the side, and gained the shelter of the bulkhead.

“Good question.” Jess finally said, handing the scanner back. “Let's talk about it later.” She folded her arms and regarded the busy deck. The attack didn't seem to have fazed the crew at all, and most were returning arms to an insulated locker before moving out to go back to work.

Sigurd came back over to them, rubbing his hands. “Ready to head into the slot?” He said. “See it? Right there.” He pointed up and forward, where the solid inky black of the sea was abruptly bisected by a ghostly gray wall looming up unexpectedly in front of them.

“I see a head on crash.” Jess said. “Not much else.”

The captain chuckled “There.” He grabbed a post as the ship veered. “That crack.”

Jess squinted, seeing a long, dark line in the gray. “You're taking this thing in there?”

'Hehehe. Scared?”

“Yes.”

Sigurd looked at Jess in surprise. “Thought you jiggers didn't admit to that.”

“Stupid ones don't.” Jess eyed the oncoming wall. The ship lights now bounced off the ice and she could see the separation between the two big sheets, the waves rushing up against it and bouncing back. She could feel her breathing returning to normal, and the energy that had been making her muscles jerk was easing.

She was out of the need to be zoned. The harsh black and white flatness had eased from her vision, and she could feel the bowed tension in her back releasing as she leaned against the wall of the ship.

Had she freaked Dev out? She watched her partner grip the rail to keep herself steady, her head turning a little as she watched everything. It didn't seem like it. “Dev?”

“Yes?”

Jess hesitated. “Never mind. We'll talk later.” She turned to the captain. “Why there?” She asked, walking over to the side of the ship and peering over the rail. “What do you think you'll find in there?”

“You tell me.” Sigurd said. “How about it, tech? Wanna give that thing a whirl?” He came over next to Jess. “We know schools tend to hide up in the crevasse. Give's em shelter from the big current they're just a little tricky to set the nets into.”

“Why at night?” Dev asked.

“That's when they there.” The captain grinned at her. “They sleep at night. Get it?”

The alarm went off. “Standing by to move forward, cap'n!” A voice rumbled over the hailer. “Have clearance.”

“C”mon.” Sigurd motioned them forward. “See it for yourself. You'll only get the one chance.” He rambled towards the side of the ship clearly expecting them to follow and they did, coming to the near rail just as the ship lunged and tumbled through the surf.

The walls of ice towered over them, and Jess tipped her head back, feeling a blast of cold air hit her, along with a wash of icy spray. She refastened her neck cover a little more firmly and felt her eyes widen a little as the brash lights of the ship hit the ice and sent a dozen jolts of color through the surface.

She felt like they were entering a cave. The dark clouds over head were formless and impenetrable, and as they slipped between the walls the thunder of the waves nearly deafened her, thrumming against her ears with an uncomfortable vibration.

She lifted one hand and covered her right ear, wincing.

Through the thickness of her jacket she felt Dev's touch on her, the heat of a grip on her elbow and then the press of Dev's shoulder against hers as they were surrounded by rumbling echoes.

“Loud huh?” Sigured yelled.

The noise was pounding in her head and Jess felt suddenly sick.

“Drop the net!” The captain bawled into the loudspeaker. “Drop ! Drop!”

Dev could see the real discomfort on her partner's face. She looked around at all the activity, then she carefully gripped Jess's arm and tugged her towards the hatch that would block some of the sound that was bombarding them from all directions.

It wasn't terribly comfortable for Dev, the discordant waves were making her head ache and she was glad to get the hatch open, and then closed after her and Jess, the seal thumping into place and dropping the noise level by three quarters.

It was a physical relief. “Ah” Jess leaned against the wall, rubbing her ear and wincing. “Thanks.”

Dev shook her head rapidly to clear it. She could still feel the ship moving but the roar of the waves and the echoes had faded to almost irrelevancy. They were alone, in the mostly dark corridor, in relative safety.

Jess exhaled, flexing her hands. “Let's go look at that scan.” She finally said. “Something's not really adding up. What was that ambush all about?”

“They wanted the fish?” Dev hazarded a guess.

“Why drop a full on assault team to the deck in that case? Why not just put the guns on them and threaten them?” Jess wondered. “Were they after fish, Dev... or were they after something else.” She slowly turned her head and looked around. “Like this ship instead?”

Dev picked a spot on the wall next to her and leaned on it. “Why would they want this ship?”

“Why would they want an old carrier?” Jess countered “How many of them didn't have tags? They weren't Interforce, Dev. You were right about that. Those weren't agents.” She exhaled reflectively. “If they were I'd be dead.”

“I see.” Dev said, then paused. “I think.”

“We all get the same training. Some of us are better at some things than others, but we can all do a first class job of kicking ass and those guys could no more kick my ass than they could flap their arms and fly.”

“I see.” Dev repeated slowly. “You... seemed very successful.”

Jess stared quietly at the opposite wall for a few moments. “I'm very good at killing people.” She acknowledged. “You shouldn't really have come that close to me while I”m like that. I don't always know the difference between my friends and my enemies when that old fog of war descends.”

“But.. “ Dev protested. “In the big pl.. in the citadel, when those people attacked us, you knew Doctor Dan wasn't a bad guy.”

Jess exhaled, and half shrugged. “Yea, but you can't always depend on that.” She said. “Don't take chances with me. Last thing I want to do is screw up and pop you one.”

Dev remembered that laugh. She thought about what she'd done, and that run across the deck and the irresistible need that had driving her. “I didn't think about what I was doing.” She admitted. “I just did it.”

Jess just nodded. “Let's go back to our digs.” She draped her arm over Dev's shoulders and pulled her close. Then she turned fully and wrapped her arms around Dev and hugged her.

Dev smiled, returning the hug with a sense of wholesale relief. Things might be getting confusing, but this, at least, certainly wasn't.

**

Jess was very glad to get back into their little scrap of a cabin, away from the sounds and the wary eyes of the crew. She felt raw, and it occurred to her it was the first time she'd been in the zone since Josh's betrayal. She hadn't thought about going into that space before she'd done it, and now that she'd come out of it she wondered why she'd felt so nervous back in the citadel.

She remembered being nervous, and that sick, roiling feeling in her guts as she'd imagined going back into action but when the time had come, she hadn't even thought about it.

Just like Dev hadn't thought about it. She hadn't thought about killing, Dev hadn't thought about saving her ass. What, really, did that say about both of them?

She looked up at the ceiling, flat on her back on her upper bunk as Dev worked to consolidate the scan files and parse the data inside them below her.

Dev.

Dev had done good. She'd done just what a tech was supposed to do right up until she'd broken orders and bolted across the deck, more concerned about Jess being in trouble than her job. Even though that was against regs, and wrong from an ops perspective, Jess was smiling at the ceiling because every agent she'd ever known always wished for a tech that would do exactly what Dev had done.

You wanted to trust. You wanted to know someone really, honestly, had your back. She remembered that one odd night, in the back of a bar in Quebec City when she'd found an old instructor from field school and gotten him drunk and they'd talked.

Retired agent. He'd come out of the field when he'd been part of an ops move that had gone wrong, and lost his tech partner in an explosion of body parts. It happened. He told her, still feeling it all those years later that it hurt, but he was glad he'd trusted in the right place.

Jess thought about Dev's body coming apart in a blast meant for her, and she closed her eyes, because it did hurt. A fierce pain gripped her chest and she reached up to rub the spot, shaking her head a little at the discomfort. She flushed the image and after a moment the pain faded, and she could breathe again.

“Jess?” Dev came over and stood next to her head, the bio alt's blond hair gently reflecting the dull light in the cabin. “Here's an ops recap. Do you want to review it?” She leaned her arms on the bedframe and turned the scanner so Jess could look at it.

Jess found herself unable to focus on the screen. She looked at Dev's profile instead, watching the faint twitches along her smooth skin and admiring the nice shape to her face. After a moment of silence, the bio alt looked over at her, head tilting just a little in question.

What amazing eyes she had.

“Jess?” Dev asked, after another long, silent moment. “Are you all right?”

Jess grinned briefly. “Yeah.” She said. “Sorry. I”m still buzzed from the fight. Takes me a while to come all the way down.” She focused with some effort on the screen. “Roll it. Let me see if you got my good side.”

Dev complied, glad that the ship had mostly stopped tossing around. She held the scanner steady and watched Jess watch it, the screen overlayed with data from the merged scan.

“That is an old carrier.” Jess said, after a pause. “They were current when I was in field school. I trained on them.” She studied the text scroll. “Look at those guys.” She leaned closer and pointed at the figures dropping from the carrier. “Lines.”

“Not the jet pack we have?”

“No. They'd be idiots to use that in the weather we were in anyway, but this is old style. We used to rappel before they stabilized the packs so..” She watched the scanner print the ident details on the still moving figures. “Nice job of integrating the scan, by the way.”

Dev smiled, and her eyes twinkled a little. “Thank you.”

“This guy.” Jess pointed at the screen. “He was chipped.” She studied the readouts. “We wont' know who he is until you squirt that back home but he was one of us.” She watched the man move. “See that? That's field school training.” She watched him swing clear of the deck obstacles and release at just the right time to drop him behind a barrel for shielding. “He went faster, and got behind something. Not an idiot.”

Dev nodded. “Those people didn't.” She watched three others drop. “But they're all in our uniforms.”

“Oh yes.” Jess nodded. “They make a good show, but one thing's for sure, they don't have current comp because if they scanned us before they put a move on us they missed picking up me.” She flexed her hand. “They didn't know I was here.”

“No, I dont' think they did.” Dev said, as she watched the recording. “You can see this person here, that one you said was real? He saw you, and look.” She pointed. “See his face?”

Jess smiled ferociously. “Know what that is?” She said. “That's an 'oh shit' face.” She could, in fact, see the expression and the widened eyes as her own figure flickered past, arms outstretched, guns firing. It always made her twitch, watching herself on the comp, always thinking of what she could have done better or different, always finding some fault with her body position or aim or...

Anyway.

“You move so fast.” Dev commented. “It's amazing.”

Jess eyed her. “You think so?”

“Yes.” Her partner said, and then fell silent as she apparently decided that was answer enough.

Jess watched the scan play out, until the lights blared on and she saw the carrier start a recovery phase, and the picture suddenly got out of sync and lost focus. The pickup caught some low voice and then Dev's yell to her warning of the carrier gun shift. “Did you curse?”

Dev pondered that. “I think so.” She admitted. “When I realized they were going to try and shoot you.”

Jess reached over and patted her on the cheek. “Good girl. You learn fast.”

Then scan cut out, the playback ending as Dev had shut down prior to her bolt across the deck. The scan screen went dim, and Dev shut it down. “Do you want me to send it?”

“You think you can get a signal out?” Jess asked. “No, wait, tell you what. If you can get sig, then just squirt the bio idents we pulled off. Let's see what that gets us. I'm not ...” She paused. “I'm not really sure where the vector is on this, Dev. It could be tied in with the leak.”

Dev nodded. “Okay, I'll see what I can do.” She turned and sat down on her bunk, then she squiggled back and leaned against the pillow, raising up one knee to brace the scanner against as she worked.

Jess folded her hands over her stomach and studied the ceiling again. There was so much to think about. Who were the impostors? Why were they attacking ships dressed as Interforce agents? Were the interesting little golden sparkles in Dev's eyes something that happened naturally or were they engineered that way?

She let out a slow breath. Now, where did that thought come from? Why should she care either way about those sparkles? “Hey Dev?”

“Yes?”
“When they make you.” She said. “Do they pick stuff like what color hair you have or is it just skill sets?”
Dev didn't answer for a little while. “I'm not really sure.” She finally said. “I think... I never heard Doctor Dan say anything like that. About what we look like, I mean.” She paused. “It's more about what you do, than what you look like I think.”

“Huh.”

“Why did you ask me that?” Dev said, after another pause.

“Just wondered.” Jess said. “Just was curious if he did it on purpose or not.”

“Do what?” Dev asked.

“Made you so damn cute.”

Dev swiveled and stuck her head out from under the top bunk, peering at her partner with a puzzled expression. “Am I?”

Jess rolled over onto her stomach and peered over the edge of the sleep bag. “I think so.” She allowed. “I really like looking at you.”

Dev blushed a little, but grinned. “I'm glad.” She said, after a moment.

They remained in place, studying each other. “You think I”m cute?” Jess finally asked, resting her chin on her wrist.

“I think you're beautiful.” Dev answered readily. “And also cute.” She added, when she saw the surprising blush darken Jess's skin. “I've never seen anyone as pretty as you are.”

“Okay, got it.” Jess felt lightheaded from the blood rushing to her head. “Thanks.”

Dev pulled her head back in and extended her body out on the bed, resting her head on the pillow area of her bag. That had been interesting, if a bit confusing, but she was glad Jess liked how she looked since she didn't much have any choices in that area.

It did make her wonder though, about whether they made bio alts look a certain way or if they left it to chance like the natural born did. That made her think about what the captain had told her, about family, and how he thought he could see something in her face that he recognized.

Was that true? She flipped through the vid in the scanner until she picked up an image of him and she studied it briefly. Was there something familiar there?

She really didn't know. But then the image shifted and the captain glanced at the record sensor with a certain look and Dev realized there was something she recognized there but not from her mirror. There was something in that look, in the half humorous expression that reminded her very strongly of Doctor Dan.

Ah. She nodded to herself. Maybe that was why she felt like she knew him. That idea made sense to her, more so than some story of ancient connections between them. Feeling more settled, she set up the transfer for the squirt and started parsing for signal, narrowing the range and tuning out the discord of the metal interference around them.

She could feel the ship moving under her, pitching back and forth but the motion was far more gentle and it came across as almost soothing. The scanner meeped at her, and she regarded the tuning, shaping the signal and altering the waves to lock on to a master sync passing overhead.

From the met sat, she registered the channel and riffled through the interconnects to find one for her relay. There were two, and she picked the strongest, encapsulating the squirt and sending it through. A full second later she got the relay confirmation and then she severed the connection, backing out of the sat and closing down the channel.

She set a timer, to go back for retrieval since the scanner was a send and reply system only not consistently online like the carrier was. “Jess, the ident has been sent and accepted.”

“Good.” Jess responded. “The captain said the carrier was on top of them before they realized what the signature was on their radar. Too much EMF – not surprised they didn't see it.”

Dev was studying the scanner, keying through it's comp. “We didn't see it either.” She said.

“What?”

“I left he scanner on low band.” The bio alt said. “While we were resting. It didn't pick up anything either.”

“Really?” Jess swung her head over the bunk edge again. “Nothing?”

Dev slid out of bed and set the scanner on Jess's bunk again, displaying the screen. “Just the systems onboard. Even the met scan, I see the storm edge here, but nothing else.” She ran the comp back several hours, flickering across the screen. “See?” She leaned her elbows on the bunk, her head nearly touching Jess's.

Jess ignored the screen, and leaned closer, grabbing Dev's earlobe in her teeth and gently nibbling it. She heard the hastily stifled laugh from her partner, and then she released her and refocused on the scanner. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

“Um.” Dev studied the screen. “No scan.” She finally recalled. “No sign of the carrier before it attacked us.” She ran the comp again. “I didn't try to scan them as they left, though.”

“You were busy protecting my ass.” Jess agreed. “So.” She studied the data. “Either the trash in the sky obscured them or they obscured themselves. Found a way to block the scan spectrum.”

“is that possible?”

'Used to be. We used to know how to build stuff that could hide from anything. Now?” Jess shook her head. “Why bother? We can use storm fronts and vectors to slip in undetected. Stealth is expensive.” She pondered the thought. “Though it sure gave them the advantage tonight, didn't it?”

“Did it?” Dev asked. “What would have happened if they had seen them coming?” She set the scanner down and studied Jess instead. “Could they have hid somewhere?”

“Aren't we hiding in somewhere right now?” Jess turned the question back. “Granted, not many places to duck behind on the sea but Sigurd's been sailing these waters since the dawn of time. He could have avoided them I bet.”

“Hm.” Dev put her chin down on her forearm. “Do you think these guys were the pirates?”

Jess shook her head. “Other side.”

“Even though that one person had a chip?”

“Even though.” Jess sighed. “A few have changed sides, over the years. I didn't recognize him though. Not someone I knew. Could have been from another base.” She theorized. “I'm thinking they wanted the ship to help them infiltrate one of our centers... maybe even Base Ten.”

Dev propped her head up against her hand. “So. They were trying to do the same thing we are?”

Her partner chuckled wryly. “More or less, yeah.”

“I see.” Dev straightened up. “Would you like some hot tea? I will go get some from the big room.” She shut down the scanner and put it back in it's cradle. “I think we're still in the ice thing.”

“Sure.” Jess said. “Just be careful. After tonight I don't think any of them would put a finger on you but watch out.”

Dev shrugged into her jacket and closed the fastenings, tugging the hood up into place before she went through the hatch and stepped into the hallway. Mindful of Jess's warning, she looked in both directions, but the hallway was empty and she turned and proceeded down it towards the common room with almost silent steps.

Far off, she could hear the sounds of the crew working, and below, the grind of the engines and gears. It was quiet as she emerged into the central corridor and then made her way to the inner hatch, pushing it open and going inside cautiously.

The room was mostly empty as well, only the two women were inside, working at the rear of the room. They turned and looked as she entered, but then went back to what they were doing without speaking.

That was okay by Dev. She went to the dispenser and took out two cups, studying the choices. After a moments pause, she decided on seaweed tea and requested two portions, waiting as they brewed and emitted a gentle cloud of spicy sweet steam into the air.

The inner door to the room opened, and a set of piping voices emerged. Dev turned to see two of the children come in, their tow heads and small bodies attracting her attention. They brought a smile to her face, and a memory flashed into her mind's eye of those few times in the creche when she'd taken a turn at minding the youngers, filling in for the proctors when they'd been called to other things.

A little boy, and little girl. They clamored around the two women asking for a snack, their tousled hair and hide singlets contrasting with the steel deck and dull gray paint in odd counterpoint.

One of the women turned and caught Dev watching. “What are you looking at?”

“The children.” Dev answered readily.

The two had spotted her now and they focused on her. “Who're you?” The boy asked, tipping his head back to look up.

“Dev.” She answered.

“Keep clear of her, Edguard.” The woman said. “Her kind's not safe for the likes of you.”

Dev regarded herself, then she looked at the woman in question, cocking her head to one side. “My kind?”

“Those that do nothing but kill and maim, and take.” The woman said. “Like those who attacked us. You're one of them, no matter you don't carry the guns openly.”

Dev capped the now finished cups. “We defended you against them.” She said, after a pause. “Does that make us the same?” She studied the women. “We mean you no harm.”

“Don't you?” The woman herded the children back into the inner sanctum, leaving the other woman to finish the work.

The second woman waited for the door to close, then she turned and regarded Dev. “Don't mind Eva. She hates everyone.” She came over, a small case in her hands. “Some of us know the difference between techs and agents, and between you lot, and pirates. Really.”

Dev produced a mild grin. “Jess doesn't think the people who attacked you before were Interforce.”

“Of course she'd say that.” But the woman smiled back, offering the box. “Have a cake. I bear no ill will to you. If they were, or weren't, you fought on our side tonight so all's fair for now.” She studied Dev's face. “They said you were a spacer.”

“Yes.” Dev took one of the wrapped items in the box. “I was born in space, on a bio station.” She examined the item, then put it with the cups. “Thank you.”

“Dev's a funny name.” The woman said. “But then, so's Hilda, my name to you I suppose.” She said. “Wha'ts your family name?” She watched Dev's face intently.

“My name never seemed strange to me..” She felt programming kick in. “And I'd rather not talk about my family.”

Hilda studied her for a long moment. “No offense intended. Family's everything to us. I just wondered. Sigurd thought you maybe were kin, way back.”

“Thank you.” Dev smiled at her. “It would be an honor for me if that was true, but I have no way to know as I have no knowledge of my ancestors.” There was something in her that strongly resisted lying about what she was. She found herself almost incapable of claiming that made up identity.

She wondered why. Was it programming? An older set of basic rules that made her not want to pretend to be something she wasn't, warring with the newer programs that told her how?

The words seemed to please Hilda, however. She relaxed visibly and offered the box again. “Take one for your.. ah.. whatever it is you call each other.”

Dev did. “Jess is my partner.” She said, unable to repress a tickled of pride at the words. 'I”m sure she'll appreciate it, so thank you.” She put the cake with the other one and picked up both cups, grasping the handles in one hand. “Please excuse me now. The tea will get cold.”

Hilda stepped back. “The nets are out, but Sigurd's giving them time to collect. We'll be here in the crack at least till dawn. “ She said. “Shouldn't need your guns until then. But you never know.”

“You never know.” Dev agreed. She ducked through the hatch and re-entered the corridor, now spotting two dimly lit figures making their way towards her. The ships roll had almost ceased now, and she was able to keep a steady balance as she approached the men.

Would they cause her trouble? Dev kept her expression mild, as she came within the nearest pool of light and they spotted her. But the two men paused as they recognized her, and both moved back flat against the wall to let her pass.

“Tech.” One said, in a respectful tone. “Can I get the hatch for ya?”

Ah. “Yes, thank you. It's that one there.” Dev said, waiting for him to undog the latch and open it for her. “I appreciate that very much.” She smiled at the crewman.

The man touched his head with one hand, and then they went past, continuing down the hallway towards the commons. Dev stepped through the hatch and leaned against it to close it behind her, her eyes flicking to the inside of the room to find Jess's tall form near the far wall, her suit stripped down off one arm. “Hello.”

“Hey.” Jess turned to face her, one hand holding a pad against the front of her shoulder. “Give me a hand with this, woudlja?”

Dev put the cups and the cakes down and went over to her. “What's wrong?” She stripped off her jacket and put it on the hanger.

Jess removed the pad, exposing a puncture wound halfway between her neck and shoulder. “Pain finally kicked in. Just need you to clean this out and pack it.” She regarded her arm dourly. “When I'm fighting I never feel it.” She looked past Dev. “Whatcha got there?”

“Some tea, and some little cakes the woman called Hilda gave me.” Dev said, absently. She focused on her partner's shoulder and nodded a little at the burst of programming that told her what to do with it. This had come in the second round of deep time, and she'd woken with an almost discomfiting understanding of critical aid.

She retrieved the small aid kit from their pack and took out the cleaner, as Jess edged around her and investigated the cakes. “I got to see the children. They seemed to be afraid we would damage them.”

Jess snorted, as she unwrapped the cake and sniffed it. She took an experimental nibble as Dev cleaned her shoulder, making a pleased, grunting noise at the taste. “Not bad.”

“How did you get this?” Dev asked, ignoring the edible commentary. “I thought they had energy weapons with them. This seems to be a sharp implement that hit you.” She could see whatever it was had a jagged point, and it had gone almost the length of her fingerjoint into her partner's body, but that the bleeding had already mostly stopped.

“My own clumsiness. I threw myself against the wall where the harpoons are.” Jess finished the cake and took a sip of the hot tea. “Anyone give you any trouble on the way there and back?” She asked. “Seems pretty quiet.”

“No, everyone was correct.” Dev applied salve to the wound, and sealed it with a breathable skin bandage. “Hilda said they would remain here in the ice space until dawn.”

“Good.” Jess reached up and cupped the back of Dev's neck, tilting her head to one side and gently kissing her on the lips. “Tomorrow we need to get Sigurd to sell his fish to the bad guys. But between now and then I think we should work on keeping each other warm, don't you?”

Dev was surprised. They were in a strange ship, where lots of unusual things were happening, and Jess wanted to spend time practicing sex?

Jess's lips touched hers again, and she felt her body react, her hands reaching out to caress the smooth, bare skin she'd only so recently been working on – hearing and feeling the quiet sounds of the catches on her jumpsuit parting. “Sounds like a great idea.” She heard herself say, as she savored the rich burn in her guts.

“Thought you'd agree.”

She did agree. She didn't really understand, but as her body pressed against Jess's, and the sensation built she decided she really didn't need to understand it.

She just needed to enjoy it.

**

Jess opened her eyes into darkness, her time sense telling her it was still before dawn outside. The ship around her was very quiet, and just gently moving under her, just a bobbing motion that was almost soothing.

Not nearly as soothing as the solid warmth of Dev's body pressed up against hers though. Jess found herself quite surprised at that, since it had never been her habit to remain in bed with anyone before past having sex.

She could have told Dev to go back to her own bunk. The small space was hardly big enough for Jess's tall form, and it was nothing less than squishy with the two of them there together but after they'd finished it had just seemed easier to stay where they were.

Besides, she'd said they had to work to keep each other warm, right? It certainly was warmer together under the covering than it would have been apart, and she'd noticed that Dev seemed to get cold a lot faster than she did.

Maybe it was her having been born in space, under all that atmo control. Jess exhaled, feeling the gentle movement as Dev drew in a slightly deeper breath and then she found herself wondering if her new partner dreamed.

She hadn't, this sleep. It had been a restful few hours, matter of fact, and her body appreciated that, especially after all the energy she'd expended in the fight.

Ah, the fight. Now, Jess could smile about it and she did. Even though the attackers hadn't been Interforce, it had felt curiously good to wreak havoc again and she didn't mind admitting that to herself as she lay here in the dark, her arm tucked around Dev's middle.

Dev had appreciated it, she thought. She'd noticed her bio alt cohort hadn't seemed to mind the bloody splattering and the bodies, she'd rolled them over to scan them with no emotional charge at all. That was a good sign. It had taken Josh a half a year to be able to handle that.

Good sign.

Dev seemed to be nearly perfect, in fact. Aside from her knowledge, and her driving skills, and her willingness to sleep with Jess, she seemed to have all the right stuff anyone would expect in a good tech.

Jess wondered, briefly, if it was really possible that this last minute project would get such a perfect candidate. Was it reasonable that Dev could have been picked at random? She blinked a few times, her eyes focusing on the faint tracer gleam from the collar around her partner's neck.

Was it just fate? She hadn't had that much luck in her career so far, so maybe this was just all that catching up and giving her a break for a change. The force worked at pairing people up, with greater and lesser results, but usually your partnerships were never completely successful.

At best, you hope you could work with your tech, that they had skills and that they knew how to get your ass out of trouble when you were in it. Bonus was if they had a good personality, and were comfortable to work with.

Double bonus was if they agreed to intimacy if there was attraction on both sides.

Jess let her eyes close again, as she the gentle rocking lulled her. She had at least two hours before dawn, and she figured getting as much rest as she could before they entered the other side was a very good idea. She felt Dev take another deeper breath and then they both jerked as the comp fastened to Dev's bunk chimed softly.

“Comms.” Dev said, her voice soft and husky.

“The long arm of the nerdy.” Jess reluctantly released her, unsealing the sleep sack and letting a rush of cold, damp air in. “Brr.”

“Brr.” Dev repeated, grimacing a little as her bare feet hit the deck. She sat down on the lower bunk and pulled her legs up crossed under her, opening the device and triggering the comms module. She felt herself start to shiver, and she rubbed her arms a little as she waited for the connection to clear.

“Hell of a way to wake up huh?” Jess had her head over the edge of the bunk and was watching her

“Not exactly pleasing.” Dev agreed. She focused on the screen and studied the readout, watching the scan lines flutter. “Squirt.”

“Figures.”

“They sent ident on the scan.” Dev said. “Ruthgart Chambers.”

“Huh.” Jess pondered that. “Doesn't mean a damn thing to me. Anything else? Any data?”

Dev stifled a yawn. “He was assigned to Virginia Bluffs. They lost contact with him two standard years ago.” She said. “They're asking for confirmation of death.”

Jess chuckled.

Dev continued studying the screen.

“Cold?” Jess suddenly asked.

“Well.” Dev sorted through the requests. “Having no clothes on is probably inhibiting my ability to hold this still enough to read if that's what you mean.”

Jess bounded out of her bunk and removed the over sheet from her bed sack, ducking her head and taking a seat next to Dev and wrapping the fabric around both of them. She peered over Dev's shoulder, feeling the bio alt's shivering abate after a moment. “Tell them I confirm the ident.”

Dev had to read the letters several times before they made sense to her, the sudden warmth around her distracting her completely. “Okay” She finally said, tapping in the code. “Should I send the vid now?”

Jess considered the question. “No.” She said. “Let's hold off on that until later.” She fell silent for a bit. “Somethings still not right back there. I don't want to give them too much information.”

“Okay.” Her partner shut down the connection and hung the comp on it's strap back on the bunk support. “What do we do now?”

“We can get more rest. Got a few hours to dawn yet” Jess responded. “We're still in that ice split, no sense in wandering around the ship in the dark.” She looked around the cabin, lit only by the faint line of emergency illumination along the floor. “Glad we brought a couple flashes”

Dev considered the gloom, all the more gloomy since she'd shut down the comp. “Why is it so dark?”

“Saving power.” Jess promptly supplied. “They're lucky this thing runs on a converted ion generator. They suck in sea water and make ergs using chemical reaction but getting parts for the damn thing's a bitch. They turn it off when they can.”

“I see.”

“Got a point. If they don't have to move and everyone's sleeping, no sense in running the batts.” Jess added, after a brief pause. “Hate to see what would happen if they had to get moving fast though.” She rested her elbows on her knees.

Dev cleared her throat a little. “Should we lay back down?”

“Sure.” Jess unlatched the sleep sack on the lower bunk and squirmed into it, waiting for Dev to join her before she sealed it back up. Now, with the coversheet from her bunk, and the full sack on this one, it got nice and warm rather quickly. “Ah. That's better.”

She felt Dev relax, then she let her eyes close, only to open them a moment later when she heard soft footsteps coming down the hall outside.

Stealthy footsteps. Jess had heard them often enough to know. “Someone's coming” She whispered into Dev's ear. “Shh. Stay still.”

Dev pressed herself against the bunk as she felt Jess ease herself over her, unfolding her long frame and ending up standing at the foot of the bunks. She waited for her partner to clear the edge of the mattress then she sat up silently, reaching out to find her jumpsuit and slipping into it.

Once she'd sealed the catches around her throat she lay back down, aware of Jess's tense figure still locked in place. She herself couldn't hear anything, but she trusted that her agent partner heard what she had heard and was preparing to do something about it. That something might possibly mean light, and Dev wasn't sure their reluctant hosts were ready to find a bio alt in their midst.

Jess moved, silently but affecting the air pressure in the room, and there was a very faint sound as she drew her blaster from it's holster and put the holster back down on the small shelf. There was a brief flicker of red as she activated the weapon, then she put her back against the wall and got in position.

Dev heard the sound of metal cushioned in grease moving, the tiniest suggestion of a echo that stopped at once, and went silent.

Everything went silent. The there was a rush of motion on the other side of the hatch and then a booming, solid thump hit the surface, making Dev jump before she flattened herself back down on the bed. But the hatch stayed shut, and a faint, soft curse echoed through the steel, before she heard the distinct sound of someone walking rapidly down the hall away from them in bare feet.

Silence came back, then Jess exhaled, and chuckled very softly. “Forgot I jammed my dagger in the lock.” She admitted. “Poor bastard probably knocked himself silly.”

“Who was it?” Dev whispered.

“Someone looking either for trade stuff or a roll in the hay.” Jess re holstered her blaster and put it on the dresser. “Morons. Probably one of the kids taking a dare.”

“Taking a dare?” Dev squirmed to the back of the bunk as Jess climbed back up into hers.. “ In hay? What is that?”

Jess chuckled. “I'll tell you later.” She stretched out on her back. “Sleep if you can. If I get what I want and we end up in the other side's clutches there won't be much time for rest.”

Now what did Jess mean by that? Dev settled back down anyway, composing herself to stillness. When you were in the creche, you learned how to put yourself down when it was time for it and she did, taking in a lungful of air and releasing it as she let her body go slack and felt her breathing slow.

Who had been at the hatch? What was Jess going to do? Where were they going to go, and if she was with Jess, who'd fly in and help them get out?

How did she feel about going with Jess into that kind of danger?

All questions for later. Dev heard the quiet chiming in her head and listened to it slow, as her heartbeat slowed, and her chest motion did as well.

She let go. The darkness around her and the relatively soft, gentle motion reminded her strongly of the creche, and her sleep pod and she went deeper and deeper into the rocking motion and drifted free.

And then, seemingly just a moment later there was a touch on her arm and she opened her eyes to the same darkness, but with a sense of Jess next to her. “Hello?”

“Near dawn.” Jess said. “Let's get up and see what we can see.”

Obligingly, Dev sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, as the room was suddenly lit with the warm glow from Jess's suit light. She looked up to see her partner's body outlined against it, and that made her smile as she stood up and retrieved her sanitary pack from her gear bag. “I don't think we've moved.”

“Me either.” Jess was pulling her jumpsuit on over her shoulders. “Ow.”

Dev paused in her motion towards the hatch. “Are you in discomfort?”

“Stupid shoulder.” Jess muttered. “G'wan. We can look at it later.”

Uncertainly, Dev nodded and then she went to the hatch, carefully untwisting the heavy dagger from the lock that was holding it shut. She examined the weapon briefly. Despite the impact against it, the metal was unmarred, and it had a dark patina to it that barely reflected any of the glow from inside the room.

“Like it?”

Dev turned to find Jess watching her, with a hint of amusement in her expression. She walked back and handed the knife over. “It's interesting.” She said. “I hadn't held one before. It's heavier than I expected.” She waited for Jess to take it, then she went back and opened the hatch, pausing to listen before she went through it.

“Huh.” Jess slid the knife back into it's holster. “Yeah, I guess they don't have those up there huh.” She muttered to herself, grimacing as her shoulder wound protested. “How stupid was that? I'm surprised I didn't gut myself with a fishhook.” She turned the light a bit higher and finished fastening the wrist catches on her suit, feeling the ship move a little under her.

Aside from the shoulder though, she felt pretty good. There was a residual ache in her back from the old injury, but the stiffness she'd felt the night before had eased and she counted herself ready to face the day.

A minute later the hatch opened again and Dev slipped inside. “It seems very quiet.” She said. “Do you want me to run a scan?”

“Sure.” Jess shrugged into her weapons harness, the sound of the catches loud and solid in the room. “Let me take a peek.” She went to the hatch and emerged into the hallway, also lit only by the emergency lighting along the ground. Jess straightened up and peered around, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the gloom.

The shadows faded into silver and gray and she studied the hall, now understanding what Dev had meant. There was a silence around her that set her senses on edge and she turned and ducked back inside the hatch. “Anything?”

Dev was standing near the bunks, her elbow resting on the top one as she studied her scanner, it' s light outlining her features in a mix of pale blue and green. After a moment she looked up. “I'm not getting any returns, except for the animals in the bottom of the ship.”

Jess's nape hairs prickled immediately. “No other life?”

“No.”

“Let's go.” She went to the locker next to the bed and picked up her heavy blaster, seating it into the side holster and pulling her jacket on. “Let's go see what the hell happened.”

“Okay.” Dev set the comp down and put her jacket on, snapping the catches on it and then slinging the scanner over her shoulder. She followed Jess out of the room and into the silent hall, hoping her comp had got it wrong since the results seemed to have caused her partner serious distress.

They walked through the silent darkness and Jess paused before the big hatch at the end, drawing out her light blaster and flipping off the safety before she worked the lock. “Ready?”

Ready. Dev considered the question. “Yes.” She answered, not entirely sure what she was ready for.

But Jess nodded, and paused a second, before she gently booted the hatch open and moved sinuously through it in a continuous motion. She cleared the space then paused again. “C'mon.”

Dev poked her head through and followed, finding the space beyond empty. She walked behind Jess as they crossed the common room, where only a safety light shone over the space the women had been fixing the meal on. Everything was locked down and put away, with bars holding the containers and cabinets closed.

Jess turned gracefully in a full circle, then continued on to the center, inner doorway. “Scan it.” She uttered softly, turning and making her way over to the porthole to look outside.

It was dark. She could see the outline of the ice around them, a ghostly gray surface that continued to where the crack they had entered through split into a much darker outline. After a moment, Jess turned and looked at Dev, who was studying her comp. “Anything?”

“No.” Dev joined her, turning the scan to show her the screen.

“Okay.” Jess led her to the hatch to the outside and carefully worked the lock, bumping the heavy metal door open with her shoulder as she peered out onto the deck. A cold blast of air hit her and she blinked, before she emerged into the inner deck area.

Still, all silent. The working gear was all put away, lashed against the deck, and only the soft clank of the anchor chain echoed softly in gloom. Jess walked across the open platform, turning as she did to take in the entire area as she crossed towards the big wheel in the back.

Dev continued to scan. She could see the motion below the deck where the fish were, the bio sensors detecting them without any trouble at all. But if she turned around and pointed the scan at the rest of the boat – all it showed was the electronics that controlled it, and the outline of it's structure.

No bio signs. Dev wondered if perhaps they'd found a way to shield against the scan, remembering what Jess had said about them not liking intrusion. Curious, she tuned the comp, bringing up her matrix and shaping the waves as she probed the internal structure.

The sine waves rippled, and then she turned, as she picked up something off to the right of where the boat was. “Jess.” She called softly.

Instantly, Jess was at her shoulder, peering over it. “What?”

“Trace echoes.” Dev said. “From over there.” She pointed off to one side, and they both walked over to the railing to peer over it.

The front of the boat was moored into a chunk of ice, the long heavy chain disappearing into the white solid surface. From where the chain emerged was a roughly chopped path, visible now as it moved off into the distance, between two upthrust ice peaks and, just visible, disappearing into an unevenly shaped hole in the ice wall.

“Huh.” Jess said. “They all got off?”

“It seems so.” Dev agreed. “That explains why they turned everything off. They didn't need it.”

“And left us there.” Her partner's eyes narrowed. “Nice.”

“I don't think they really trust us.” Dev said. “Even though we helped them.”

Jess holstered her blaster and put her hands on her hips. “Wonder if this is one of their hidden hole ups.” She said. “I've heard about them, but no one ever really found one. Makes sense they'd put it in a place like this – only an idiot would risk entering the ice like this.”

Dev regarded the path, then she turned and looked at the anchorage. “Why is this a bad thing?”

“Because the ice can shift and close this gap.” Her partner supplied readily. “Being crushed to death ain't my idea of fun.” She exhaled. “I've seen the bodies it spits out.”

“Oh.” Dev now felt a bit nervous. “Does that happen often?”

“Hm.” Jess grinned suddenly. “Let's go see if they left the keys in the ignition.” She started across the deck heading for the control room. “Bet you could drive this if they did.”

Drive this? Dev felt her jaw drop a little. Wait, what? “I don't think I know how to do that.” She chased after her partner, who was already halfway up the ladder that led up to the control house. “We didn't have any sims for boats.”

“Ah, can't be that different than the bus.” Jess found the door locked. “Stand back.” She took a step back herself and drew her gun out, pointing it at the lock and triggering the weapon. A bolt of energy smacked into the metal, turning it bright red, and producing an odd, spicy hot smell.

It clicked, and she kicked it, shoving the hatch inward and stepping over the verge. “C'mon.”

Dev followed, finding herself in a space that held control surfaces on every inch reminding her suddenly of the crèche's sim lab.

Her eyes went to the controls and much to her surprise, she felt programing kick in.

“Let's see.” Jess went over to the main console. “Wonder if we can turn the juice back on. At least we could go down and steal breakfast.”

“Not there. “ Dev went to a side panel. “Here.” She ran her fingers over the controls and then, after a moment, she nodded and started pressing them as a programming overlay made the shapes and positions make sense to her. “I think.. yes.” She flipped a cover off and pressed a button, and the deck started faintly vibrating. “Yes.”

She turned to find Jess looking at her.

“I guess you do know how to do this.” The agent said, dryly. “Got any other surprises?”

Dev let her hand fall to her side. “I don't know.” She answered. “They are surprises to me sometimes too.”

Jess nodded. “Okay” She gestured to the controls. “Get this thing powered up and see if you can retract the anchor.” She went to stand near the front of the bridge. “Lets get out of here and do some of our own hunting.”

“Those people will be in great discomfort if we do that.”

“Yes, they will.” Jess smiled. “Hope they've got supplies.”

With a soft grunt, Dev went to the main console and sat down, letting her eyes scan the surface before she started triggering things and bringing up power. “This should be interesting.”

Jess chuckled.

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It was interesting, and also hard. Dev flexed her hands, glad at least the control center was closed, and warm. She checked the power settings, hesitating a little before she engaged the heater that would warm the anchor line and get it to release. “Is this correct?” She asked Jess.

“Is what correct?” Jess was examining one of the old style comp readouts.

“Taking this ship?”

Jess glanced over her shoulder. “Was it correct for them to leave us here alone on it?” She turned the question back on her partner. “Don't get sentimental because that old salt liked you.”

Dev thought about that for a minute. She checked the readings, then triggered the anchor chain retraction, hearing the rumble as it engaged. “We don't know why they left us.” She said, after a long pause. “They might not have meant to cause us discomfort.”

Jess snorted. “Just get us out of here.” She said. “I don't like that ice.”

Oh well. Dev settled into the operator's chair. They could always bring the boat back, after all. If the fisher folks had been somewhere off in the ice all this time, they were probably okay. She confirmed that the anchor was seated back on the boat, and then she engaged the engines, her hands moving the throttles with uncertain motions.

She glanced at scan, surprised that the noise of the boat coming active hadn't attracted any attention. “I would have thought they'd come if we were leaving with it.” She remarked mildly.

Jess leaned against the console and regarded the ice. “Yeah, you'd think.” She murmured.

They were drifting away from the ice wall now, and Dev turned on the sonar, seeing the faint return from the ice all around her. She looked over at the uneven opening in the wall again, expecting to see at least the captain come running, but the opening stayed stubbornly empty and she frowned, still not feeling right about all of it. “Jess...”

Jess's hand came down on hers. “Sh.”

Dev closed her mouth, and waited. She watched Jess's face, which was tense and twitching a little. She had turned her head to one side, and Dev could see the muscles around her ears moving.

For a minute, they were both silent. Then Jess drew in a breath and straightened. “Get us out of here.” She said. “Fast.”

Dev shunted aside all her questions and responded to the urgency in her partner's voice. She laid her hands on the throttles and moved them forward, aiming the front of the boat for the opening in the ice.

“Faster.” Jess said. “Hurry!”

She had no idea what the problem was, but Dev obeyed, moving closer to the console and standing up, leaning against steel and adding power to the engines. The boat surged forward, and as it did, she squinted at the opening “Is that getting smaller?”

“Yes.” Jess bolted for the other side of the control space. “Hurry!”

Now the urgency made sense. “Hold on.” Dev said, bracing herself and shoving the throttles full forward. The boat responded immediately and lunged towards the crack, not feeling at all like a carrier or anything else she'd ever sim'd. This was new, and strange, and she fought the controls to keep the boat straight as she felt the water crashing against the hull.

The walls were moving closer. Dev felt her eyes widen. She wasn't sure what exactly was happening but a very quick look to her right showed her Jess's face looking as alarmed as she felt. She pushed the throttles forward as much as she could, and heard a crash and heavy, scary crunching noise as a huge chunk of ice tumbled past her and thumped into the water next to them.

The boat rocked, but she kept it under control. Another chunk of ice struck the bow, but bounced off and then they were at the wall and rocketing between the edges of the opening which were closing against them as they squirted through. Then they were outside, and in higher surf, and she was grabbing everything she could to keep the boat on course as it bounced across the waves.

Dawn had broken outside, and the sea was alive with white froth, with a mist gray sky glowering overhead. Waves were crashing up against the ice and sending spray high up in the air.

“Whoa!” Jess grabbed the console and thumped into the wall as she stretched to look behind them. “Nice driving, Devvie!”

Dev got the boat under control, panting a little. “Thank you.” She moved them away from the ice wall, turning the bow around so she could see the crack. “Are the...” She paused, looking at the now solid wall behind them, the only sign of an opening the newly floating bergs of ice bobbing near the center. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Jess moved behind her and put both hands on the control chair to hold herself steady. “That would been ugly. I'm not much for being squash frozen.”

Dev stared at the wall. “Did you know that was going to happen?” She asked. “Did they?”

Jess drummed her thumbs against the chair back. “Good question.” She said. “Did I know? I had a gut feeling something was wrong.” She admitted. “Did they know? Who knows?”

An iceberg floated past, it's white and gray exterior bobbing in the deep green blue ocean. “Are they dead now?” Dev asked, after a moment of silence.

“Don't know, don't care.” Jess slapped her on the shoulder. “Let's get moving towards the bad guys. This makes it easier for me anyway, don't have to screw around talking Sigurd into taking us there.” She said. “And we've got a ride back.”

Dev settled into the chair and hooked her boots on the foot rest of it. She studied the controls, then she keyed up the navigation comp. “Do you have coordinates?” She asked. “To where you want to go?”

Thinking about the fishermen bothered her, she realized. She wasn't sure she was sentimental about it – actually she wasn't really sure what sentimental was, but the captain had been friendly to her, and it disturbed her to imagine him and his family crushed to death in the ice behind them.

Especially the little children.

“Ah, yeah, let me get em.” Jess was busy at the navigation comp. “Basically east, then southeast from here. Gimme a minute.”

Jess wasn't disturbed at all about them. Dev studied her partner's tall form. Was that what she'd meant when she said she had no conscience? That she really didn't care if other people died? But she'd helped that fisherman, hadn't she?

“Okay here.” Jess was at her side, with a tablet. “There.” She pointed at a set of coordinates. “Thats their deep sea fishery. We can pull in there.”

Dev plotted the course, hesitating a little over the unfamiliar, then familiar comp. “Won't they recognize you?” She asked, after she finished. “You said a scan would find you.”

“Not the fishery.” Jess said, with a note of quiet confidence. “Or – if they do, I'm not sure they'd care. What they want is the fish. Takes a lot of em to feed everyone.”

“I see.”

“Then we'll take the credits we get for the fish, and pick up luxuries in the black market there.” Jess rested her arm om Dev's shoulder. “And that, my friend, is what will get us into the science compound. No one likes fancies like eggheads do.”

Dev turned her head and looked at her.

Jess patted her on the back. “Its' all good, Dev. We're back on track.” She paused. “So – you said you didn't know how to drive this thing, then you did. What's the deal?”

“I didn't think I did.” Dev put aside her disturbing thoughts with some effort. “I don't know why they would give me that, but when I saw the controls, I felt it kick in.” She said. “It wasn't something I sim'd or anything. They must have given it to me on the second long session.”

“So you don't know all of what they put in your head?”

“No.” Dev admitted readily. “Not until I need it. I really didn't expect to need this.” She set the course and activated it, feeling the keel come around as the engines engaged and they started off towards the east. She waited for the boat to settle into it's motion before she turned again to Jess. “Does it bother you?”

Jess studied her. “Every time I think I've got you squared, you change it up. I'm not sure how the Hell I should feel about that.”

Dev was briefly silent. “I'm sorry.” She finally said. “I don't think there's anything I can do about it.” Her brow creased in a worried little expression.

“No, me either.” Jess said. “But at least all the surprises have been pleasant ones so far.” She grinned a bit rakishly. “Time it would have taken me to figure this thing out we'd be bloody Popsicles right now.”

“That doesn't sound good.”

“No.” Jess leaned against the chair. “Would have been a painful way to die.” She peered through the heavy leaded glass over Dev's shoulder. “Looks like the weather settled.”

Dev had to take her word for that. The overcast clouds, and the fractious seas looked the same to her, except that the water washing over the control center was splashing from the waves, not rain from the sky. Now that the boat was at speed though, it plowed through the surf stolidly, and she started to relax a little.

“Power on downstairs?” Jess asked. “I could use a cup of something hot. You?”

Dev glanced at her, and smiled. “That would be very nice, yes.”

Jess winked. “Be right back.” She went to the door and slipped through it, turning to climb down the ladder to the deck.

The engine roar was subdued and far off, the bulk of the ship blocking out most of the sound. Dev took a deep breath and released it, relaxing into the chair as she studied the controls.

They were far more rudimentary than the carrier's. Most of them were old, and very basic, just a raw sonar feed and basic comp, a sideband comms and the control sets for the power, and the batteries and the propulsion engines run by them. On one side was a small panel that showed the big tanks the fish were kept in, and the bio controls for that, and then another panel showed the systems for the living spaces, and the prep area.

All pretty basic. Once she'd gotten the scope of it, the programming she'd been given was more than sufficient to let her run the boat and now that she'd gotten them pointed in the right direction she started looking around at the space she now found herself in.

It was a relatively cramped space, with consoles on three sides, the chair in the middle, and lockers behind her. On one side of the workspace was a big book, and she turned her chair to get closer to it, opening it up and peering inside curiously. There were many pages, and a lot of scribbled lines and it took her quite some minutes until her eyes were able to translate the squiggles into actual letters.

It still didn't let her read it though. The letters made words, but the words were unknown to her and she decided they were in some kind of code. That she had programming for, but only very basic kinds, and she closed the book and left it for later perusal.

There were two stools clamped the the deck, and she reached behind her to open one of the lockers, finding a thick, heavy suit inside not too different from her jumpsuit. There were things clamped to it, and she closed the door before the suit swung out of it with the ships motion and fell.

So. Dev put her elbows on the chair arms and settled back. They were on their way again. She left the whole subject of the fisher people alone for now, and focused on the mission, as she knew Jess was. Regardless of why and how, she reasoned that it had worked out all right for them since she hadn't really been sure of how they were going to get the captain to do what Jess wanted otherwise.

He hadn't seemed like someone who could be persuaded easily.

Of course, Jess wasn't someone you could turn down easily. So she suspected it would have been very interesting, but possibly not in a good way if they had needed to force the question.

The door bumped open and Jess entered, carrying a box tucked under one arm leaving her other free to help her climb up the ladder. She closed the door behind her, locking the chill outside and set the box down on the side console. "Found some wraps too." She opened the box and started sorting things out. "Damn good thing, because I have no idea how to use that food machinery downstairs."

Dev kept her eyes on the seas, and her hands on the controls. "I don't think I do either."

"You said that about this boat."

Dev chuckled softly. "Yes I know I did, but I really don't think I have any programming at all about food." She demurred. "Everything in the creche was constructed by the processors. We never even really looked at what was on our trays."

"Ah." Jess brought over a cup and a roll, and handed it over. "Well, I've got something on ya then but not with machines." She said. "One of the things we used to do in the citadel when we went swimming is bring up some grub, and I can actually make that taste like something."

"Really?"

"Really." Jess assured her, seemingly in a good mood. "The Drakes have lived in a stone house by the sea for a lot of generations. I got my share of fresh seafood." She paused. "Well, six years of it anyway." She glanced out the window. "After that, it was spotty, in school"

Dev took a sip of the seaweed tea, once again enjoying the taste. "Did it bother you to leave your family and go away?" She asked. "One of the proctors in the creche did that. Left their family behind and come up to station."

Jess went and got her own meal and took a seat on one of the stools. "Did I." She mused. "It was a really long time ago. I don't think I remember how I felt."

Which was a lie, she realized, even as she said it. She did remember, being that five year old child and coming back into the house soaking wet, to see mom and dad standing there watching her with that strange, stomach twisting look.

She remembered her mother turning away, and her father taking a deep breath, and kneeling down to talk to her, telling her she'd done so well on the tests that she'd earned her place at the school.

At his school, the one daddy had gone to. He'd seemed so proud, but so sad.

She remembered the transport picking her up, and that sudden spurt of fear as she waved goodbye, not truly understanding that home, and life, and family would all change it's meaning for her as fast as it had.

"Jess?" Dev touched her arm.

She looked up, to find her new partner studying her with a quiet, serious expression. "It was fun, at school" She said. "I met a lot of other kids there and we had a pretty good time." Her pale eyes shifted, then went back to Dev's face. "Until they start teaching you the business." She smiled briefly. "You know, how to break necks and use blasters."

Dev sucked in a tiny breath. "That's something they didn't program me for."

"Sure?"

"Yes." Dev glanced at her. "I knew that when I saw you do it. When I saw.. Bain do it." She paused thoughtfully. "I think they wanted to, but we ran out of time."

Jess nodded. "It wasn't in your script. I looked through it." She said, in a casual voice. "You know they teach us.. they make us kill a seal first. They take us out on the ice, up in the back of beyond in the north and they find one, and you have to slit it's throat."

"But it didn't do anything to you." Dev frowned. "Why did they make you do that?"

"That's the point. Sometimes you kill things just because." Jess leaned her elbows on the console. "They're sort of cute, seals. They have pointy faces and whiskers, and big dark eyes."

Dev adjusted the throttles a little, turning the bow so they were cutting through the waves. "I see."

“Mm.” Her partner picked up her roll and took a bite of it. “I killed the instructor instead.” She munched the fish and seaweed inside. “I should go find that seal. He owes me one.”

Dev had gone quite still, and now she turned her head to stare at her companion.

“Completely stupid. Got me tossed in lockup for two months.” Jess took a swallow of tea to wash the mouthful down. “Everyone thought I was on the crazy side after that. Not sure if it helped my career or hurt it.”

“Why did you do that?” The bio alt finally asked.

Jess pondered briefly, using the time to ingest more of her roll. “I liked the seal more than the teacher.” She finally admitted. “Guy was ugly as hell and he'd tried to bugger me in the shower. I figured he had it coming anyway.”

Dev blinked. “Well.” She turned her eyes back to the console. “I”m really glad you like me then.”

Her partner chuckled. “That seal would have been stew if it'd been him or you.” She reassured Dev. Then she exhaled. “You know, I did miss my family. I missed home.” She admitted. “I think we all did for a long time.. just no one said anything because you weren't supposed to. They didn't like it when kids acted like kids.”

The bio alt thought about that, as she adjusted the throttles. Did she miss the creche? Not the way Jess had her family, she guessed. She missed a few of her proctors, a little. Some of her fellow bio alts, especially Gigi, a little. But there was a lot more not to miss. “I don't think I know what that's like.”

“No loss to ya.” Jess said. “Just makes your guts hurt. Not worth it.”

Looking at Jess's face, though, made Dev think that wasn't entirely the truth. There was a sadness there that she could see plainly, a look of melancholy that was really very unlike her. She reached out and touched the taller woman's arm again, closing her fingers around it and gently squeezing.

She didn't know what to say so she didn't say anything.

Jess looked up at her, her eyes half hidden by thick, dark hair.

For a moment, she felt a pang in her chest, odd and strange and discomfiting.

Then Jess winked, and bumped her. “Let's stop being sad sacks.” She said. “Past's the past. Can't change it.” She straightened up and started eating again. “This thing going what, ten knots?”

Dev put her hands back on the controls. “Twelve.” She said “A lot slower than the carrier.” She admitted. “This will take us a long time to get to those coordinates.”

“We can trade off driving.” Jess said, observing her. “Doesn't look that hard. Got most of it on auto, right?”

“Right.” Her partner agreed. “It's a lot simpler than the carrier. Just these engine controls, and this one, that steers.” She indicated the rudder control. “You have excellent reflexes. I'm sure you could easily handle this.”

Jess smiled at her .”You sweet talker, you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Thank you for the compliment.” The taller woman said. “Especially since I've been known to drive a carrier right into an iceberg.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Dev picked up the roll and took a bite. The knots that had in fact formed in her stomach relaxed, and she settled back in the big chair, wondering a little at all the strange feelings she'd had over the last little while. She wasn't sure about a lot of them, but one she knew she liked.

And it was strange, because there was nothing really to like about what Jess had told her But she thought again about that seal, and felt herself smiling all over again. Was it strange? She thought maybe it was terrible that she was glad the animal had lived and the human had died, but really she didn't feel like it was terrible.

She was glad. She was very glad Jess had disobeyed her orders, and saved the seal. She wasn't even really sure why she felt that way, but in her head, she had a picture of this animal, and it's eyes looking at Jess, and Jess deciding not to hurt it, but to hurt the one who'd ordered her to kill it instead.

That seemed correct to her. She wondered what Doctor Dan would say about it.

She remembered finding Doctor Dan in the botany lab once, and he'd been leaning over his comp station, staring at a plant. When he heard her come in, he'd turned and shown her what he was looking at, a small thing he called an insect that was living on the plant.

It had been pretty. Red with black spots. He'd let it walk on his finger and brought it close for her to see. Someday, he'd told her, someday when plants lived downside again, this bug would make the plants grow.

It hadn't made complete sense to her, because she hadn't gotten that kind of programming, but she remembered the fond look he gave the bug, and how carefully he'd put it back on the plant. She decided that Doctor Dan would have approved of what Jess had done, and he probably would have very much liked the seal.

“Jess?” She looked at her partner. “Can we see a seal? Are they out here somewhere?”

Jess grinned at her. “After we find the bear?”

Dev smiled back. “I'd like to see one of those too.” She admitted. “The scan got some pictures of the one we saw before. I didn't have a chance to look at them though.”

“Tell you what.” Jess finished up her tea. “You keep driving, and I'll hang out on the rail and see if I spot any seals.” She promised. “Or bears.” She added. “Or whales.”

“Whales?”

“C'mon, Devvie. You'll be surprised what we can find out here.” Jess ruffled her hair, and then she picked up her cup and returned it to the box. “Let's try to enjoy the trip.” She tugged her jacket up and ducked back out the door, moving to the outer railing and shading her eyes.

Dev watched her. Then she sighed. “I would like to see a bear.” She snapped a few switches, and then wondered if the portable scanner could help Jess look.

And, after all, they could go back when they were done and find out about the fishermen, maybe even rescue them and give them back their boat.

Dev nodded in satisfaction. It would all work out.

**

Jess leaned her elbows on the rail and watched the sea go by, very content with how her plan was progressing. Like most of her schemes, it had no real structure, and left a lot of things up to chance, but she had a clear place to start, and a goal, and everything in between would usually fall into place.

Stealing the boat was a good example. It hadn't been part of the plan, but as soon as she'd realized what Dev's scan had found, there wasn't anything else she wanted to do. It gave them a transport, and a way in to the other side, and took away all the fishermen impediments all in one fell swoop.

She'd just been lucky that she'd heard the ice creaking, and that Dev had known how to drive the thing. But her luck was like that. When it was good, it was really good, and when it was bad, she usually courted death with it.

Now she just had to find Dev a seal. Or a bear. She scanned the ice pack, just off their port bow and watched for either the telltale blow holes, or something white moving on white. There was plenty of time to look – she figured they'd be two days to the fishery.

Two days, to find a critter, as they cruised past the ice pack, there boat's belly full of live fish she knew the fishery would pay top dollar for, even from a fishing boat conspicuously missing it's big family crew. Jess figured she had time to hunt up something to put on over her blacks so at least

she wouldn't be glaringly obvious but maybe Dev could talk to the in-taker, since she actually did look like she was Sig's kin.

That seemed to be falling in line for her too. Jess smiled, and swung her head from side to side, watching the passing water and ice intently. The one downside was that they'd have to take turns sleeping, and that meant they wouldn't be sleeping with each other during the ride.

Jess sighed. Oh well. On the other hand, they did have tank full of fish, and if she caught one, and she could figure out how to turn the heating apparatus on in the prep area, she could treat Dev to fresh broiled fillets and toasted sea grapes. She licked her lips, tasting it in her memories.

A flicker of motion caught her eye, and she turned her head, shading her eyes from the cloud glare as she searched for what had alerted her. It was waterside, and she peered eagerly ahead, hoping it was a whale, and not too disappointed when she caught sight of the sleek, surfing forms of porpoises.

“Hot damn.” Jess reached over and tapped the glass, looking inside to see Dev watching her alertly. She pointed ahead of the boat to the motion ahead of them, and waited until she saw the bio alt jerk and then peer over the bow. She circled the control center and stuck her head in the hatch. “Slow down! You see them? They're dolphins!”

Dev immediately slowed the engines down and put them in idle, setting them to rocking glide in the waves as she engaged the auto pilot. “What are they?”

“C'mon” Jess guided her out to the bow and pointed “See there? They're jumping... they're coming this way.”

Dev glued herself to the chilly rail and watched as the motion resolved itself into moving animals, gliding through the water in a rhythmic way. She could see puffs of water coming out over their heads, and now that they were closer, she could see the sharp fin on the tops of them, and the rounded heads. “Are they fish?”

“Matter of fact, no.” Jess leaned on the rail next to her, thoroughly enjoying herself. “They breathe air.”

“They do?” Dev's eyes opened wide as one of them came right up out of the water and splashed back into it. “Wow!”

“Be right back.” Jess loped off towards the fishing deck. “I”ll get some bait for em.”

“Bait?” Dev frowned. “We're not going to try and catch them are we?” She asked the icy, empty air.

The animals came even closer, and as she looked at them, they seemed to see her, and veered right towards the boat's hull. Her eyes got bigger and bigger as they slowed and cruised past, apparently watching her out of one round, dark eye. “Hello.” She called out.

Jess returned, with a pail. “They here? Oh, yeah.” She pulled something out of the pail and tossed it in the water. The closest porpoise immediately chased it down, grabbing it in it's mouth and swallowing it. It then opened it's mouth and made a sound at them, an odd, discordant chittering.

Dev's jaw dropped, and she stared at it in delight. “Is it laughing?” She blurted. “Wow!”

Jess chuckled. “Sure sounds like it.” She tossed another piece of bait at them. “Look at those suckers.. they're huge!”

Dev leaned against the rail and felt the cold wind against her skin, blowing her hair back as she avidly watched their visitors. “You said they were dolphins?” She whispered. “And they breath air???”

“Yeah.” Jess nodded. “I went swimming with them once. Really cool.” She leaned closer. “Look at the hole on their head, see that? Thats how they breathe.”

“No way.”

“Yes way.”

Impossible to really imagine that. “Can I give them some?” Dev edged over next to her partner, taking a chunk of bait from the bucket when Jess offered it to her. She tossed it gingerly into the water, delighted when one of the smaller animals retrieved it and flipped it in the air, bolting it down when it fell into it's mouth.

It watched her hopefully with it's round eye, nodding it's head up and down as if encouraging her to throw some more.

So she did.

She could see them blowing air out of the hole, and she leaned over further, watching them in utter fascination. “That's amazing.”

Jess grinned wholeheartedly and tossed more bait in the water. She was very glad she'd found the dolphins, and even more glad that they'd come over to the boat and showed the intermittent curiosity she'd seen from time to time from them. “Hey buddy!” She stuck her arm over the side of the boat with a big chunk of fish in it. “C'mere!”

“Jess!” Dev's eyes widened as one of the dolphins swam away, then back at the boat, moving faster and then leaping up out of the water to grab the fish right out of her partner's hand. “Oh!”

“Hah.” Jess chuckled. “Did you see that? Jumped right up here.”

The dolphins chittered at them, and Jess gave them the rest of the bait before turning to Dev with a regretful smile. “Gotta get going.”

Dev leaned on the rail and watched the dolphins swim off, admiring the bow of their bodies, and the sinuous movement. “That was awesome.” She told her partner. “Thank you, Jess.”

“Anytime.”

Dev headed around the deck to the hatch to the control center and ducked back inside, still thinking about the dolphins. Just looking at their faces had been interesting, and she wished she'd taking her scanner out side to record them so she could look at them again later.

Oh well. Maybe they'd see more of them later on. Dev took her seat and picked up the remainder of her roll, nibbling on it as she checked the controls and started them off towards the east again. The boat came up to speed and she settled back against the cushion, watching Jess from the corner of her eye as she roamed around behind her. “Tell me about the swimming thing.”

“With the dolphins?” Jess sat down on the stool and hooked her feet up on the rungs. “Ah. Well, yeah. I was goofing around near the citadel one morning, just collecting some shells on the beach, that sort of thing. We had some time off and it wasn't raining. Anyway...”

Dev smiled, adjusting a throttle with a tentative nudge.

“They dared me to dive off one of the ledges.. almost underwater now but then it was pretty high and I climbed up there and did.” Jess said. “Midway down I saw the water start moving and freaked out.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, thought they were sharks.” Jess said. “I flipped around and got myself in a ball so when I hit the water nothing was sticking out. Next thing I knew they were bopping me around like I was a toy and making that chittering noise.”

“Did they hurt you?”

“Nah.” Jess smiled in memory. “Made me laugh. I uncurled and they swam around me, bumping me with their noses. I touched one of them. Their skin's softer than I thought it would be.”

“Wow.” Dev sighed. “That would be so interesting.”

'Next time.” Jess patted her knee. “I'm going to go exploring. See if there's anything we can use on this crate and get us some sleeping bags.” She got up and went out the hatch, leaving Dev alone with her controls and the white ruffled sea they were cruising through.

Whistling, Jess went down the steps and through the hatch into the common chamber, closing it behind her to keep the cold wind out. She crossed the floor and went to the inner door, not

surprised when the hatch didn't open to her touch. She looked around for something to pry with, and then, finding nothing, shrugged and drew her blaster and aimed.

The bolt touched the latch and the very next moment her own reflexes reacted without her conscious thought as she threw herself across the room and behind the table just as a loud blast rocked the boat. Jess ducked her head behind the table base and heard metal shrapnel rattling against the other side of it just as the boat's engines cut off and she heard a slam outside.

Ah. Jess surged up and over the table just as the hatch flew inward and she caught Dev just as she came inside and pushed them both back against the wall.

“Ugh!” Dev's eyes were wide “What was that?”

“Just me blowing up things.” Jess told her, peering cautiously around the still open hatch door to look at the one she'd blasted. “Your six times removed fourth cousin Sig apparently figured he'd made sure his family jewels were safe and put an explosive trap on the hatch to his digs.”

Dev absorbed that. “I see.” She peered around the door. “Is it safe now?”

“Probably.”

“Would you like to let me go?”

“Nope.” Jess had her arms wrapped around Dev and she felt the bio alt's body relax against her as Dev tilted her head back and looked up at her with a wry grin. “Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

Dev blushed visibly. “I wasn't sure what was going on.” She admitted. “I heard a loud noise.”

Jess gave her a brief hug then released her. “Yeah, bombs are loud. G'wan back up and get the bus moving.”

Her partner hesitated. “Are you sure there aren't more bombs?” Dev studied her gravely. “It would cause me great discomfort if you got damaged by one.”

Jess studied her for a moment in curious silence. “Would it?”

“Yes.” Dev said, after a pause. Then she ducked out the door and trotted along the deck back to the ladder.

Jess closed the hatch, a thoughtful look on her face. She picked her way through the debris of the door and paused, drawing her blaster again before she entered the family quarters, this time with very cautious motions.

She felt the engines start up again and braced herself as they moved, slowly letting her eyes roam around the space, a faint smile still tugging at her lips. “Now would it, Devvie?” She murmured. “Sure damn would discomfort me to see you get squashed, that's for sure.”

That was odd, and new. While she had always been expected to work together with her tech, and keep their skins whole, she never, ever felt like this before about one. Not even Josh, who'd been what she'd considered a friend.

It was really kind of shocking, how fast she'd become comfortable with Dev, and the bio alt apparently returned the liking.

Was it the same thing? She'd never heard of bio alts having relationships of any kind, in the citadel or elsewhere though she had heard more than once of them being used for pleasure.

Was that what she was doing? Jess felt an uncomfortable twist in her guts thinking that. Was she just taking advantage of Dev because Dev thought she couldn't say no?

Or did she realize she could say no?

Did Jess want her to realize?

“Peh. Later.” She gave her body a little shake and continued her exploration.

The inside of the fisher family quarters was full of odd things. Jess suspected they were family heirlooms, and remembered a couple of counters in her own home that had something of the same. Old pics and holos, bits of carved white substance she thought might have been bone, old spears, a few stuffed big fish on the wall.

She liked it. She moved carefully from room to room, not letting her nostalgia get in the way of looking for more booby traps. The beds were thick and looked comfortable, and the kids room had hammocks in them the sight of which made her smile.

To one side there was a storage bin. She nudged it open and looked inside, making a soft chuckling sound under her breath as she spotted the packaged rations they probably used when the seas were too rough for them to cook. It was a relief to find them, since it meant she and Dev probably wouldn't starve before they could get to the fishery.

Another storage bin coughed up two spare hammocks and thickly woven blankets, and she happily shouldered them along with the hooks the hammocks hung on.

After another sweep, she backed out of the space, gently booting the hatch closed on it's broken and twisted hinge. “Waste of metal.” She sighed, as she holstered her gun. She went over and collected a thermal carafe full of the tea she'd brewed, and headed for the hatch with her burden, whistling softly under her breath.

Dev was occupying her time looking at the log book she couldn't read. She was leafing through the pages, looking at the small sketches she found there most of which she figured probably had something to do with fish. They were interesting. It seemed like the captain had been drawing bunches of them, using squiggles, and indicating how they looked when they were together.

She wondered if there were any pictures of dolphins in the book. She leafed through it, hoping to find one, looking up when the hatch opened again and Jess reappeared. “Did you find anything?”

“Nah.” Jess set the tea down and then put down her armful of hammocks. “Just stuff to make us more comfortable.” She examined the hooks, prowling around the command chamber looking for places to hang them. “They use these things down at the kelp factories.”

“What things?” Dev divided her attention between the control console, and her partner, though they were on a reasonable course and there was nothing in front of them but water.

“These.” Jess pointed the hammocks. “Hanging beds.”

“Really?” Dev sounded surprised and interested.

“Uh huh.” Jess found an eye bolt in the wall and slid one of the hooks through it, then she went over to the right angled wall and found another one at just the right length. “Heh.” She put the other hook up and then went back to get the hammock, stringing it up between the two hooks before she stepped back to examine her handiwork. “What do you think?”

Dev half turned to look. “Oh.” She said. “That's sort of like what we use when we have to sleep in null.”

Jess sat down on the hammock then rolled into it, stretching her body out and putting her hands behind her head. She rocked back and forth with the ships motion, and grinned in satisfaction. “Almost as comfortable as our beds back at base.” She decided. “Since we're gonna trade off driving, I figured it made sense to bunk out up here.”

“Excellent.” Dev nodded approvingly. “I think that would be the safest thing too, especially if there are bombs on board.”

Jess rolled out of the hammock and wandered over next to her, taking a seat on the stool again. “Whatcha looking at?”

Dev showed her the book. “I was seeing if there were any dolphins or whales in the pictures. I can't read the words.” She said, regretfully “Can you?”

Jess studied them. “No.” She said. “I think it's his language.”

“His language?”

“Yeah.” Jess propped her head up on one fist as she idly thumbed the pages. “They didn't teach you about languages?”

Dev considered the question. “Well.” She said. “I know machine programming languages. Is that he same thing?”

“No.” Her partner chuckled. “Believe it or not, before the whole world went to crap there were enough of us human bastards around to have each bunch of us talk a different way. A different code, I guess.”

The bio alt blinked. “How did you understand each other then?”

“We didn't.”

“I see.”

“They still speak some different stuff on the other side, but mostly there's so few of us now when it all went down they picked the easiest and most bastardized language which was what used to be called English and pushed some other stuff into it and that's what we use on our side.”

“I see.”

Jess looked up in amusement. “Doesn't make sense, right? But that's where some of the weird crap I say comes from. Old times.”

“We only got taught to talk one way.” Dev admitted. “Everyone talked the same up on station. I'm not sure why you would want to do it any other way, and not understand each other like I don't understand these notes.” She pointed at the book.

“Ah Dev.” Her partner smiled wryly. “It's just how we were. It was more important to find ways we were different, because that meant we were better than the other guy. If we were all the same, no one wins.” She saw that look of utter confusion come over Dev's face. “It's still like that. Look at what we're doing here. We're going over there to try and screw the other guys up because that takes away the chance that they'll do something better than us and get ahead.”

“I don't really understand that.” Dev admitted. “But I'll take your word for it.”

Jess chuckled. “So anyway, this must be the old language of Sigurd's people.” She pointed at the book “They've been doing this forever, doesn't surprise me they still write in it. It is like a code you know? This is probably where he puts down all his tricks about catching fish, and if it's in this language, only his family can read it.”

“Oh.” Dev nodded. “Okay, that I understand. Up in the creche, sometimes, the scientists would do that, put their notes in code if they thought someone was trying to copy something they did. That's the same thing, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Doctor Dan thought that was so silly.”

“Bet he did. He seems like a pretty sharp guy.” Jess said. “Wonder where he did his field training?”

Dev's head cocked to one side again. “His what?”

“C'mon. Didn't you see him with that blaster? He knew what to do with it as much as I did, and my bio bomb didn't scatter him to pieces. He's friends with Bain. He was one of us.”

“Oh no.” Dev shook her head. “He's been a scientist up on station his whole life practically. He told us so.”

“Practically.”

Dev stared at her, feeling anxious.

Jess seemed to sense that, because she pushed the log book away and put a hand on Dev's knee instead. “Sorry. Didn't mean to freak you out.”

Had she been freaked out? Was she? Dev let out her held breath, and thought about that. What was it exactly that Doctor Dan had said once? That he'd spent his life in the creche, except....

Except, now she remembered, for what he'd called a mis spent youth. She studied Jess's intense, planed face. Had he misspent that time with Interforce? Really? Gentle Doctor Dan? She remembered how shocked she'd felt seeing him holding a gun, and holding it with...

Yes, he'd known well what to do with it. She remembered too, how he'd reacted when Bain had shot the man, coming between her and the rest of them, making sure she was safe. Had he been like Jess?

“Relax.” Jess patted her knee. “It's a good thing. He knows and so he made sure you know.” She said. “He was probably a kid.... but you saw how he talked to Bain. He knew him.”

“Yes.” Dev finally said, in a soft voice. “He told me it was okay to trust him. Bain, I mean.”

“He did?” Now it was Jess's turn to be surprised.

“Yes. Him, and you.”

“And me? Damn man hardly knows me.” Jess protested. “And I don't know him at all.”

Dev shrugged a little. “Well, he knows me. So maybe that's why.” She said. “And also... he really understands people.” She fell silent, a faint crease forming on her forehead. “He cares about what happens to us.” She added, after a pause.

Jess wondered if that were really true. Certainly, watching her new friend with the doctor had given her the impression that the man was fond of her, but it was a business. Wasn't it? They had hundreds of bio alts doing all sorts of menial jobs around the place, after all.

But Dev was different, wasn't she? “You're different.” Jess spoke her thoughts aloud. “You're special. Not like the others. I've seen bios around for years, none of them are like you. He made you like us.”

“What do you mean?” Dev adjusted a setting, looking briefly at the console before turning her attention back to Jess.

Jess leaned on the console and regarded her. “He made you like us. He made you to pass as human, didn't he? Way before he was asked by us to.”

“What?”

“All the other bios, they're like s.. like machines.” Jess said. “They can't think for themselves. That's the biggest problem in using them but also the reason no one's killed them yet because they're inferior. No one cares about them. But you"re different. Your brain's like mine.” She studied Dev's face. “It always was.”

Dev's eyes shifted and went unfocused for a long moment. Then she looked back at Jess. “Is it... am I.. incorrect?” She asked, in a very soft, almost scared tone. “You think that's bad.”

Jess felt her heart thump uncomfortably. She stared into Dev's eyes, seeing a deep emotion there that made her feel terrible. “N.. no.” She managed to get out. “I just wondered why.” She reached out and touched the hand Dev had resting on the console. “How he knew.”

“How he knew what?” Dev reached up and rubbed her eyes with her free hand. “I don't like how this feels.”

Jess stood up, unsure of what to do. “Hey.. I didn't mean to make you feel bad.” She hesitantly clasped Dev's shoulders in both hands. “I like how you turned out. I like that you can talk to me, and think and all that stuff whatever the hell his reasons were.”

Dev exhaled, her shoulders relaxing under Jess's hands. “If there was a reason, he never told me.” She finally said. “Maybe he just wanted to see if he could do it.” She stared pensively at her partner. “He likes to do hard things.”

Jess moved her hands and cupped Dev's face in them. “Fine by me.” She could feel how chilled Dev's skin was and she rubbed her thumbs against it for warmth. “I like you just how you are.”

Finally, that got a smile from the bio alt. “Well, I'm glad since I don't really have much choice in it.” Dev said. “Could we have more hot tea? This is a cold place.”

“Sure.” Jess released her and went for the thermal. “Some tea for the insides and I'll see what I can do for the outside”

Dev took a steadying breath and went back to the controls, staring quietly out over the waves.

**

Driving the boat in the dark was hard. Dev kept one eye on the sonar and one on the dimly see waves ahead of her as she concentrated on steering. The control room was dim, and behind her Jess was curled up in the hammock, getting some rest.

Dev was looking forward to taking her turn at that. Her entire body was aching with the tension of doing this somewhat unfamiliar activity, and the uncertainty of piloting the boat through the night seas was wearing on her.

On the other hand, she was glad to be saving Jess from the effort. Her partner had scrounged around and brought up enough odds and ends to feed them, and she was relatively full from it. She had a big, insulated cup in a clamp next to her with still hot tea in it and Jess had taken pains to try and make things as comfortable for her as she could.

That was gratifying. She even had found a thick, soft blanket some where and now it was tucked around Dev's shoulders as she sat in the big pilot's seat.

It felt good, to have Jess be concerned about her. It made her warm inside, having nothing to do with the blanket. She had decided to see what she could do in return once they changed places. Surely there was something she could do for her partner.

Her partner. Dev risked a glance over her shoulder at the somnolent form in the hammock. Once Jess had conceded her that title, she hadn't looked back and then the rapidness of her acceptance of Dev had really surprised her. It felt good, and maybe that was why their discussion earlier about Doctor Dan had rattled her.

It had.

She had only lost the stomach ache from it when Jess had wrapped the blanket around her, and then simply stood there for awhile behind her with her arms draped over Dev's shoulders, breathing softly in her ear.

Dev didn't want to think about being different, or made a certain way or something that someone else shaped. It made her feel strange, but thinking about being a bio alt bothered her.

She knew that was incorrect. She knew she wasn't considered a person, not by anyone that was naturally born. And yet...

And yet. Just thinking about failure, about being sent back to the creche and having to go back to being like she had been made Dev feel so bad she stopped it, just like that, because she didn't want to get that stomach ache again.

But it kept creeping back. Had Doctor Dan made her like a natural born? Dev caught sight of her profile in the reflection of the glass, a faint, ghostly figure outlined in the dim blue of the controls. She certainly looked like one. But then, they all did. You couldn't tell from the outside a bio from a natural.

What Jess had said was, it was something on her inside that he'd made the same.

The same as Jess. Dev considered that, soberly, acknowledging in her head that she had always felt a little different. Hadn't she? Or had that been wishful thinking? Didn't they all want to think that? Dev exhaled a little, then she picked up her tea and sipped it, enjoying the mellow taste.

Didn't they all want to think they were special? Why else would they compete for the proctor's notice, and that rare, cherished good word from Doctor Dan?

And yet, Dev knew, that in certain ways she was in fact different. She was a dev unit. She was the only produced member of her set. That had given her status in the creche, and she had begun to be aware of that, these last time sections, as she moved through the last of her classes and approached assignment.

Gigi had been so excited, when she'd gotten hers. To be given an assignment as the assistant to the director was about the best thing one of them could hope for, if you weren't specialized and Dev well remembered how jealous the other bios in her class had been when they heard about it.

What would they think about her assignment? Dev adjusted one of the throttles, and had to smile at her reflection. She had hoped for something interesting, and though she'd never mentioned it to him, remembered wishing for an assignment in the lab with Doctor Dan.

Being his assistant? Now that would have been something for them to be jealous of, if she'd stayed topside. The director was the director, but everyone knew the most important person in the creche was Doctor Dan. He was the one who decided everything.

He was the one who made them all, sitting in his quiet office with his big drafting board, sketching out DNA molecules and plotting genetics by hand in complex ways that even the comp couldn't do with any consistency. He didn't of course do everything personally – there were many scientists and doctors under his leadership, but the over all plan?

That was his. And there were a few sets, selected sets, that had literally felt his hand in their creation and no matter what they ended up doing, they always had that little extra status regardless of their level.

Dev had been one of them, and so, given her classes and the programming she'd gotten, she'd secretly hoped that when it came her turn, Doctor Dan would tap her on the shoulder, and become her mentor.

So instead, here she she was, down world, in a fish boat, driving across the water in the dark, in a storm, with a partner who liked killing people and enjoyed practicing sex in dangerous places.

Life could be quite unexpected. Dev smiled briefly. Now that she was here, though, she had a feeling she wouldn't trade this experience for all the status in the world, and even for a place in Doctor Dan's lab. This was something none of them had ever even imagined.

She had done things already that no bio alt ever had, and experienced things she didn't think maybe a lot of natural born had. Though it had been so short at time, she absolutely knew she didn't want that to change. No matter how dangerous, no matter how scary and difficult, she wanted this.

Going back to the creche? “Ugh.” Dev grunted softly, giving her body a little shake.

She heard Jess stir, and she quickly looked back, hoping the small sound hadn't woken her. But her partner was merely shifting in the hammock, it's knotted surface swinging gently in the motion of the boat.

Relieved, she returned her focus to the window, sparing a brief glance to her scanner sitting propped on the console next to her. It had, by far, more intelligence programming than anything on the boat, and she was using it to check the on board primitive scan.

The route was basic – but the scanner had picked up rocks and escarpments that the ship's system did not and Dev was being cautious, aware she was only operating in one plane now, not the three she'd come to anticipate in the carrier. She found herself missing the power of the craft, and the speed of it. Her progress over the waves seemed, in comparison, painfully slow.

The seas were also rough, and it was raining again. She could feel the wind pushing against the boat, shoving it sideways and the engines could only gain so much torque against that and the heavy waves that rocked them.

Not really comfortable. No way to put the thing on auto pilot, which was why she'd stopped it cold when she'd heard the explosion below.

A lot more tiring than piloting the carrier at least in a long haul. Dev took another sip of her tea, and set the cup back in it's swinging holder. Her scanner bleeped, and she quickly looked at it, her hands going to the controls and adjusting the course as the wiremap drew in a rock escarpment the sweep of the ship's radar had missed.

How did they manage? If she hadn't had the compact comp scan she'd have plowed the ship into these unexpected islands of rock at least three times already. The captain must, she reasoned, be a really excellent driver.

A soft sound made her look around again, and she frowned, not entirely sure she'd heard it. As she cocked her ears though, it happened again. At first she thought it was maybe the hooks swinging, but then she saw Jess shift again, and cry out, her body and hands tensing visibly.

Oh! Dev's eyes widened, and she rapidly switched her attention back and forth between the window and the hammock. “Jess?” She called out softly.

Jess cried out again, twisting in the hammock.

Dev pulled the throttles back and slowed the ship, feeling the bow pitch down as it came off plane and they went with the motion of the waves. She glanced anxiously at the scanner and hoped there was enough free water around them as she left the controls and bolted back to where her partner was struggling and gasping. “Jess!”

She grabbed hold the hammock as they pitched and in the next instant found herself gripped in an iron hold around her neck as Jess sinuously twisted around and slammed them both to the ground.

Dev reacted instinctively. She got her hands around Jess's wrists and clamped down on them, tearing the hold off her and shoving herself and Jess off the deck reversing their positions. She landed on her partner and held her down. “JESS!”

For a moment the staring blue eyes bored through her, then they blinked, and she felt the powerful form under her lose it's tension.

Another long silence as they looked at each other. Dev was very surprised to see wetness around Jess's eyes and she shifted to one side and released her, afraid she'd done her some damage. “Are you all right?”

Jess lifted her hand and covered her eyes, breathing hard. “Fuck.”

The hand, Dev noted, was shaking. She cautiously touched Jess's shoulder, feeling a shivering in it as well. “Jess? Are you in discomfort? Is there something I can do to help you?”

“No.” Jess finally answered. “Get the boat moving again. I'm fine.”

Dev didn't think that was true. But she understood that refusing to do what Jess asked would not make her be in less discomfort. She very gently squeezed the shoulder her hand was resting on, then she pushed herself to her feet and went back over to the controls.

She settled into the seat and started up the engines, applying power and steadying the boat's movement as they shifted forward and plowed back into the waves. Once she was up and planing again she looked back over her shoulder, to see Jess sitting with her back braced against the cabinet, her head held in her hands.

Dev almost stopped the engines again, the urge to go do something to help overpowering her. “Jess?”

Her partner's shoulders shifted and she straightened, resting her forearms on her knees before she slowly pulled herself up and walked over to the stool next to Dev, dropping onto it with a grunt. “Shit.”

Her last few offers of help having been rejected, Dev sorted around to figure out what she should try next. “Would you like some tea?” She picked up her mug and moved it closer. “It's still hot.”

Jess rested her hands on the console. “Soon as I think I won't throw it back up sure.” She uttered softly. “Crap I hate that.”

“Throwing up?” Dev asked, cautiously.

“Hallucinations.” Her partner answered shortly. “Dreams.” She paused. “You know.”

Hallucinations and dreams. Dev riffled through her programming quickly, then went over it again. “I'm sorry.” She finally answered. “I really don't know. What are they? They sound uncomfortable.”

Jess turned her head and looked at her. “You don't dream at night?” She asked. “See pictures in your head? Go to different places? While you sleep?”

Pictures in her head. “Well.” Dev mused. “Sometimes, when I got a lot of programming, I saw some pictures when I was waking up.” She admitted. “But they weren't really different places. Just a flash or two, like a person's face, or a smell.”

“Not the same thing.” Jess said. “But if you don't have them you're damned lucky. Wish I was a bio in that case.” She rested her forehead against her wrists.

Dev put a hand on her back, gently rubbing it. She wasn't really sure why she'd done that, or if it was helpful, but under her fingers she could feel, just a little, relaxation in the stiffness of her partner's body. “I was just thinking.” She said. “About how much I wished I wasn't one.”

Jess reacted, turning her head and looking back at her, the faint glow from the controls reflecting off her pale eyes.

“I mean, how much I'm really enjoying getting to do everything.” Dev clarified. “And how much better it is than being in the creche.”

“Ah” Jess grunted, grimacing a little and rubbing her temples with her fingers. “Well, crap right now I'd trade ya.” She exhaled. “Thought I was past them from last time.”

“What does that mean?” Dev asked, softly. “Are you sure you don't want some tea?”

Jess sighed and straightened up a little. “Never mind. It's a stupid thing and I don't want to talk about it.” She accepted the cup though, and took a sip. “Show me how to drive this thing and you can go get some sleep.” She got up and came close to Dev.

Then she stopped, and put the cup down and put her hands on her hips. “Wait a minute.”

Dev glanced sideways at her. Then she looked back out the window, as the boat twisted under them, and made her grab the controls a little harder. “Yow.”

Jess leaned on the console so she could see Dev's face. “Did you just pick me up and body slam me?” She watched as a flush of color darkened the bio alt's face, visible even in the dim light. “You did.”

“I..” Dev felt nervous and suddenly very anxious. “I didn't mean to cause you discomfort.” She said. “Did I hurt you?”

Jess was more than glad enough to let this distraction drive her recent nightmare out of her thoughts. To have had one at all shocked and infuriated her and she was embarrassed that Dev had witnessed it. “No.” She said. “I just didn't think you were that strong. I'm bigger than you are.”

Dev smiled briefly, relieved that her partner really didn't seem upset. “Well, we did work a lot in plus grav.” She reminded her. “So I guess that's why, but I wasn't sure what was going on and I didn't want you to hurt yourself.” She paused. “Or me.”

“You?”

“You were grabbing me by the neck.”

Jess felt a shock go down her entire body. “I did?” She said. “I mean.. I was?”

Dev glanced at her for a brief moment, her lips tensing into a faint smile. “I think you were sort of still asleep.”

Well, that wasn't good. Jess frowned. “I...” She stopped speaking, and took a step back, half turning and folding her arms across her chest. Then she sat back down on the stool and studied the deck. “Sorry.” She managed, after a moment. “When you've done all the... “ She paused again. “Sometimes we relive stuff that's happened in our sleep. Agents. Like me.”

“I see.” Dev said, gently.

“And I guess we don't have any really good things to relive.” Jess went on. “So we get all the bad things. All the attacks that went wrong, and the friend's we've seen die and...” She stared at the ground. “Anyway. I'm sorry. I really don't want to do anything to hurt you.”

“It's okay you didn't.” Dev remarked. “I just wanted to hold you still long enough for you come back up.” She adjusted a control, and glanced at the scanner. “Sometimes when we.. when bio alts that is, are down for programming they come up and if things aren't right security has to hold them until they integrate everything.”

“I'm not a bio alt.” Jess stated, flatly.

“No, I know.” Dev said. “But it was the same sort of thing. You weren't really.. um... here.”

“Oh.” Jess sighed. “Thought I was past them from this last clusterfuck.” She rubbed her temples. “I had them after for weeks. Couldn't sleep worth a damn. Anyway, if you see me like that.. just stay the hell away from me. Let me suffer.”

Dev was silent for a long moment. Her hands were resting on the controls, and her breathing was even, but her eyes were slightly unfocused and after a long, silent pause, she turned her head and looked at her partner. “I don't think I can do that.” She said in an apologetic tone. “Seeing you suffering causes me a lot of discomfort.”

Jess blinked. “Does it?” She watched the bio alt release one hand off the controls and extend it, and then felt the warmth of Dev's touch against her cheek. She was unable to look away from those eyes and there was something so compelling and so intense in them, it made her a little short of breath.

“It does.” Dev said. “So I'll try not to get my neck in the way of your hands, but don't' ask me to not try and help you. Please.”

The feeling of shortness of breath intensified. Jess felt a sense of almost lightheaded confusion as her cheek was gently stroked and she had the suddens suspicion that if she had been standing her knees would have buckled under her and she had to wonder seriously what the hell was going on.

Why was she feeling like this? Her stomach felt strange, and she reached up to cover Dev's hand with her own as the memory of the nightmare rippled into shreds and released from her mind. It felt like getting a wash of seawater over her, and her body relaxed. “You're a funny old thing, Devvie.” She finally said. “Just don't be afraid to pick my ass up and toss me if I turn crazy on ya, okay?”

Dev smiled faintly. “Okay.” She agreed. “But you know, Jess, I really hope you get to see some happy pictures in your head sometime.”

The sincerity of the tone got down into Jess's awareness and lightened her heart in a curious way. She got up and came closer, leaning forward and very gently kissing Dev on the lips. “Thank you.” She said. “I appreciate that.”

It was a pity that the seas were so rough, and they had someplace they had to go. Dev regretfully broke off their intense eye lock and caught sight of a huge wave heading their way. “Yike!” She grabbed the steering controls as Jess grabbed the chair and gunned the engines to full power just as the wall of water bowled over them.

“Shit!” Jess yelped, wrapping her arm around Dev and around the seat as the boat pitched over and for a very long moment, threatened to flip.

“Oh my gosh.” Dev's eyes were big as she saw the sea crashing down on them.

The boat creaked and groaned, and alarms started going off, as they were shoved sideways and tipped up onto one side, and Jess would have crashed against the wall if she hadn't had both arms and both long legs wrapped around Dev.

Jess's eyes popped open wide as the tip turned into a roll and she waited for the boat to turn turtle, her mind already spinning with what nexts, marking the door position and sucking in deep breaths as she anticipated the cold, stunning rush of the water entering.

But Dev had a death grip on the throttles and she shoved them forward, twisting the steering controls as she plowed the bow through the wave and they emerged on the other side with a thunder of water cascading over the top of the boat. They rocked back and forth and then she got them moving forward again, as they both let out a long exhale at the same time.

“Some bitch!” Then Jess started laughing. “Nice move!!”

Dev had no idea on earth what was funny, but she chuckled as well, and all of the strange tension in her body relaxed and she wanted to lay down all of a sudden. “Ah, thanks. I think.”

“You think?” Jess shifted her grip and wrapped her arms around Dev from behind, giving her a squeeze. “I don't think there's anything you can't drive.”

Ah. Dev savored the contact. “Thank you.” Really, she wanted to lay down with Jess. Not to practice sex, but just to be near her. The whole driving the boat thing, and how far they had to go were abruptly annoying and she really wished they could just stop, and park in some cave or something.

That surprised her, and yet it didn't. “That was amazing.”

It occurred to her that there was a certain lack of dedication to the mission that was rising and she wondered a lot about that. She knew she had a job to do.

Jess knew they had a job to do, certainly.

“That was suicidal.” Her partner disagreed. “We could have rolled over and you don't swim that good.”

“That's true.” The bio alt agreed placidly. “But you'd take are of me.”

And that, Jess acknowledged, was true. “I would.” She draped her arm over her partner. “I never want anything bad to happen to you if I can help it.” She added. “I .. um... “ She paused for a long moment. “That would make me nuts.”

Dev digested that. “What's a nut?” She asked, after a pause.

Jess pinched the bridge of her nose. “You know something? I don't have a fucking clue what a nut is.” She admitted. “But I know what that means is, I'd be very upset.”

It occurred to Dev that it wasn't really regular to have a natural born feel that way about a bio alt. It made her feel strange, though in a good way. “You would?”

“Yeah.”

Maybe Jess really didn't think of her as just a bio after all. She hoped that was true. With a smile, she went back to the controls, finding a course through the waves as the weather came down harder, the rain going sideways in front of the console window. “Wow.”

Her partner regarded the storm, and smiled. “Ah crap.” Jess leaned against her. “Show me how to run this thing.” She said. “One of us should get some rest.” Her shoulders shifted and she exhaled. “Least the damn weather will keep me distracted.”

“All right” Dev said. “These are the engine controls.”

Jess rested her chin on Dev's shoulder. “Engines.” She agreed. “Hey you know something, Dev?”

It was all Dev could do to keep the boat going forward, her hands clenching lightly on the throttles as she felt Jess's cheek press against hers. “What?”

“Thanks for waking me up out of my nightmare.” Her partner said, in a quiet voice. “And for caring what happens to me.”

The soft echo of plaintive wistfulness in that voice went right through her. Dev felt at once happy and at the same time sad. “I think you're my favorite person ever. “ She said. “Even more than Doctor Dan.” She added, feeling the motion as Jess smiled. “Thanks for making me feel real, like a person.”

“You are.”

Dev tasted salt on her lips as she licked them. “Am I?”

“Oh yes. There's no going back for you now”

**

It turned out that driving the boat wasn't that difficult at all. Jess sat in the control chair, glad of the restraints as they crashed through the waves in the darkness of pre dawn. Behind her, tucked in the hammock and wrapped in her new sharkskin jacket Dev was sleeping peacefully undisturbed by the motion.

Jess envied her. Her own eyes felt red and sore, and her body felt achy and tired, nightmares or no nightmares wanting to join Dev in the hammock in a huddle of warm comfort. But instead, she dutifully scanned the darkness, and worked to keep them on course as they followed a track through open seas now with no land in sight.

They were in no man's waters. Vast stretches of mostly dead ocean where the bottom was so far down nothing they had left could plumb it. Far too deep for fishing, home to once again unknown life on this side of the mid atlantic ridge left alone to repopulate after almost being fished to extinction.

Funny, how that was. Just before the change happened, they had come to a crisis point. The oceans had been raped to the extent that if the orbiting labs hadn't been functional, a huge human die off had been looming.

Chaos! Politics! Jess faintly shook her head, remembering the texts she'd scanned in school They had been heading for a melt down right up until the planet itself had taken control, wiping out ninety percent of it's problems in one long, horrific descent into death and starvation.

She remembered films of the time, watching as cities drowned and the flood waters rose and rose and rose, eventually washing clean to rock everything it touched.

Only the tough and the lucky had survived. Jess remembered, vaguely, her father saying that the harrowing had helped the species in some ways, but narrowed their biological choices to almost disaster in other ways. They had to be careful, now who bred with who, since they'd seen what happened when the genes got too close.

Humans adapted at an almost frightening rate. Far more and far faster than the other species left on the planet, that being the one true advantage they'd had. Already the families who farmed the seas for a few generations, down by the shoreline had developed webbing between their fingers and toes, and oily skins to protect them against the seawater they spent so much time in.

Jess herself had some of it. She regarded her hand, and stretched the fingers out, then curled them into a light fist. She'd grown up with the sea wind in her face, and her body in the water for as long as she could remember and now that she was here, in this seat, her hands on the controls there was some ancient familiarity about it that echoed softly inside her.

She took a sip of tea and shifted a little. Soon they would be crossing over into enemy territory and she sorted through her memory of radio codes, planning out the ones she'd need to use once they caught her on scan and contacted them.

Always a danger. Always the chance that some bored controller would decide to hunt them through the comp, and realize something wasn't quite right about this incoming fisher with only two crew onboard.

If they got past that, to the fishery itself, they were home free.

A soft sound behind her made her turn her head, to see Dev stretching her body out and peering over the edge of the hammock at her. “Hey there.”

“Hello.” Dev rolled out of the hammock and stood up, keeping one hand on the edge of it to steady herself. “That was very nice.”

“The hammock?” Jess asked.

“Yes. It felt like our sleep pods in the creche.” Dev explained, coming over and peering out the window. She looked down at the nav console and raked the fingers of one hand through her hair. “It's darker.”

“We're almost to the edge of their waters.” Jess said. “Why don't you grab a cup of something downstairs, then let me get out of this chair for a while.”

Dev studied her for a moment. “Okay.” She put her jacket hood up and bumped the outer hatch open, disappearing into the howling wind and shutting the door behind her.

The blast of cold air made Jess sit up straight, driving out the sleepiness that had started to overtake her. She could see ice lining the outside of the boat in the dim phosphorescence from the rail lights and briefly she felt homesick for the citadel and the warm blast of her own shower.

Ah well. She flexed her hands and leaned forward, watching the spray come up over the deck. Suck it up, Jesslyn. You're the one who told everyone how tough you were. Don't blow your rep now.

**

Dev looked around the gathering area, rubbing her hands together in the chill air. She was waiting for some water to heat up to make tea, having found a big carafe that would hold more than enough for both her and Jess. She'd gone inside and used the sanitary unit, and retrieved her kit and used that as well, and now she felt as reasonably awake, though her body was craving food and she was still chilled.

While she waited, she decided to explore a little, and almost hesitantly she started opening cabinets and peering at what was inside. Mostly supplies, all clamped down. Plates and things to prepare food with, none of which held any programming charge for her.

There was plenty of tea though, and she knew what to do with that since one of the prized events in the creche was being asked to tea by one of the proctors, or by an administrator. She had been so honored twice by Doctor Dan, and though the leaf shreds here on the boat were seaweed and not real tea, the process was the same.

One cabinet had odd belts and closed containers, and she studied one for a while, then realized that it must be for the people who worked the fishing things when they were outside for a long time. Experimentally, she put one around her and studied the result in the piece of metal hammered to the wall nearby.

It was far too big for her, but she could see how useful it could be, having a cup to drink from that was sealed, and a container that could fit maybe a fishroll, or something like it. That way they could keep working outside and in fact it wasn't that different from the kit she had for the carrier.

With a grunt, she took it off and put it back away, closing the cabinet after it. Then she went over to the warming unit and removed the water, pouring it carefully over the pile of shredded seaweed in the big carafe. The steam came up at once, and she blinked as it bathed her face with faintly spicy heat.

She actually really liked the seaweed tea. It was less pungent than the real tea she'd had, and didn't have the sometimes bitter aftertaste. She glanced at the countertop while the tea steeped, cocking her head a little as she spotted a big, brown pot with a spoon sticking out of it.

Experimentally, she lifted the cover, and her nose twitched as she caught a sweet scent. She put the tip of her finger in the substance inside, and brought it back to her lips, cautiously tasting the gummy stuff on the tip of her tongue. “Oh.” She went back for a second try and sucked the end of her thumb that came back covered in it.

It tasted like the mead. She wondered if this could be honey. It reminded her of the mead. The pot seemed to have a place there, and she remembered Jess saying that the honey came from the other side. So that fit with notion her partner had that these fisher people would go wherever they needed to sell their catch.

She nodded, then she picked up the spoon and scooped up some of the substance, bringing it over and letting it drizzle into the still steeping tea. After it all went inside, she stirred it, then she put the top on the carafe and the spoon back where it belonged, picking up the tea and heading back to the control center with it.

**

Jess paused in mid sip, turning around to look at Dev who was taking over the control station. “What's in this?”

Dev smiled, as she tucked the comm bud from her scanner into her ear. “They have a big jar downstairs. I think it's honey.” She said. “I thought you might like some in the tea. It tastes nice, doesn't it?”

“Big jar?” Jess savored the sweetness. “Those bastards.”

“Well, if they could get it, why shouldn't they?” Dev asked. “You got that bottle, right?” She put her own cup in the holder and adjusted the throttles, examining the board and pausing, then moving a switch into a new position.

Jess came over and leaned her back against the console, hooking one arm around a bracing bar and crossing her ankles. “Yeah I guess me taking that as a prize of war and then being pissed off at these guys for buying it legit is pretty hypocritical, huh?”

Dev gave her a sideways glance, then went back to her controls. “It looks like we're crossing into long range scan. I can see beams.”

Jess turned and looked at the readout. “Yep.” She sat down on the stool. “If they contact us, let me answer.”

Dev nodded, tuning in the scanner a little more tightly and watching the screen. She could see the sine waves of the enemy scanners and the pattern they were running, a comprehensive sweep that would surely, eventually, go over them. She studied the scan output and typed in a request.

Jess stood up and went over to the grub she'd scrounged earlier, sorting amongst it and putting together a meal for them. She braced against the wall as the boat lunged and rocked, and managed to make it back over to where the big chair was with everything clutched in her arms.

Waves were coming up. She peered out the window, checking the chrono. “Should get a little lighter in a bit.” Jess commented as she handed over a packet of boiled fish. “Sounds like the weather's going to crap again though.”

Dev pointed at the scanner. “That's the same kind of line we were avoiding the other day isn't it?”

Jess looked and exhaled. “Shit.”

“I don't think it will affect the systems on this boat like it does the carrier.” Dev said, placidly. She unwrapped her portion of fish and took a bite of it, surprised at the firm texture, and tasty flavor. Outside, as if in counterpoint, a blast of lightning showed in the distance, outlining the peaking waves in silver precision.

Jess got up and circled around her, putting her hands on the back of the control chair and looking past Dev, then moving over to the navigation station and studying the map “Storm could help us.”

“Keep them from seeing us you mean?” Dev noted the waves getting larger, and she brought the throttles down a little, easing into one of the larger ones.

“Uh huh. Fast learner.” Jess glanced over her shoulder and gave her partner a rakish grin. “I do like that about you, Devvie.'

Dev finished her fish and neatly folded the bit of dried seaweed it had been wrapped in and put it back in the package. She could, she supposed, eat the covering but she'd found them to be dry and somewhat bitter, and not really appealing.

There was another package though. She opened that one, then took a step back, leaving it on the console. “Jess?”

“Huh?”

“What is this?”

Jess craned her neck to look. “Crab.”

Dev stared at the creature, a hard shelled animal the size of her hand. “Are we supposed to eat this?”

Her partner snickered. “Yes. You wanna bet me you'll like it?”

Dev eyed her with what could only be described as excessively polite skepticism. “Would you like it? I”m going to finish my seaweed.” She edged away from the crab and went back to her tea, sipping it and trying to ignore the mischevious grin she was getting from across the room.

“Nah, nah nah, none of that.” Jess left the map and came over, removing the big, heavy knife from it's sheath and reversing it. With a casual motion, she brought the hilt down on the crab and cracked it, then picked it up and wrenched it's legs off, putting them down and smacking them as well.

Bits of shell went everywhere, nearly nailing Dev who ducked at the last minute as one piece sailed past her ear.

“Now.” Jess ignored the chaos she was causing. She pulled apart the shell and removed a chunk of white substance from it and handed it over to Dev. “Try it.”

Dev regarded it for a moment, then she reached out and took the offering. It felt in her hand not that different from the fish, and she tentatively bit into it, extremely surprised at the rich taste. “Oh.” She said, in a surprised tone. “That is good.”

Jess took a piece for herself and popped it into her mouth. “Not too different from the shrimp at Quebec. Not as spicy though.” She said. “These cost more creds than I have in the bank usually.”

“Really.”

“Really.” Jess took a leg and went back to the weather map. “Damn these guys live good.”

Dev investigated the shattered creature remains, pairing bits of the white flesh with her tea as she returned her concentration to the waves. “Jess?”

“Huh?”

“What's a bet?”

“Ahhh. I'll teach you all about that, my friend.” Jess chuckled. “But first, let's find a way to drive through this mess and keep away from the bad guys. I don't think we'll stand up to a really descent scan.”

**

Dev finally sat back and took a breath, her entire body stiff and aching from the tension caused by having to navigate the boat through the storm. The rough weather had kept them hidden, but the boat had almost rolled again several times, and Jess had gone below the deck to make sure nothing was broken.

For now, the rain had stopped and the winds had died down, and she was beginning to see structures on comp coming up that she understood were the enemy's. They were just wiremaps for now, but she set the scanner up to passive and turned up the volume on the old style radio, right now just issuing a soft, hissing static.

It seemed a moment of calm for them. The waves had settled, and the water had changed from a dark and angry black to a lighter color, her scanner confirming the depth decreasing as they continued on.

She heard the sound of boots on the stairs outside and glanced behind her as the hatch opened and Jess appeared, well wrapped and gloved. Her partner swept the hood off her head and shook herself, rubbing her hands together as she crossed the deck.

“Looks good.” Jess said. “I can hear those fish swimming around in there too. How far are we from.. ah.” She came to stand next to Dev, peering at the tracking map. “Nice. Good job.” She touched her finger on the screen, pointing out a block on the wiremap. “There it is.”

Dev stood by her chair and stretched her body out, pausing as she felt Jess's hands on her. They brought a warmth, and as she felt her partner's fingers kneading her back, a happy grin appeared on her face. “That really feels nice.”

“I know.” Jess smiled with her, moving her hands up the bio alt's spine as she rested her hands on the console, feeling the knots under her fingers. “Remind me to teach you this when we get back so you can return the favor.”

“Absolutely.” Dev agreed. “That seat is not really comfortable for a long time. Not like the carrier.” She straightened and turned as Jess finished, looking up at her with a grateful expression. “Thank you.”

Jess let her wrists rest on her partners shoulders and met those eyes, in a breath losing track of what they were doing and letting herself get a little lost in that gentle regard.

Dev waited for a moment, then she cocked her head slightly. “Jess?”

“Yes?” Jess kept looking into her eyes, her face shifting to a mild introspection.

“Do we have to do something?”

“I”m sure we do.”

Dev let her hand rest on Jess's hip and in the next breath they were moving together, and kissing. Jess's hand cupped her cheek and she wished that her partner didn't have her heavy jacket on as an intense craving erupted inside her.

It seemed crazy. They were in the middle of a mission.

Jess backed off a little, just enough to look at her. “Know something?” She said. “You're the first person who's made me want to forget about my job. Why is that, Devvie?”

Dev definitely wanted to go back to that whole kissing thing. “I don't know.” She exhaled, after a pause. “But when you start doing that I don't really care about whats going on either.”

“That bother you?”

“Does it bother you?”

Jess tilted her head and they kissed again, in a silence that lengthened quite a bit. Then she took a breath and let her head rest against Dev's. “Feels too good to bother me. “ She admitted. “That's never happened before.”

“Well.” Dev sighed. “Pretty much everything's never happened to me before so it's difficult to say.”

Jess smiled. Then she looked past Dev to the comm console, which started crackling. “I think I hear my blaster calling my trigger finger.” She growled.

Dev gave her a brief hug. “Did you want to talk to them?” She indicated the radio. “I'm going to take a walk downstairs.”

“No I didn't.” Jess returned the hug, startled by the jolt of positive emotion it gave her. “But I will.” Reluctantly she released Dev, and eased into the chair. “I'm going to tell them we're pulling in with a full load, and bargain a little.”

“Won't they know you're not the fisher people?” Dev asked, resting a hand on the chair arm. “You said they went to this place before.”

“Its automated.” Jess explained. “We swing the boat in and they hook up to the back of it and the fish go out that way. Nothing face to face. “ A faint smile appeared. “Too dangerous for both sides. They don't want to be able to identify the fishermen, and the reverse is true too. Everyone knows trade crosses the lines.”

“I see.”

“Market's like that too. I've been there.” Jess said. “It's all barter for weight chits, no record of anything. No one wants to know, they just want your money.”

“Maybe they'll have that honey mead.” Dev said, with a slight grin. “That happened up on station too. Sometimes a shuttle would.. um.. 'get lost' or come in dock for repair from the other side. Doctor Dan has some things in his office that came that way. You weren't supposed to talk about it.”

“We aren't either.” Her partner told her. “It's against the rules. Everyone knows it. No one cares.” She gave Dev's arm a squeeze. “G'wan and stretch your legs. Let me figure out what story I”m gonna tell them.”

Dev tugged her hood up and trotted off, feeling oddly buoyant as she went out the hatch and rambled down the steps. Though it was cold outside, the spray had diminished and they were traveling relatively smoothly over the calming seas. Dev went over to the rail and looked out, blinking a little but sucking in a deep lungful of the salt misty air.

She felt a little strange. She felt like she wanted to jump up and down and laugh, which would be very inappropriate. It would also be very inappropriate for her to go back into the control center and pull Jess out of her chair and into the hammock.

She suspected, however, that Jess wouldn't mind it at all.

This was something she didn't have any programming for. Sex she understood, at least, she understood a lot more now than when she'd had classes about it. The class hadn't mentioned anything at all about this wild, warm, happy feeling that made her want to run around and laugh.

What did it mean? Was it correct?

Did she care?

Dev smiled into the wind, reveling in the rush as it pushed her hair back and moistened her skin. Then she turned and rambled towards the inner hatch, bouncing a little as she laughed, if only to herself.

**

“Vessel Northern Star, come about to starboard, slip 6 Decca.” The radio voice was rough, and harsh sounding. “Cut engines standby to offload.”

“Check.” Jess answered. “Put the chits on the deck when you're done. Crew's sleepin.”

“Got it.” The voice answered, then cut off with a burst of static.

The fishery was enormous. Dev was almost glued to the window as they approached, peering up and up and up at the structure that towered over the waves almost as tall as the citadel.

This wasn't rock however. This was steel, long and very heavy pylons going down into the ocean with spaces between them for boats, and huge hatches with solid doors just above the waves.

Above that was platform after platform, layered one atop the other with weather stained steel stretching up higher than she could see. “Wow.”

“Big, huh?” Jess was standing next to her, hands tucked into her hip pockets. “Know what that used to be?”

“I have no idea.” Dev trimmed the throttles, aiming for the slot they'd been directed to by the gruff voice on the radio. There weren't any people in sight, just the docks, and grapples, though she could see a shielded, glassed area mid way up that might hide a control center.

“That used to be an oil rig, Devvie.” Jess said. “Way way back in the day, when we pumped petroleum from everything we could to power combustion engines.”

“Ah.” Dev regarded the structure. “That really is old then.”

“It is.” Her partner agreed. “Swing around and back us in. I”m going to watch the grapples.” She moved to put her hood up, then frowned and carefully tucked her dark hair into it. “Hope no one's close enough to get a shot of my mug.” She muttered.

There was an actual note of discomfort in her voice. Dev noticed. “Would you like to park this vessel?” She offered. “I could go watch. If they see me, they'll think I belong to the boat.”

Jess stopped in mid motion. “Are you reading my mind?” She accused. “Can they teach you to do that?”

Dev merely looked puzzled at the question.

“Never mind.” Jess pushed the hood back. “Good idea. These guys are pretty well known here from the response I got on comms. You do look like them. More than I do anyway.” She traded places with Dev and watched as the bio alt shrug into her jacket and fasten it. “Be careful.”

Dev cocked her head. “I'll try to.” She said. “I'm going to go back in that area just behind where this is. It has that metal wall.” She went to the hatch and ducked through it, moving quickly down the steps as she heard the engines change their timbre.

The fishery was in a calm area, and the winds had dropped to almost nothing, so the boat was comfortable to walk around as she went across the deck and squeezed back between the walls so she had a view of the back. Jess swung the bow around and then reversed the drive, moving them slowly back into their assigned dock.

It was still very cold, but not the bitter cold of the white. Dev pushed her hood down after a few minutes, and watched the approaching dock, seeing the worn chains and bumpers meant to cradle them as they moved in. The sense of the age of the structure increased as she got a better look, the metal stained with weather and age and dented in many places.

A thing from before the change. Dev had once seen the genesis of the station she'd been hatched on, a small, old, worn set of chambers locked together that had been the first station section boosted, where the workers had lived who built the rest of it, almost hidden except for the small brass plaque affixed to one rounded wall, that Doctor Dan had shown them.

It had the same sense of age. Dev found it very interesting that they had reused the structure, and made a mental note to look up the petroleum thing when they got back.

As the boat closed into it's positon, she saw the grapples start to move, and she watched in mild apprehension as they shifted around the boat, one of them with a big hook aiming fro the hatch in the back.

“Station keeping.” A loud, oddly accented voice sounded out suddenly. “Lock on.”

Dev heard a set of thunks and then the grapples were all over the back of the boat, pulling open the hatch as a boom came sweeping down with scan on it and dove into the big tank where the animals were.

She watched it for a minute, before she realized there was another figure on the dockside, watching her.

What should she do? Dev looked at the figure, who was slowly walking down the edge of the platform, with an unhurried motion. He seemed to be searching for something, so she climbed casually up onto the platform where the fishing controls were and perched on the wood topped steel seat, letting her hands rest on the knobs.

He paused as the boat settled into idle, it's back end fitting neatly between the bumpers as they came to a halt. He studied her intently then, after a moment, he lifted a hand and waved.

Dev immediately waved back, leaning forward on her elbows after she let her hand drop. She was hoping that would be enough, but a moment later, the man made a motioning forward gesture to her, and seemed to expect that she'd obey it.

Well then. She got up and climbed down to the deck, moving out behind the wall and keeping near the rail to stay out of the way of all the grapples opening the hatches and starting to unload the fish, hooking up a chute to the rear of the ship making a path for them to swim out.

There was a space of water between the side of the ship and the dock, and Dev was glad of it as she came to the rail across from him. “Hello.”

He leaned on the bumper. “Old man there?”

“He's sleeping.” Dev said the first thing she could think of. “I could go wake him up if you want me to.” She looked behind her.

He held a hand up. “No no.” He shook his head to emphasize the thought. “Just wanted to know if you got any word about some renegades we heard about, stealing fish.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “They tried that on us. They came over and dropped people on the deck and tried to take us over, but we fought them off.”

“Yeah?” The man's brows lifted. “You got guns oboard?”

“Yes.” Dev didn't see any point in denying it.

He shook his head. “Careful with that, lass. You get caught with them, you'll end up bait.” He glanced at the chutes. “Nice catch.”

“It was hard work.” Dev felt an eerie sensation, as though someone were standing behind her watching her back. She kept herself from turning though, reasoning that with the water between them, and the steel wall of the ship she was relatively safe.

He nodded. “Betcha.” He straightened up. “Thanks for the news.” Then he looked intently at her. “Know who they were?”

Dev shook her head.

He stared at her for a brief moment, then he merely nodded and turned and walked away. “Later.” He lifted a hand, but didn't look back.

“Goodbye.” Dev waved back even though he wasn't watching. Then she turned and crossed the deck, coming back inside the metal wall only to be startled nearly out of her wits when she came face to face with Jess, fully armed, with her big blaster in her hands and an extremely serious look on her face “Oh.”

“Nice.” Jess complimented her. “You have any idea who that was?”

“No.” Dev shook her head. “Um.” She gently eased the muzzle of the blaster to one side. “Were you going to shoot him?”

“If he'd taken one step towards you, sure.” Jess informed her. “And then since the back of this thing is hitched to the wall we'd have both died together in one big ass flameball but there you go. “ She put the blaster back into it's side mount and sighed. “That was Davog Stern. He's one of the other side's big shot hot shot agents.”

Dev sorted through all that. “Like you?” She hazarded a guess.

Her partner smiled briefly. “He's got ten years on me, but yeah, sort of.” She acknowledged. “Maybe if I live that long I might get as nasty a rep as he has. Hard to tell.” She edged over and peeked across the deck. Now that the other side's big bastard had left, the place was deserted again but that itch was surfacing between her shoulderblades and she wanted out of the shackles. “Good thing you were on deck. If he'd caught me he'd have probably gutted me with the laser knife he had in his right hand.”

Dev blinked. “He did?”

Jess regarded her with a bemused expression. “Did they give you programming to fight?”

Had they? “You mean like you do?” Dev watched her partner nod. “Well, you sometimes don't know what you get but I don't think so.” She admitted. “Is that incorrect?” She asked, hesitantly. “I remember in the hallway, when the base was attacked that Brent didn't have anything to fight with.. is that usual?”

“Ah.” Jess exhaled. “No, well, it's fine.” She stepped back into the shadows. “Most of the time techs don't. That's not their gig. That's our job. But they know how.”

“I see.”

“Let's get under cover.” Jess nudged her towards the stairs, tugging her hood up and tightening the catches so it hid her face. “Hope they hurry up.”

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It took a while to get the fish out. Dev was aware of her partner's growing impatience as she paced around behind the console, stopping to watch the vid that showed the back deck being worked. No more people had appeared, but now that the dull gray light had brightened a trifle, she could see shadows behind the glass walls that were probably people watching them as they were watching the work.

“What in the hell's taking them so long?” Jess growled. “How many damned fish were in that thing?”

Dev consulted her scan. “The tank is almost empty of animals.” She reported. “I don't think it can count them though.”

Jess snorted softly. “What did you tell him when he first walked up?” She asked abruptly. “I missed that when I was falling down t.. I mean, getting to the back of the deck.”

“He asked for the captain. I told him he was sleeping. “ Dev said. “Then he asked me about the attack.”

“And?”

“And I told him about the pirates.” The bio alt replied. “I said they tried to get our fish, but we fought them off, and they went away.”

Jess had her arms folded over her chest, and she was thinking hard, her eyes slightly narrowed. “You tell them who they were?”

“No, I said I didn't know.” Dev said. “He warned me not to get caught with weapons.”

“That's where I came in.” Her partner said. “I heard the rest. Bastard.” She paced across the deck again, her body language restless and almost jerky. “What's his angle... what's he looking for?”

Dev regarded her mildly, but didn't answer since she really didn't have anything to add.

“Now he's wondering if you knew who they were and didn't want to squeal, or what.” Jess went to the vid and studied it. “What's he doing here, Dev? I didn't expect to see one of them out here, they usually steer clear of the fisheries. Too many uncertain loyalties for it to be safe for them.”

“He didn't seem to be in any discomfort.” Dev offered. “He did seem very interested in who the attackers were, but.. “ She cocked her head. “It almost seemed like he was expecting me to say something different.”

“He expected you to ID the bad guys as Interforce. Most any fisherman would have.” Jess said, quietly. 'So now he's wondering – was it because you' didn't know, or because you didn't say that for a reason.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Dev frowned.

“It could be.” Jess leaned on the console. “C'mon, bastards. Get that tank empty before he decides to find out more about us.”

Dev sat down in the control chair and watched the waves go by the front of the boat. They were low and just slightly ruffled on top, and as she watched a seagull drifted by, outlined against the clouds. She watched, enchanted, as it floated, angling it's wings as it made a lazy circle in the air. Looking this way, it seemed quiet and peaceful, and she spared a moment to check the scanner before she settled herself in the seat and let her hands rest on the throttles.

It seemed a way to get ready to do something since she was pretty sure that Jess was pretty sure that something was going to happen that would require her to do something.

Or something.

Dev ran that thought over in her head again, and then reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“C'mon.. c'mon.” Jess was repeating behind her, shifting restlessly. She already had all her weapons on her, and her jacket was unfastened over her armored jumpsuit.

“Where do you want to go when they finish?” Dev asked, rubbing her thumb over one of the gauges, where the glass over it had gotten a bit cloudy.

“What?”

Dev half turned in the seat to face her. “When they're done. Which way do you want to go from here?” She was fascinated by the almost ceaseless motion of Jess' s body, now channeled into a slightly rocking pacing stride. “Are you in distress? Should we do something?”

Jess went to the vid and stared at it. “I feel like a sitting duck.”

Duck. Dev's brow furrowed. She'd heard people say that word but it had something to do with crouching down, which she supposed could be related to sitting. Was a sitting duck different than a standing one? “All right.”

“I think they know something, Dev.” Jess said. “I think they're planning on coming at us.” She flexed her hands.

Dev got up and walked to where she was standing, looking up at the vid. It showed the back of the boat, where the grapples and arms were still busy, a heavy flow of water rushing down the chute and into the fishery's lower level. There didn't seem to be anything wrong, and yet, she could feel Jess twitching next to her.

It made her breathe a little faster. She wondered if she would be turning to the controls next, shoving the engines forward and trying to wrench them free of the fishery.

The radio crackled, making them both jump. “Northern Star, attention.”

Jess went over and sat down, picking up the commset and slipping it onto her head. “Star.” She said, in a brief, clipped voice.

Dev continued to watch the vid, seeing the water flow start to reduce.

Static sounded for a moment. Jess felt the tension in her ratchet up a few notches and she glanced quickly behind her to ensure her partner's position. “Dev, you might want to come over here and hold onto something.”

The bio alt obediently left the display and came over, settling next to Jess and wrapping her hands around Jess's arm.
“Okay”

It made Jess smile, despite everything, and after a moment her body relaxed a little. She clicked the comms a few times. “This is Star, who called?” She cocked her ears, and watched the vid, her body waiting for the sight of armored figures pouring down the dock.

Another crackle, then the voice came back. “Stand by for weighting. Check 98 percent live. Good stock.”

Jess stared at the speaker. “Thanks.” She said, belatedly. “200 fathoms.”

“Ice pack?”

“Not far.” Jess kept to the clipped tone.

“Weighting 7.5K, 2.5 chits per. Stand by for delivery.”

Wow. Jess did the math in her head and her eyes popped wide open. No wonder they had full jars of honey onboard. And that was for one load. “Holy shit.” Her eyes tracked to the deck, seeing a grapple coming over with a large can dangling from it. “That's our payoff, Dev.”

“Payoff?”

“That's what they get for delivering the fish. Trade spots. With any luck they'll let us loose and I won't have to start shooting.”

Dev hopped into the seat her partner vacated, and got ready to start the engines up, not really understanding what was going on. Behind her, Jess went to the hatch and drew her blaster, inching the door open and watching the dock intently.

The grapple descended, and then they heard the loud, hollow sound as the can hit the deck. Then the grapple arm released and lifted clear, and the next moment the locks and shackles surged into motion, making Jess lurch against the door and start forward before she paused and relaxed. “Damn.”

“Is there something wrong?” Dev asked.

“Plan worked.” Jess admitted. “I wasn't really expecting that.” She put her gun back in it's holster and dogged the hatch shut, feeling the boat float free as the last of the grapples let loose of them.

“Northern Star, egress to starboard, keep to your lane.” The voice warned. “Stay clear of station.”

Jess got back to the console and grabbed the comms. “Acknowledged, out.” She answered. “Dev, take us out and to the right. Don't go anywhere outside those markers. They've got the waters mined.”

“What does that mean?” Dev got the engines started, and gently nudged the throttles forward. “What's a mine?”

“Big boom.” Jess turned and watched the vid, her trigger finger still itchy. It didn't quite feel right, the normalness of the transaction. It was hard for her to believe that the fishery, greedy as it was for take wouldnt question a thirty crew boat where only one crewmember was visible, and a unfamiliar voice on the comms.

Not after seeing Davog. Her guts clenched a little, thinking of him. Remembering the first few missions of her career, when she'd run full into him and nearly got her rookie head blown right off her body. She'd gotten lucky and gotten out, but she'd never forgotten his canny, icy precision and how his almost black eyes had bored through hers.

Davog there and they just let them go? A thougth occurred to her, and she turned back to Dev. “Trade a minute. Run a scan on that barrel they dumped on the deck. See what's in there.” She took over the throttles as Dev stepped to one side, feeling the vibration of the engines through the palms of her hands.

Dev turned and adjusted the scanner, opening up it's field and walking to the back of the control room, watching the analyzer finish it's sweep. She hoped it ended up finding what it was supposed to, because Jess's agitation was starting to get her nervous and she wished her partner would relax a little.

The scanner focused in on the barrel and she adjusted it, running first a bio sweep, which was negative. Then she went on for a threat portfolio, watching intently as it went through the various possibilities that included destructive things.

Also negative. “Clean so far.” She called over her shoulder. “What am I supposed to see in there?”

“Gold.”

“Ah.” Dev nodded. “Atomic element 79, isn't it?”

Jess sighed, as she took the boat out and into the carefully lined lane. “I feel like such a dipshit around you sometimes.”

Dev straightened. “What?”

“Never mind.”

The bio alt came over and showed her the display. “The barrel is, in fact, filled with that element.” She said. “So that is a good thing?”

'That's a freaking amazing thing.” Jess said. “It makes me not trust it. Davog should have stopped us. We didn't look right.” She increased speed a little and resisted the urge to look behind her, the spot between her shoulderblades itching fiercely. “We didn't look or act right and they should have held us.”

“But they didn't.” Dev commented.

“No.”

“Do you think they will?” Dev set the scan down and watched the waves come at them. They were heading away from the fishery and back into open water, and the motion made itself evident as they moved further away.

“Damned if I know.” Jess admitted. “I'd be very surprised if we weren't followed. Even though we turned over legit catch, and they paid us in legit chits, I know we were out of spec.” She slid out of the way. “Here you take it.”

Dev took the controls. “Maybe they didn't notice.” She suggested.

Jess went back to the hatch and opened it, keeping her hood up and tucked around her head in case long range scan was focusing on them. She watched the rapidly retreating docks, spotting another boat heading in behind them, but saw no sign of the being chased.

Was Dev right? She scanned the huge structure, looking for a flash of motion or a reflection where there should not be any. But the stained and battered metal remained just that, as they came around the side of the facility and went past the processing stations.

On this side, prepared product was loading onto trundles, the short haul delivery boats that would make the trip across the water to the isolated communities on the islands all around them.

As she watched one of the trawlers started out from the bay, two men on the deck watching them idly. Was it really a trawler? Jess watched it closely, her fingers closing on the blaster at her side. But the other boat curved away to the south, while their route was north, and in a minute they had left them far behind.

So they were out. She had what she wanted, and they could head to the Highland Island market and pick up the tempting delicacies that would gain them entrance to the secure space they needed to get into.

It was all working great. Jess gazed unhappily at the empty sea. Wasn't it?

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Dev watched the approaching sea station with a sense of bemusement. It was a little like the fish place, but this was two of them, smaller, between a set of rocky escarpments so they formed a sort of gate. The boat would have to go between then, and she could see that there was something strung there blocking the way.

She was dressed in some of the fisher people's clothes that Jess had found belowdecks, a high necked thick fabric shirt and a pair of somewhat funny pants that had straps that went over her shoulders and held them up. It was all quite comfortable, and she had her sharkskin jacket to wear over it when they got to the market.

Dev slowed the engines as another boat ahead of her did the same, coming close enough now for her to see men on the little towers, holding guns.

That was confusing. She turned her head as Jess entered the control space, her partner's body also encased in borrowed clothing. “They seem in some discomfort ahead.” She pointed at the gates.

“Nah.” Jess came up to stand next to her. “That's normal. They don't like people to make trouble in the market.” She rested her hands on the console. “I've been here about a dozen times. None of them as myself.”

“I see.”

Jess studied the boat ahead of them, which was longer but narrower than theirs, and had a haphazard pile of fishing equipment on the back of it. “Crabber.” She indicated the boxes on the back, which were stacked up high all over. “Those guys make credit like crazy.”

“That crab was good.” Dev admitted. “Do you think they'll have some more of them here?”

Jess laughed. “That's the least of what they'll have here.” She draped her arm over Dev's shoulder. “Market's sort of a no man's land in a way. The other side knows we come here, we know they come here, everyone pretends they don't know anyone but everyone's trying to get goodies to take home.”

“Its something you have in common.” Dev ventured.

Jess looked thoughtful, then she shrugged. “It's what all humans have in common I guess. We all like to get stuff. Get luxuries.. know that we can take a few chits and get some comfort.”

“I like that too.” The bio alt adjusted the throttles again, backing them down as the boat ahead of them went to idle speed. “So I guess you're right, if even bio alts do it.”

“Even?” Jess bumped her. “You're a great barterer. I heard you in Quebec.”

Dev smiled.

“Now. Keep it nice and steady as we're going through.” Jess instructed as the boat ahead of them passed through the gates and they were coming up on them themselves. “This boat's known here.”

Dev nodded, watching the men on the towers. They were examining them closely, but as Jess had said, they apparently knew the ship because the gate drifted open and the man on the right hand tower waved at them. She waved back, just as the radio crackled to life.

“Northern Star, over.”

“Answer it.” Jess said quietly.

“This is Northern Star.” Dev keyed comms. “Go ahead.”

“Welcome. Third dock, inside jetty, first space, the usual. Compliments to Sig.”

“Oh ho. They really really do know them here.” Jess murmured. “Bouncy little bastard. This could be trickier than I thought.”

“Acknowledged.” Dev said. “The captain sends his regards.” She added, pausing slightly then going on. “He says he hopes you have something worth buying this time.”

Jess turned her head and stared, round eyed, at her partner.

The radio erupted in laughter. “Tell him I hope he's actually got chits this time not polished fish scales.” The voice called back. “Over.”

“I will, thank you.” Dev unkeyed the comm. “I hope that was not really incorrect.”

“How in the hell did you know to say that?” Jess said, after a long moment's silence. “Where did that all come from?”

How did she know? Dev piloted the boat carefully through the gate and regarded the space past it. To her surprise, it was a very big but enclosed stretch of water, with jagged pieces of rock sticking up on the edges in a strange kind of way. Ahead of them was a mound of land that was covered in structures with docks sticking out from all sides of it. “I thought about what he might have said to that, and that's what it was.” She finally answered. “Was it incorrect?”

“No.” Her partner said. “I think it's pretty much exactly what he would have said. But how did you know that? You only just met the guy.”

“I don't know.” Dev admitted. “Can we talk about this after I finish piloting? I don't want to hit anything.”

Jess chuckled wryly. “That's the nicest way anyone's ever told me to shut the hell up.” She gave Dev a light scratch on the back with her fingertips. “Sure. Third dock's that way, portside. One's up at the top, that's the ritzy harbor. Then three's on the east side.”

Obediently, Dev steered toward the right, as the other boat puttered off to the left. She could see the many docks clustering around the edge of the island and it seemed rather busy with traffic. Very different. Very interesting.

Jess was watching everything with a look of intense alertness. Her eyes were sweeping all the other ships and searched diligently for outlines she might recognize, or people she knew. Highland Market was a fun but dangerous place, and having seen Davog at the fishery, she suspected she would find more of his ilk here.

It happened. Sometimes, between the escalations and insertions, she'd even shared a cup of grog with one or the other of them here, since it was recognized as a truce area. No nasty business allowed, or you ended up in the Highland lock down and what she'd heard of that...

Wasn't something she wanted to experience. No one wanted to be outed, which they would be, and have their organization embarassed, which they would be, and end up being punked and demoted which they definitely would be as she'd seen it happen to others including Jason.

So all of them kept up the facsade and pretended not to be who they were, and ignored old grudges while they were there on the island. Jess, however, suspected that regardless of that, and of the unofficial rules, if she was spotted and recognized the rules would go out the window.

Not after blowing up half a damned mountain.

They motored around the edge of the island and Jess pointed at the entrance to the harbor they'd been assigned to. This one was about half full, and most of the boats were empty and bobbing quietly at rest. They passed between them and found the slip they were to park in, up near the front and handy to the long ramp leading up.

Dev managed to park without much trouble, and the side grapples clamped onto the dockside rings with a sound of brassy solidity. The boat stopped moving, only bobbing lightly on the surface as she shut down the engines and the vibration of the deck stilled to nothing.

“Okay.” Jess put her hands on her hips. “We're peace bonded here.”

Dev's blond eyebrow inched up.

“No weapons.”

“I see.”

“We're going to go out there and browse the market. You're gonna be the moneybags.”

Dev's other eyebrow crept up to join it's mate.

“You're the one who looks like Sigurd.” The agent explained. “So you'll carry the chit record. I'm just along to protect you.” Jess went on. “I'm not going to pretend to be someone else this time. I'm just gonna be an Interforce agent Sigurd hooked into protecting his patch.”

“All right.” Dev actually managed to follow that. “What about.. I'm here by myself because I .. um.. “ She frowned. “Remember that bet thing you mentioned? I looked it up in comp. What if I bet the rest of the fisher people that I couldn't take this boat here by myself?”

Jess grinned wholeheartedly. “Oh I like that.”

“So he agreed but he sent you along to make sure I didn't get into trouble.” Dev concluded “Does that work?”

Jess leaned forward and gave her a lingering kiss on the lips. “You're the bomb.”

“I am?” Dev felt confused. “So that was incorrect?”

“No.”

“I see. So in this case, bombs are good?”

“Yes.” Jess wrapped her arms around her pilot and hugged her. “I don't know what Bricker was thinking when he asked for you but I”m damn glad he did.”

Dev smiled in relief, returning the hug. “I'm glad too.”

They shut down the control center and dogged the hatch, and Jess led the way down the steps to the side of the ship that was close to the walkway.

“Here.” Jess handed Dev an embossed card. “That's the value of that can. They'll lift that up and bank it, see?” She pointed at the shoreside grapple latching on to the can and picking it up. It was placed in a weatherworn casing right next to the dock marked with the same number as the ship had. “You can't carry all that around with you.”

The container bong'd softly, and a number registered on the side of it. Jess grunted. “They also take a percent off for the service, but that's okay.”

Dev merely nodded.

“So now you can use the card to get stuff. When they deliver it to the ship, they put their cards in that slot, and register chits to it. Then they pick up the chits before they leave.” Jess continued her explanation. “It's totally local to this island. Not worth anything anywhere else but it keeps people from being hit over the head in the market and getting their chits stolen.”

“I see.”

“Its anonymous in that, the card is only matched to that dock number.” Jess concluded. “So let's go shop.”

They crossed over onto the dock and walked up the ramp. It was late afternoon and the walkways were mostly empty, only two or three people strolling in the opposite direction.

It was cold, but freezing, Dev noticed. Her jacket kept her reasonably warm, and she stuck her hands in her pockets as they reached a set of chiseled steps and started walking up them. The there was some moss on the rocks, but otherwise it was clean, and as they got to the top she almost stopped at the view below them.

She had thought Quebec was chaotic? It had nothing on this place. The whole inside of the hill was full of stone shelters, lines and lines of them in concentric circles around a big tower in the center. Between the shelters were aisles full of people, and she could hear noise and the sound of people talking brushing against her in waves that matched the confusion of smells and colors. “Wow.”

Jess chuckled and led the way down the steps. “C'mon.”

As they walked, the cold wind was cut off and it became a lot more comfortable. Dev pushed her hood back and drew in a breath full of strange scents and her ears caught the sound she now recognized as music somewhere in the mix. She followed Jess down the carved steps into one of the aisles, and as the stone walls rose up next to her she put her hand out and touched one. “Oh.” She looked at it. “It's warm.”

“Yeah.” Jess paused to scan the aisle, and then moved forward again. “This is what's left of one of the smaller volcanos that went off back in the day. That outside ring was the crater, and this island's what's left of the cone that got drowned when the seas all came up.”

Dev wasn't sure she liked the idea of being inside a volcano, but she did enjoy the warmth and she was able to open up her jacket as they entered the area where all the stone shelters were.

Like in Quebec, there were people inside the shelters with all kinds of different things. It seemed more organized though, and the people around them were dressed both more richly and far more strangely to her eyes. Some had seashells decorating them, she noted, and others had colored marking on their skin that was a little like what Jess had.

“Hey there kid! What'cha looking for? Want some of this?” A male voice sounded just ahead of them. Dev realized belatedly he was addressing her, and she peered into his little shelter. It had some of the strange clothing, strips of one color intertwined with a second, looking more like undergarments than anything else.

“No, she doesn't.” Jess answered, steering her past. “She likes to wear things more than once.”

Dev wasn't sure what that meant, but she saw the man glare at Jess until he saw the insignia she'd pinned to the collar of the fishermans overall she was wearing and then he turned away and turned their back on them.

He was afraid. She saw it in his face before he turned. “What are those?” She whispered to Jess as they moved past. “I like the colors.”

“Women wear them and dance in them to let people know they want sex.” Jess responded straightforwardly. “I”d rather we keep that private between us, if you don't mind.”

Dev felt her face warm as the blood rose to her cheeks. “I see.”

“Besides, that's not something the science boys would like. Now..” Jess led her down a cross alley and into the next ring. “This is more like it.” She slowed down as they came even to a bigger shelter that was full of steel barrels and rows and rows of drink dispensers. “Ice wine.”

Dev had absolutely no idea what that was, but she went with it and found herself face to face with a ginger haired woman in a deep purple one piece outfit that ended at her knees and left most of her arms exposed. Dev felt chilly just watching her. “Hello.” She said, as the woman focused on her.

“Top of the day to ya.” The woman amiably responded. “Looking for a bottle or two?”
Dev waited to see if Jess was going to intervene, but when she remained silent, she figured just being straightforward would be the best. “I don't know. What is it?”

“Ahh.” The woman didn't even look at Jess. She picked up a small glass and uncapped a bottle, pouring a bit into the glass and offering it to Dev. “Taste for yourself.”

Dev took the glass and sipped it gingerly. It tasted like... well, nothing she'd ever tasted was like it. There was a clean sweetness to it that was very appealing, and it seemed to evaporate on the back of her tongue. “Oh. Wow.”

The woman grinned.

“How do you make this?” Dev asked, curious. “It tastes excellent.”

There were two other men in the shelter, and they were watching, but kept their distance, and looked for other people walking by to pitch their product to. Everyone ignored Jess.

“Family secret.” The woman winked at her. “Let's just way we've got some family upside and we provide the ice. Like it?”

Dev nodded. She felt Jess lay her hand on her back, and her fingers tightened twice. “I think I would like two bottles. How much are they?”

The woman sat down on a box and they settled in to bargain.

Jess was content to listen. She was aware of all the eyeballs on them, but she'd put her insignia on for a reason and there was a bit of gratification on seeing the wariness. The crowd was light, she noted, far lighter than the last time she'd been on the island and the merchants around looked more than a little discouraged.

Was it the weather?

“You're a hard bargainer, shippy.” The woman was sighing.

“We work very hard for our chits.” Dev said. “So we don't like to give them up.”

“And well you're known for it. All right.” Two bottles were marked off, and Dev handed over the card. She waited for it to be recorded, and then she took it back. “Delivery's first bell.”

“Thanks.” Jess spoke for the first time. “We'll see you then.”

The woman nodded briefly at her. “Agent.”

Jess smiled at her, and they moved on. This ring seemed to be mostly edible and drinkable items, and they moved further in stopping here and there to taste. “Haven't seen most of this stuff in a long time.” Jess admitted, after they tried some small crackers with fish eggs on them. “See that? It's made from octopus.” She sampled a bit of the meat and watched Dev try some. “See if you can get a couple packages of that, and some of the snails.”

Dev wasn't sure about the snails, but the octopus tasted nice, slightly briny with a chewy texture she liked. They had stacks of cryopacked product, and she met the eye of the man selling them, giving him a little smile that drew him over at once.

So far things seemed to be going well. She glanced up at Jess, who was searching for more things to nibble on, but who was also sweeping the area every few steps looking for trouble. Her insignia flashed briefly in the light and Dev wished she'd been allowed to put hers on as well.

Octopus secured, they continued further on towards the center of the ring, where it seemed it was busier, and the narrow path they were on got crowded with other shoppers. These shelters were full of more exotic things, and Dev found herself pressing closer to Jess as they had to slow way down.

Jess put her hand on her shoulder, keeping herself between Dev and most of the crowd. So far she hadn't seen anyone she knew in a bad way, though she had spotted a few people who she had a slight acquaintance of and many more who recognized her collar bug and kept their distance.

That was fine. When she'd decided to wear it she knew she was going to be advertising what she was and though they were peace bonded everyone knew that didn't make it safe. Didn't make them safe, either her, or her counterpoints on the other side.

“Oh, Jess.” Dev stopped, and frowned. Her stomach turned at what she was looking at, and she felt a sense of muted horror fill her.

What? Jess peered around her and spotted a stall with furry animal skins on it. White fur, and big. Had to be bear. “Bear skins.” She agreed, distracted by the distressed look on her pilot's face. “We should get a few. Great for some bigwig's office.”

Dev went over and peered at the skin, which had the bear's head attached with it's glassy eyes and lurid, poking tongue. She turned back to Jess and put a hand on her arm. “Do we have to?” She asked. “I don't like this.”

Jess studied her, intrigued by the fact that her partner had rolled over dead humans without a flinch but freaked out about a dead bear. “You're wearing a shark skin.” She commented.

“I know. But.. “ Dev looked behind her.

“But your jacket doesn't have eyes.” Jess gave her a tolerant grin. “No problem. Let's move on.” She guided Dev further, starting towards the stall she saw had golden jars prominantly displayed across from what looked like a shop stocked with more stuff from upside.

Halfway there, they heard a loud commotion ahead, and Jess felt her instincts prickle. She immediately got ahead of Dev and looked quickly forward, where an open space between the ring made a crossroads. There were shouts and laughter, and she flexed her hands, wishing not for the first time that she'd chanced the peace bond.

They reached the edge of the crossroads and stopped, as the crowd closed in and made it impossible to go further. Jess straightened to her full height and got a look at what the fuss was about, seeing two men in expensive looking clothing kicking a third man, who was dressed in a threadbare jumper.

The man sprawled on the ground, covering his head with both arms.

An older man, also in worn clothes darted into the opening, going over to the man on the floor and kneeling down next to him. “Leave him alone you bastards.” He yelled at the two attackers. “He didn't do nothing to you.”

“Why are they harming that man?” Dev asked in a very low tone.

“People are assholes.” Jess responded promptly. “They don't really need a reason.”

“Yeah? Shut your mouth!” One of the men kicked the older man in the side. “Your kind should go back where you came from we don't need you here.”

“Are you going to assist him?”

Jess sighed. “I shouldn't.”

Dev remained silent for a moment, then she exhaled. “I wish you would.” She said mournfully. “Doctor Dan always would do that for us.”

“That's not a bio alt.” Jess objected. “He's just a scrub.”

“Would they treat one of us any different?”

Hm. Jess studied the two fancy pants, realizing why one of them seemed familiar to her.

He kicked the man again, and the in a quiet flicker of motion Jess moved, bumping her way through the crowd and getting across the open space before he could try a third time. “Stop.” She said, in a quiet yet firm tone. “No place for this.”

The man whirled and lifted a hand, then stopped, his eyes fastening on her neck, then darting away. “You've got no influence here. “ He said, as the second man came over, watching Jess warily.

“Neither do you.” Jess had her hands clasped behind her back and she merely looked at him. “But making noise in the middle of the market is never a good idea.” She stared him in the eye. “No one wants a bad rep, right?”

Both men glowered at her, then the shorter of the two slapped the other on the arm. “Let's go. It stinks around here.”

Jess waited for them to leave, then she went over and extended a hand down to the older man. “I'd get out of here if I were you.”

The man took her hand and let her pull him up. Then he squeezed her fingers. “Thanks, agent.” He said. “My son ddn't mean to cause trouble. He's just a little clumsy.” He tapped the boy on the head. “Get up, Jeso.”

The huddled figure got to his feet, blinking painfully. He kept his shoulders hunched, blood running from a cut on his head. The older man ducked his head in respect to Jess, then led the boy off down the crossroad away from the center as the crowd started milling around again, the entertainment seemingly over.

Dev ducked between them and arrived at her side. “That was excellent.”

“That was idiotic, since everyone in the place now knows I'm here especially the two agents I just pissed off. ” Jess sighed. “C'mon. Let's get some tea and honey and get out of here before someone decides to make trouble. She pulled Dev back into the side aisle in the direction they came from, aware now of all the eyes sticking on her, and the whispers following her through the crowd.

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They were halfway around the ring before Jess sensed the presence and turned, tucking Dev behind her in a single fluid motion. Facing here were two men, in plain woven clothes made of sea plants and the only sign on them was the metal bracelet on their right wrists. “What?”

“Man wants to see you.” The one nearer her said. “Says with his compliments, would you please come up the hill.”

Jess sorted through the invitation and relaxed a little, realizing it was an invitation and not an order. “Sure.” She said. “Lead on.” She motioned Dev to go ahead of her.

“Just you.” The man said, not moving.

“No.” Jess answered, and then stopped talking.

“The man just wants to see you.” He replied, still in a quiet and calm voice.

“I don't leave my partner behind.” Jess replied. “So you get us both, or neither, your choice.”

The man reacted with some surprise, looking intently at Dev, and then tilting his head to one side. “Wasn't indentified. That's fine. Let's go.” He turned and started down the aisle, turning at the next crossroads and heading up the hill with his companion and the two of them at his heels.

Jess remained silent as they walked, one hand resting lightly on her pilot's shoulder. They quickly rose up out of the market and then were passing through the circles of stone houses that spread out right and left.

Dev wasn't sure what was going on but she was sure it wasn't the time to ask about it. She glanced to either side as they walked, noting small signs of people living in the stone huts, strings of clothing drifting in the breeze, and once a small child running down the stone path, and darting into one of the buildings.

It was quieter up here, and she could hear the sound of the surf crashing gently up against the harbors down below.

There was a gate up at the top, and it swung open as they approached. Dev glanced up at Jess's face, but her expression was calm, and so she walked obediently through it and only flinched a little as the gate closed behind them. They walked to a door, and paused.

Jess took advantage of the pause and fished something out of her pocket, reaching over and fastening it to Dev's high collar. “There.”

Dev reached up and touched it, unsurprised to feel her tech's insignia there. It made her feel a lot better to have it and she supressed a grin as the door opened and they moved through it. They walked down a long stone hallway, passing several roughly cut doorways leading to rooms with people in them doing various things.

It smelled like rock, and salt, but it had a faint scent behind it that was oddly spicy and different. They entered through a doorway and crossed a big, busy room until they came to a table that had a half dozen people around it, and one man sitting at the head.

“Drake.” The man stood up and came around the table, extending his hand. “Good to see you.”

Jess took his hand and exchanged grips. “Hello, Charles. Same back.” She half turned. “This is my partner, Dev.”

“Tech.” The man ducked his head towards her in respect. “This was very unexpected.” He returned his attention to Jess. “I sure didn't expect to see you in these parts after what we heard.” He said. “Josan told me what happened down the hill. I'm glad you kept it quiet.”

“They complain?” Jess asked, as they moved a few steps away from the group.

“No.” Charles shook his head. He was a tall man, with broad shoulders and tightly curled gray hair and a roughly weathered face. “And that in itself should be a warning.”

Jess nodded. “I won't be here long.” She said. “I don't want any trouble.”

“Nor do I.” Charles agreed. “So I would advise you to keep to your plan and leave as soon as possible. There are odd rumblings and I don't want anything to disrupt the market, Jess. Times are hard and as you know, we don't take sides.”

“I know.”

Charles turned and regarded Dev. “So this is your new partner.” He said. “Somehow we heard it was one of Sigurd's pups.”

“Intentionally since we borrowed his boat.” Jess said, straightforwardly. “We're shopping.”

“Using fisherman chits?” His eyebrows lifted. “Dangerous.”

Jess shrugged lightly.

“No, that wouldn't matter to you would it.” The man smiled briefly. “Don't tell me anything. But I'm reasonably glad to see the rumors of your demise were somewhat exaggerated.” He lifted a hand. “As long as you're spreading someone else's credit around, don't forget to stop at the spa. We've got some new treatments I think you'd like.”

“Maybe we'll go there now.” Jess said. “Seems like a good time for it.”

“Excellent idea.” Charles said. “Miklos, will you guide our friends here to the private door? Enjoy.” He shook Jess's hand, nodded at Dev, and went back to the table where he sat down and picked up a pad he'd been looking at.

Miklos, the taller of the two men who had sought her out, gestured in a different direction than the one they'd entered from. “Please to come with me.”

“Lead on.” Jess put her hand on Dev's back and they followed Miklos through the back door to the room and into a set of quiet hallways that were lined with woven pads and had inset lights spaced evenly on the walls. After a minute or two of even walking, they started downward again and the passed dozens and dozens of closed doors on either side.

A door opened and a man started to emerge, then he spotted them and ducked back inside, shutting the portal as they came even with them. Miklos didn't say anything, and when Dev looked up at Jess, her partner put a finger up to her lips and then let it drop.

It was all very strange. Dev felt that there was danger there, and that Jess was unsettled, but she just kept walking with a calm look on her face.

They reached another door, and Miklos opened it, then stepped back and indicated they should go through. “Enjoy.” He said, waiting for them to move past and then closing the door behind them.

Dev blinked. They were in yet another hallway, but this one was round, and there was light coming in from the ceiling. She glanced up to see slanted holes going up through the rock. She looked at Jess, who was frowning.

Was it okay to talk? She watched her partner's face, and after a moment, Jess looked back at her.

“Okay.” Jess said. “So, let's go see what they have.” She pointed towards an opening that showed a larger room behind it, and they walked through.

It was a big space, with a high, arched ceiling and there were quite a lot of people inside. Dev looked around and stuck close to Jess, following her across the space to a rock desk with three or four women behind it. She paused, and almost jerked when she saw the collars around their necks, not expecting at all to find fellow bio alts here.

“Good day.” One of the women greeted them. “What do you wish?”

It wasn't a set she knew well, Dev realized. They were perhaps ten standard years older than she was, slim and tall with uniformly pretty faces. They reminded her just a little of Gigi.

“Private bath.” Jess said. “With the works.” She pulled out two big chits and set them down.

“This way.” The girl picked up two large, folded pieces of fabric and bowed in their direction then walked behind the desk to one of a set of doors behind it. They followed her, and she opened the door to one of the rooms and offered them the fabric. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks.” Jess ducked inside, and waited for Dev to join her, then straightened up as the door closed behind them leaving them alone.

Dev wasn't sure where to look first. The initial thing she realized was that the air was very warm, and moist. It bathed her face and she blinked into it, smelling a rich, mineral scent as it entered her lungs. “Um.”

“Um.” Jess went over to one of the four stone beds and put the towel down on it. Across from them was a big misshapen pool with steps cut into it, full of water that had steam rising off the top. “Wasn't going to indulge in this but what the hell.”

“What is it?” Dev went over to a second couch and put her own wrap down, jerking back as she touched the top. “Oh.It's hot.”

“Yeah.” Jess sat down on hers, then lay back letting out a small groan as the heat penetrated her body. “Good a place as any to hide for a little while.”

“Are we doing that?” Dev sat down on the stone, pleasantly surprised when the warmth penetrated the pants she was wearing.

“Uh huh. When Charles gives you advice, it's a good idea to take it.” Jess said. “I'm not really sure what he was trying to tell me but it's clear he doesn't want trouble.”

“I see.” Dev got up and went to the pool, kneeling down and putting her hand in it. “Oh.. this is really warm.”

“I sure hope so given what I just paid them for it.” Her partner remarked dryly. “At least we can enjoy ourselves before we go out side and probably have to fight our way to the boat and escape.

Dev came over and sat down on the edge of her stone bed. “Is that what's going to happen?”

“Probably.” Jess let her hand rest on Dev's thigh. “Someone's hunting me. That's why Charles sent us down here. He doesn't want trouble and he knows if whoever's hunting me finds me there'll be lots of that.”

“I see.”

“So he's got local info, but not current intel from our side, since he didn't know about you.” Jess said. “So we'll get our splurge and then get back to the boat. With what you ordered so far, we can get into the science center.” She studied Dev's concerned expression. “Don't worry, Dev. We'll get out of this.”

“I didn't expect to find those of my kind here.” Dev said. “I thought Doctor Dan said the people over here didn't have them, but I know that set.”

Jess looked at her. “This place is different.” She said. “A lot of cred comes through here, most of it out of spec for both sides. You got enough cred, you can have anything you want.” Her hand warmed suddenly as Dev's dropped on top of it. “It's the old story of humanity, Dev. The haves and the have nots. Charles and his family have plenty – they've run this place for generations.”

“I dont think I understand.” Dev said, apologetically.

“Your bio station is on our side.” Jess said. “But Charles offered them enough to get them to give him what he wants.”

“He's not on our side.” Dev clarified.

“He's not really on any side.” Her partner said. “He's glad to suck in all of us ready to spend money on stuff we can't get anywhere but here, legally.”

Dev frowned. “I really don't think I really understand.”

“Don't worry about it.” Jess stretched herself out, savoring the feel of the heated stone leeching into her body. “Just enjoy yourself, Dev. We don't get this kind of treatment often. Give e a little bit to warm these old bones and we'll go in the pool.” She went on. “Then we can get some steam, and a rub and get our hair cut.”

That all sounded very strange. Not unpleasant, but strange. Dev looked around. “It's nice to be warm.” She concluded. “Is that why the walls were hot?”

“The walls were hot because we're in a volcanic cone.” Her partner said, placidly. “Charles' family led a bunch of renegades from the other side and found this place a long way back. They built it up.. word has it that they catered to pirates and outlaws first, then after the market built up, word got out and anyone with chits came here”

“I see.”

“We always thought it was funny, on our side. Perfect capitalism.” She patted the stone bench at her side. “Lay down. Enjoy the heat.”

Dev did, settling on her back next to her partner, feeling the heat from the stone but also from Jess as she felt her body relax. “That does feel good.” She regarded the lamps in the ceiling, which had come on and were bathing them. “Is that sunlight replacement?”

“It is.” Jess said. “One of the few places out here you can get it out here.” Reluctantly, she sat up and started taking her clothes off “Might as well take advantage of it.”

“What do the fisher people do?” Dev undid the suspenders on her outfit and slipped out of the pants, then sat down to unlace her boots. “Scan didin't pick up anything on the boat that could do that.”

“They don't.” Jess left her borrowed clothing folded neatly on the couch and went to the pool, walking slowly in and then rolling over with a deep, heartfelt sigh. “Damn that feels good.” She relaxed in the hot water, grimacing a little when it touched the puncture wound she'd paid scant attention to since their arrival. “Ow.”

Dev joined her a minute later, holding her hand up over the pool's surface as steam gathered against her skin. Then she moved closer and examined the wound. “It seems to be all right.”

Jess regarded her from half closed eyes. “Like the pool?”

Dev sat down next to her, thinking about that. The heat did feel good. She'd been so cold for so long on this mission, just sititng here in this hot water was letting her body fully relax for the first time in days. The rough rock felt a little abrasive against her bare skin, but the bouyancy of the water kept it from being uncomfortable. “So this is from the volcano?”

“The heat is.” Jess let her head rest against the rock. “The water comes from the ocean and they pipe it through the rock. They couldn't afford to mechanically do it, well.. “ She lifted a hand. “Maybe Charles could, now. I don't know.”

“So, people come here, and they give them credits so they can sit in the water?”

“Yup.”

Dev pondered that. 'So all you get for that is feeling nice?”

“Yup.”

“That seems odd.”

Jess chuckled. “Yeah I guess it does. But I guess... too.. it's a little piece of how it used to be. Kind of like the stuff we do, the dinner thing in the citadel. Things people remember their grandparents remembering about the old days.

Like the place Doctor Dan had taken her, Dev realized. The place where they had eaten, up in the top of the station The scientists could easily have had that served in their offices, or in the natural born eating place but they chose to put a table and chairs up where you could see the stars and have it given to you that way. “I get it.”

“You do?”

Dev nodded. She stretched her legs out and crossed them, leaning her elbows on the little shelf they were sitting against. “It's nice.”

“It is nice.” Jess picked up a piece of sea sponge resting on the shelf and half turned. “Here, see if you like this.” She dunked the sponge and started rubbing it along her pilot's arm, not missing the slight jerk as Dev reacted. “That's supposed to make your skin feel good. I never really was much for it myself since I always came here by myself and you can't reach everywhere.”

“That feels very interesting.” Dev said. “It reminds me of the flash rad cleaning we did in the mornings in the creche. It took layers of skin off.”

Jess stopped and eyed her. “Is that good or bad?”

Dev smiled and held her hand out. “Let me see if you like it.” She moved around and got behind Jess, applying the sponge to her partners' back. She could see the old injury there, still red and little swollen and she carefully avoided the spot. There were other scars there too, one that went right across her spine from right to left, old and tense. “You were hurt a lot.”

Jess exhaled. “Yes.” She leaned against the wall, savoring the sensation of the sponge scouring her skin. “I take too many chances, they tell me.”

“Why?” Dev was actually enjoying herself, exploring the storied skin in front of her.

“Why did they tell me that or why do I do it?” Jess put her head down on her folded arms. “I don't know why I do it. I just get into things and what happens to me doesn't matter, I guess. Jason once told me that's why I was as successful as I've been because I always go all in. I don't hold back.”

“But you get hurt.” Dev started down the backs of her legs. “I hope that doesn't happen too much. I don't like to see you in discomfort.”

Jess remained silent for a bit, the water of the pool lapping gently at her back. “You really care about what happens to me?” She asked suddenly, turning her head and looking back over her shoulder.

“Of course.” Dev answered placidly, as she scrubbed her way back up Jess's back and over her the tops of her arms. “I”ve never cared about anyone as much as I do about you.”

The matter of fact honesty of it surprised Jess. She had no doubt at all that what Dev was saying was true, or as true as she knew it to be but it touched her unexpectedly in a deep way. Did she feel the same way? She could scarcely remember what caring about someone meant, after that last visit home.

How did she feel about Dev?

“Does that cause you discomfort?” Dev asked. “I hope not.”

“No.” Jess finally answered, with a faint smile. “It makes me feel good because I think I care about you a lot too.” She rolled over and put her hands on Dev's knees, studying the compact profile outlined in the dim golden light of rad. “I don't think I've ever felt like this about anyone else before.”

Dev regarded her with a pleased, if puzzled expression. “Is that good or bad?” She reflected Jess's earlier question back at her.

“I don't know.” Jess responded in a soft voice. “I don't think I”m suppose to care about anyone. At least, that's what my mother told me.” It still stung, that last meeting. That back turned, that door closed. There hadn't been any animosity in it, no dislike, just a kindly worded dismissal of her as something no longer part of the core of what was left of their family.

“We can't care about you, Jess. You're lost to us. You belong to them now.”

Surprising, how much that had hurt. She remembered the tears, and the terrible constriction in her throat, as she'd turned and walked away, heading back to the transport center. Back to the citadel.

Her brothers had always kept in touch though. Paid to have an in with Interforce, after all.

“Well.” Dev put her hands on Jess's shoulders. “They never told me that. So I do care about you. I want to care about you. It makes me feel really good.”

Jess felt a smile forming on her face. So she did want to care about Dev. Maybe it was wrong and maybe it was dangerous, like they'd told her, but she hadn't gotten to where she was by listening to anyone, now had she? “C'mere.” She reached out and took hold of Dev's waist and pulled her forward.

Pressing body to body she wrapped her arms around Dev and hugged her wholeheartedly, letting herself indulge in a rare happiness. “It's good, Dev. It's very good.”

Dev was aware of a pungent moment of delight. She returned the hug with enthusiasm, and then as Jess released her, she backed off so she could look at her partner's face.

It was so nice, to see that smile.

She felt like she could look at it for a long time and not get tired of seeing it. She smiled back and saw a distinct twinkle appear in Jess's pale eyes. As she exhaled, she could sense a shift inside her, just a bit of settling that made her less of a stranger in a strange land and giving her a sense of belonging.

Strange and odd and endearing. The beginnings of a partnership in truth instead of just in a name.

Jess stood and held her hand out. “Let's go finish our pampering. Put that towel around your neck so we don't freak anyone out, and I'll show you what a steam bath is.”

Dev had almost forgotten about her collar. She followed Jess out of the pool and took the smaller piece of fabric, wrapping it around her throat before she followed Jess through a small hallway at the back of the chamber into another one that smelled more strongly of the smokey scent and was full of vapor.

It was dark. She felt sweat break out on her skin in a sensation both interesting and slightly uncomfortable. She felt short of breath. “Wow.”

“Hot, huh?”

“Very.”

“Want it to get hotter?”

Dev thought about that. “Not really. It's a bit hard to breathe now.”

Jess chuckled, and took her hand, both their skins slippery with sweat. She led her further, past a heat source that almost made it unbearable, then on to another hallway where it cooled down.

Dev exhaled in relief. “That was interesting.” She commented in a neutral tone.

“Didn't like it, huh?”

“I liked the pool better.”

They moved into another chamber, this one with set of pipes in the ceiling. Jess waved her hand and a moment later they were drenched in cold water, making Dev inhale so sharply she nearly bit her tongue. “Yipes!” She got her hands up to protect her head just as the water turned off, and the sound of it was replaced by Jess's chuckling.

“Better?” The agent asked. “You said you were hot.”

“Brr.” Dev shook herself hard, spattering droplets from her body. “I didn't expect that!”

Jess started laughing. “It's supposed to be like that. You get hot, then you cool off.” She regarded her pilot, who was standing there next to her, dripping with cold seawater, drenched hair half in her eyes. She reached out and pushed the damp blond locks back and watched an abashed grin appear.

So adorable.

Jess leaned forward and kissed her, tasting the saltwater on her lips. And she's all mine. She pulled back and lightly rubbed noses with Dev, then straightened up. “Okay, let's go dry off. Feel like getting your hair cut?”

Dev ran her hand through hers as she followed Jess through yet another hallway. “I don't know. In the creche we just had to let the sets who were being trained for that work on us.”

“Oh. That's sounds like fun.”

“Not really. There's not much programming for that they just have to figure it out.”

“Oh.”

“I don't really look that good with most of it shorn.”

Jess put her arm around Dev and laughed. “Me either. But I dont' have teaching to blame for it, we all got scalped for basic.”

“Oh. Well.”

“I'll show you pictures when we get home.”

**

“Is this length all right?”

Jess glanced in the three part mirror in the tight alcove she was sitting in. “Sure.” She said, after a moment. Her hair tended to be unruly at the best of times. “Try and get it shorter here.” She tugged the lengths near her ears, then leaned back and let the bio alt work, as she turned her attention back to her partner.

Dev was sitting quietly on an stool nearby, having finished with her turn under the scissors. Dressed in her fisherman's overalls and sweater, her burnished blond hair neatly trimmed and layered, she was just so appealing to Jess's eyes it was hard to look away from her.

The overalls fit snugly around her slim form, and the sweater with it's high collar framed her face neatly. The new cut seemed to lengthen her jaw a little and the light in the parlor they were in brought out the highlights in her hair and the intensity of the color of her eyes.

So damn cute. Jess watched her lift her head and meet her eyes, a grin appearing and compounding the adorable factor. She grinned back, idly wondering how Dev felt being here, being catered to by these other bio alts, who had fluttered around her so attentively.

Was it strange? Certainly Dev seemed relaxed, one boot hiked up on a brace of the stool, her elbow resting on her knee. She was watching the bio alt work on Jess, but every few seconds, her eyes would drift back to Jess's face, and that little twinkle would show, and damn it, she felt like melting into a puddle.

Weirdest ass feeling of her life. "What in the hell is wrong with me?"

"Ma'am?" The little bio alt snipping her hair paused and drew back. "Is it wrong?" She asked anxiously.

"Nah, fine. I'm just talking to myself." Jess waved her on, shifting a little in the chair. "G'wan."

The girl went back to her work. "Almost finished." She said, softly. "Soon soon."

Soon soon. Jess was getting restless, her instincts now starting to drive her on from their hiding place and she had to force herself not to fidget when the old style, hammered scissors tickled her temple. Her mind started to shuffle through routes to the docks, wondering if they had any space at all to pick up anything else before the got off the island.

"Okay?" The bio alt asked, stepping back. "Good?"

Jess turned in the chair and and studied her head, outlined in white lights. "What do you think, Dev?"

"I think you look beautiful." Dev responded straightforwardly. "Is that what you were asking?"

Jess felt herself blush, the heat on her cheeks surprising her. She found she couldn't either meet her own eyes in the mirror, nor Dev's eyes in her reflection and so she just cleared her throat. "Something like that." She muttered. "Yeah that's fine." She added, glancing at the bio alt. "It's good."

The girl looked relieved.

Dev regarded her reflection in the mirror thoughtfully, as she waited for Jess to get up from the low chair behind her. She rather liked the way the bio alt had trimmed her hair, neatly layering it back from her face and making it a bit shorter. It fell around the high collar of her sweater, and she found herself smiling a little as she watched the blush fade from Jess's cheeks.

She really was beautiful.

"Nice work." Jess complimented the hair cutter. "Takes some talent to make this mop look like something."

Dev turned, watching the bio alt next to Jess blush and stammer. She really done well for her partner, Dev decided, Jess's long, dark hair was cut back off her face, the slight wave in it now framing her angular features and shortened to just past her shoulders. "It's very nice." She agreed. "I like it."

Jess stood up and ran her fingers through her hair, then fished a chit from her pocket and handed it to the cutter. "Here. Go get you and your buddies a treat."

The cutter grinned, her hazel eyes lighting up as she tucked the chit away. "Agent." She bowed respectfully at Jess. "Tech, it was a great honor." She ducked her head at Dev. "Have a profitable day."

"We'll try." Jess put her hand on Dev's back and guided her towards a ramp leading to a large door. "I think we've wasted enough time to let the goons wander off. Let's try and get back to the boat."

"Okay." Dev willingly trailed along after her, fastening her jacket as the door slid open, bringing a gust of wet, cold air against them. They were let out into a small alleyway, which was lined with beautifully carved stone walls, stained with old green patches. "Did you want to say goodbye to your friend?"

Jess glanced at her. “Who? Oh Charles you mean.” She lifted a hand and let it drop. “He's not a friend. All he was doing was making sure I was out of the way for a while so the market didn't get messed up.”

“I see.”

Jess led the way to a small metal gate and paused, cocking her head and listening. Then she turned and lifted her hand to Dev's collar only to stop in mid motion.

“I took it off.” Dev pulled her hand out of her pocket and displayed her insignia, then put it back in its hiding spot.

Jess patted her on the cheek, then she gently sorted Dev's newly cut hair. “I like this.” She said. “What did you think of that place?”

Dev considered that briefly. “It was interesting.”

“In a good or bad way?” Jess went to the gate again, and cautiously examined the area. “Okay, now stick by me, Devvie. I've got a feeling we're not out of trouble yet.” She eased the metal open and stepped down the cut in stone stairwell to a lower alleyway that was equally empty and equally silent with Dev practically latched onto her coat.

“I liked parts of it.” Dev said, in a quiet voice. “Not the cold part so much.”

Jess chuckled. “Sorry.” She led the way down the aisle, her ears focused forward since the slot alleys were blind and she wasn't sure she wasn't going to be ambushed out here.

“The hot couch was nice, and the pool.”

Jess in general agreed with that. Though she'd been known to plunge into the cold sea water under the citadel and never complained about it. She reached up and touched the wall she was walking near, feeling the heat in it penetrate her skin.

Still empty. She felt more than a little conspicuous. A soft rumble of thunder sounded over head, and she tugged her jacket neck a touch closer, very aware of the lack of weapons on her as the maze of stone passageways stretched out in front of them.

The directions were easy. You headed down from the hill. She knew if she continued down the ripples of lava lined with coral she would eventually get back to the market but there was no easy way to run if a team came at them and it was easy to get lost in the maze.

She heard a buzz echo softly up to her, and slowed, coming to a crossroads and pausing before she went through it. She stood just shy of the opening, and went to tight focus, holding her hands out to stop Dev from passing her.

Dev had no intention of passing her, however. She tucked herself behind Jess's tall profile and waited, watching in fascination as her partner's ears twitched and moved, the edges cupping a little as her eyes closed in concentration.

What was she listening to? Dev could hear the soft sound of voices down the way a little, but it was just a formless noise, without any distinguishing characteristics.

“Okay.” Jess lead them forward, through the crossroads and down a slanted pathway, whose steps were cut with the slant. “Careful.” She indicated the path. “Gets slippery in the rain, and it's all downhill from here. You slide, you end up on your ass in the middle of the market.”

“I see.”

“Hope you don't.” Her partner responded. “Not looking to be the life of the party this time around.”

Dev followed her in silence briefly, as they neared the lower levels and the walls started to get wider. “Does that mean you experienced this ass thing?” She ventured, as they went around a slight curve and could see the market below.

Jess cleared her throat. “Let's just say I'm glad I was undercover.” She let her awareness sweep over the row they were exiting into, waiting to see if her senses picked up anything dangerous. Dangerous outside the obvious, obviously. But the row was clothing, not very exciting and the straggle of people browsing didn't make her twitch.

She fastened her new jacket up as the slight fog turned to a fine mist, blinking a little in reflex as the moisture impacted her eyeballs. The garment mostly covered her jumpsuit, and she attracted little attention as they moved through the stalls, surrounded by a sparse crowd of mostly lookers.

There was, she detected, a hint of desperation in the sellers. They watched her and Dev wander by with hungry eyes, and she tried not to linger anywhere suspecting the merchants would mob them if they slowed down. The stalls were covered with stone roofs, but the mist drove in a little sideways, dampening everything inside them.

Dev let her eyes drift from side to side, absorbing everything. Most of the merchants focused their attention on Jess, her taller, more striking profile drawing their eyes, and that left her free to watch them watch Jess, seeing the disappointment when her partner passed them by.

That made sense to her. She knew she would not be happy if Jess was ignoring her.

Dev paused, and reran that in her head. Wait, what? As a bio alt, what in the world was she doing going around thinking things like that? Jess had no obligation to pay attention to her. With a frown, she looked a passing stall, finding herself facing a booth full of colorful jumpsuits that had a soft plush lining to them. She slowed down and studied the nearest, imagining how it would feel to have that warmth next to her skin. “Ah.”

Jess had gotten a few steps ahead, but apparently heard her soft grunt and stopped, turning to see what she was looking at, then retracing her path back. “Like those?” She glanced at the merchant, who was watching them with wary hopefulness. The jumpers were cute, not her style, but she could readily picture Dev's slight frame tucked into one.

She reached out and felt the sleeve, which was tough but soft to the touch. “Whats this made of?” She asked the seller.

“Silk from topside.” The man responded. “Inside's synth wool. Kelp mix.”

Dev felt the garment, and gave the lining a wistful look. “It appears warm.” She said. “Do you like this color?” She studied the fabric, which seemed to shimmer from red to purple as the light hit it.

“On you, absolutely.” Jess removed a small, square piece of metal from her pocket and handed it to the vendor. “Wrap it up.”

The man glanced at it, then at her. “Want to know the price?”

“No.” Jess smiled faintly. “I don't.”

“Wait.” Dev held up her card. “What about this?”

“Put it away.” Jess told her in a quiet voice. “I'll explain later.”

Obediently, Dev did stuck the card back in her pocket, vaguely aware of discomfort she didn't quite know the source of.

The merchant touched his forehead and took the square, turning to put it into a battered old comp next to the back shelf. Then after it made a small booping sound, he handed it back to her. “Agent.” He said. “Pleasure.”

“All mine.” Jess watched him fold the garment up and make a bundle of it, which he then handed to Dev with a slight bow. Then she clapped her partner on the back. “Let's go.”

They got to the end of the row and turned right, going down the cross aisle until they reached the last row, the outer ring of the market that would bring them back to the docking area. Jess walked a little more slowly now, letting her senses extend out as they passed the ratty stalls at the shoreline, smaller and ruder, full of scroungers who were just trying to sell anything they found.

Hard life. Jess didn't pause at any of them. But not any harder than the seaweed harvesting that her family members did. She was just distracting Dev from seeing the seal skulls on sale when her warning senses tingled and she reacted instinctively, pulling her partner to one side and going flat against the wall between two stalls, half turning and putting her arms around her.

Dev found her view blocked but didn't mind. Jess's body blocked the misty rain, and it was nice to be pressed against her. “What's wrong?”

“Just hold still.” Jess said, in a low mutter “Some guys coming past us I don't want to see.” She kept her back turned to the passing crowd, resting her head against Dev's as they regarded each other at close quarters. After a moment's pause, Jess ducked her head a little and they kissed.

It was like the whole damn island faded out for a minute. Jess felt her situational awareness slip, as her body reacted and Dev's hand slid up to gently touch her face. She literally forgot where she was, focusing intently on the tingle in her guts and how intoxicating it felt to hear the soft sound of passion that escaped her partner.

Then the wind picked up, and the surroundings faded back in and she lifted her head a little, rubbing noses with Dev as she gazed half lidded into her eyes. “Look behind me.”

Dev shifted a little, and straightened enough to be able to see over Jess's shoulder.

“Anyone standing at those stalls, just browsing?”

Dev blinked a few times. “No.” She answered after a pause. “It's raining harder. People are going under shelter.”

“No one sitting on a crate, just loitering?”

“No.”

“Good.” Jess leaned in and kissed her again, this time at least listening behind her. She heard only the faint scuff of seal hide boots and the low voices of the merchants, no hint of a government issued heel among them. “Okay.” She finally paused and exhaled. “Let's move on.”

“Do we have to?” Dev asked, in a straightforward way. “We have a covering over us.”

Jess glanced up and smiled. “Much as I'd love to just stand here and kiss you until dark, we need to get outta here.” She said, regretfully. She casually put her arm over Dev's shoulders and made a natural turn to the left, her eyes flickering quickly over their surroundings but finding them as innocuous as Dev described them to be. With a faint sigh of relief, she started slowly down the path, keeping her arm around her partner.

She'd been damn sure she'd seen a pair of spooks. They'd popped into her peripheral vision a little behind them on the path, but now there was no sign of the bastards either before or behind them. Had she been mistaken?

Might have. Jess exhaled, resisting the urge to reach up and rub her neck to ease the headache that had started to throb in her skull. She was looking forward to getting back on the boat, and back on the water, away from the island, and the other side.

Just her and Dev for a while again.

Jess felt the slight jar through her boots and she paused, pulling Dev to a halt as well. She made a complete turn, then she started forward again, moving faster. “C'mon Devvie. Didn't like that noise.”

“Was it a big boom?” Dev hazarded a guess.

“Something like that.” Jess muttered as they reached the dock road and headed for their berth. The rain started coming down harder, almost seeming like it was chasing them as they moved quickly across the lava rock path.

Halfway across the dock, Jess felt the vibration under her feet again and she saw the chop in the harbor pick up. “Uh oh.” She grabbed Dev's arm and sped up into a lope. “Move move move.”

Dev wasn't sure what was going on, but she heard the urgency in Jess's voice and she picked up her pace and ended up running next to Jess down the dock towards their boat just as the boom of footsteps behind the and a deep, rolling vibration rattled them both.

Jess risked a glance behind them as they reached the boat and she vaulted on board, snaking one foot out to kick the retaining clasp. The dock behind them was full of running figures, all heading for different boats as a long, low howl started to rise from the market.

“What is that?” Dev asked as she scrambled up the ladder to the control space.

“Warning.” Jess ignored the stairs and jumped upward, grabbing the railing and pulling herself up and over it to trigger the hatch a hair before Dev got up to the top steps. She hauled ass inside and went to the comms unit, as Dev tossed her package onto the shelf near the door and slid into the captain's seat.

“Dock dock.” Jess barked into the comms.

Dev flipped the caps off the engine controls and started them, studying the readouts as she felt the rumble start underfoot. She scanned comp, reading the logs since they'd left. “The things arrived, Jess.”

“Doesn't matter right now.” Jess clicked the comms. “Dock!”

“Standby' The comms answered harshly. “All undock, standby for underway, release release.”

Dev felt the boat start to drift and she confirmed they were loose from the pier, as were lots of other boats around them. She could hear the alert going off louder now, and she sensed a vibration in the air, that tickled her ears uncomfortably.

“Get us outta here, Dev. Get clear of the island north and go as far as you can without losing visual.” Jess got away from the comms and headed for the door. “I'll secure the goodies. Try not to tilt up too much I don't want to slide my ass into the water.”

“Okay.” Dev said, leaning forward a little as she started to take the engines online. “I would hate to be responsible for your ass getting wet.” She added, as her partner left the room and headed down to the deck. “Except then you would probably take your clothes off, and that's always interesting.”

She pointed the boat towards the entrance to the docks, trying hard to steer clear of the other boats doing likewise. It appeared everyone was trying hard to get away from the island but she had the advantage of bigger engines and she scooted the boat up to the front and headed for the gap.

A brief glance at the console showed her views of the back deck, and she spotted Jess working amongst the stacks of boxes that had appeared in the cleared area. She reassured herself that her partner was safe, then she focused on the route, giving the engines more power as she cleared the entrance and was heading out towards the two big gates.

The waves had come up and she felt the boat being shoved back and forth as she fought the steering, trying to keep the bow on course as she felt the surge of the water. The rain was coming down even harder now, and she heard a series of booms behind her that she wondered were thunder.

It sounded too regular though, so she looked up at comp, searching for Jess and stopping in motion as she spotted a deep, black cloud rolling down from the island towards the water.

Towards them. Dev's eyebrows shot up, and she reacted instinctively – shoving the throttles to full forward and triggering the alarm for the deck. The boat dug through the water and picked up speed, coming up to plane just as they approached the gatehouse.

It was open, and the guards were no where in sight as she powered through, hearing the roar of engines behind her and then something else. It was a deep, uneven rumble, reminding her just a bit of the sound of the space shuttle's engines when it had landed her downside.

She didn't think it was a shuttle though. The gates flashed by her and she took the course Jess had told her to, north and as she curved that way, she saw other boats flashing by, and going the other direction.

A moment later the hatch burst open and Jess bounded inside, slamming the metal door behind her. “Son of a bitch!”

Dev evaluated the statement, and decided based on what she knew about the words, that it wasn't addressed to her. “Did you see that cloud”

“Did I see it?” Jess came into her field of vision, her skin smudged with black. “You got me out from under it just in time. Get to the outer buoy and slow down, then bring her around so we can see the show.”

Dev had no idea what that meant. But she aimed for the buoy, the outer marker of the carefully drawn lanes and once they'd passed it she brought the nose around in a turn, facing back the way they'd come.

And then her jaw dropped in astonishment. The island was covered in a deep black cloud, and as she watched, it was bisected with a loud, sudden blast that shot debris far up into the air. “Oh!”

Jess came to stand next to her. “Look at that sucker go.”

“What is that?” Dev asked, almost breathless. “It's amazing!”

“It's the volcano.” Her partner responded promptly. “Goes off sometimes. They never know when.” She shook her head. “Hope they got everyone under cover.... ah, let's get moving before that ejecta gets here.” Jess pointed at the roiling cloud heading their way.

Dev gunned the engines and moved them into a turn, checking comp as she did so. “Jess? Should be move away from those too?”

Jess leaned over and saw what she was looking at. Three big boats were heading their way, making a beeline for them, and looking like the bad end of a piece of business. “Oh yea.” She said. “Finally figured out who I was, huh boys?”

“Are they bad?” Dev got them back up into plane and moving.

“Oh yeah.”

The cloud caught them, and Dev winced at the thunder of rattling crashes she heard all around her. “Wow.”

“Faster.”

“I don't think it goes any faster, Jess.” Dev said, apologetically.

“Make it.”

“Um.”

“Or find someplace to hide us.”

**

“They still there?” Jess stuck her head out of the hatch and felt the wind from their passage buffet her with startling impact. “Damn it.” The three chasers were plowing through the mixed waves behind them, inching up closer from when she'd looked a minute or two before. “Dev, they're catching up to us.”

Dev studied her console. The throttles for the engines were pushed as forward as they went. “The wind is too strong.” She told her partner. “It's making us slow.”

“Yeah but they have the same problem.”

“Not exactly.” The bio alt commented. “This vessel is higher then those are above the water.”

“And?” Jess came to her side.

“It's a higher profile against the wind. More for it to push against.”

Jess considered that, then made a face. “I don't see that changing anytime soon.”

“No.” Dev agreed.

Her partner sighed. “Okay, let me get the guns out.” She said. “Be right back.”

Dev nodded, then she turned back to the controls, settling herself into the chair and searching the scan intently. There wasn't anything on the horizon for them to hide behind, and her portable comp showed very deep and very cold water beneath them.

The boat was performing as well as it could. It was a fishing boat after all, she reasoned, and not something designed for running away from things. A glance at comp showed the three boats starting to split apart a little, two of them moving out and starting to aim on either side of them.

They would try to get around them, Dev thought, and maybe make them stop. She wished again that they were in the carrier, with it's much greater abilities and she suspected probably Jess did as well. But the carrier was far behind them, so she had to find a way to make this thing work better.

Difficult, since she wasn't entirely sure of how it worked at all. The programming only went so far.

She went back to her scanner, setting it to search for obstructions. Then she curled her hands around the rudder controls and hunched forward a little, as though her posture could make the boat go faster. The waves were getting rougher, and she winced as the bow slammed into one, jarring her entire body.

Even her ears hurt. "Wow." Dev hoped Jess had been somewhere safe when that had happened. She glanced in reflex at scan, but the back deck was empty. Frowning, she reset her scanner for internal and bio and relaxed a little once it showed her partner's wiremap in the common space.

Then she spotted a second wiremap, in the hallway heading for her and her heart jumped into her throat as she scrambled for comms. "Jess!" She got the comms open. "Someone is approaching you."

"Tac." Jess uttered back. "Secure."

Dev got up and went to the hatch, hesitating before she locked the wheel on it, shoving the metal bar Jess had left next to it into the mechanism. Then she bolted back to the controls and put her hands on them, giving a cursory glance at the waves as she focused on the scanner instead.

She could see Jess now in outline, the attitude on her body completely changed as she moved across the chamber and approached the inner door, the scanner picking up the weapons on her body and the big blaster she had in her hands. The other wiremap was approaching with equal caution, and...

"Tac." Dev triggered the comms. "Armed."

"Ack." Jess responded immediately. "Secure?"

"Ack." Dev confirmed. She wrenched her attention from scan and looked out at the water, noting a line of darker clouds on the horizon. It was already raining hard, but she reasoned maybe the storm front might afford some kind of distraction and she angled the bow slightly to the right and headed for it.

A quick look told her the other boats were now really gaining, though, and she felt like she was being torn in pieces, one part of her demanding a tight focus on Jess, and another part searching through the boat's controls to see if there was something she could do to speed it up.

It was uncomfortable. Dev watched anxiously as she saw Jess on scan take up a position behind the common room's table, then she saw the hatch opening and the intruder emerge. The scan picked up an energy flare then, and there was more motion than it could resolve.

Dev felt like bolting for the door. Only the programming hammered into her kept her at the controls, and the knowledge that Jess knew far better how to handle the threat below than she had any hope to. She swept the console again, then focused on the small section that showed the condition of the big tanks as their readings were flashing.

Hm.

A shudder caught her attention, and she looked quickly outside to find the enemy boats even with them, and one of them shooting projectiles.

Oh, that was not good. She angled the rudders, sending the boat careening towards the boat shooting at them, feeling the stresses on her body as it listed over, blaster fire boiling the water just past her bow. She cut back in the other direction as the other boat moved to avoid them, wishing she had more speed to work with.

If only the boat were more agile. She paused, then her eyes tracked up to the console again. Without over thinking it too much she reached up and uncapped two switches, putting her fingers on them and then depressing them firmly.

At once, the boat nearly ripped itself out of her hands as she heard a rumbling sound that vibrated through the hull and nearly sent her vision blurry. The engines churned and she felt the boat buck under her, as she tried to get it back under control.

On the bright side, the crazed motion made both sets of blasters misfire and the two chase boats closest to her peeled off, arcing around to try and come at them again. Dev didn't dare look at the scanner as she turned the boat in a tight circle, then powered the engines back up and put them into plane heading for the storm.

But this time, the boat surged forward with a good deal more speed, and rode higher on the waves, unburdened by the water in the fishtanks at the aft. The gauges showed them going faster, and after a few minutes, the other boats started to fall behind.

Dev made sure they were going to hold course, then she turned her attention to the scanner.

Both wire maps were gone. Her heart started pounding hard and she reset the scan, widening it out.

Nothing. She felt panic start to take her, and she got up from the chair, about to shut the engines down when she heard a knock at the hatch.

A knock. At the hatch.

For a moment, she froze, Then she responded to the drive of her programming and grabbed the scanner, tight focusing it and pointing it at the entrance, waiting for it to resolve. “Hurry.” She instructed the device.

“Hey. It's cold out here!” A voice penetrated the steel. “Open up!”

Dev put the scanner down and scooted over, pulling the bar out and working the latch. It popped open and Jess ducked inside, dripping wet and breathing hard.

She took a step back and cleared space, as her partner shut the door and leaned back against it, her face a little pale.

“Are you okay?” They both asked at the same time.

Jess smiled briefly, and exhaled. “Drive.” She indicated the console.

Dev got back in the chair and put her hands back on the controls. “I let the water out of the animal tank.” She said. “It seems to have made us faster.”

“Oh.” Jess trudged over and sat down on the stool next to her. “Is that what that was.”

“Those other boats are behind us now.” Dev confirmed. “They were shooting at us. Trying to stop us I think.”

“Yeah, they were.” Jess agreed. “Not for the reason you'd think though.” She flexed one hand which now in the light showed dark bruises. “So you want the good news or the bad news?”

Dev eyed her doubtfully. “I don't know. The bad thing I guess, if we have to do something about it.”

“Ah.” Jess pushed her hood down and ruffled her hair. “Bad news is, I just offed one of the other side in a pretty ugly way.”

“Oh.”

“That's why those boats were chasing us.” Jess said. “They were his buddies. Pain in the ass part is, I did it by accident. Boat tipped and I went flying into him and he went flying into the water outflow. Ripped him to pieces.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So that was a cock up. Didn't even get to ask him what he was looking for.” Jess sighed. “On the other hand he was about to blow my head off so I guess it worked out.”

“You guess?”

Jess gave her a wry smile. “He was good.” She admitted. “He was kicking my ass. I was flat on my back for too damn long after that last botched cluster.” She rested her elbows on her thighs and rocked her head from side to side to loosen tense muscles there.

Dev glanced at scan, and sure enough the other boats were nothing more than a spot on the horizon, though they were still being chased.. “I see.” She said. “So what is the good part?”

Jess extended her hand and opened it. “Deck's full of black diamonds.” She said.

Dev took the item and inspected it. A crystal the size of half her hand rested in her palm, glittering and reflecting the light in the control room inside it. She blinked. “Wow. That is interesting.” She admitted. “But why is it good?”

“It's good because I'm gonna have them cut something pretty from this one.” Jess said. “And because we can use the rest to buy anything we want from those scientists. We're home free.” She got up and stripped out of her drenched jacket, grimacing a little as it shed water everywhere. “So to speak.”

Dev looked at the floor, then back at her. “I see.”

“So that's the good thing.” Jess came up next to her and leaned against the console, studying the view out the window. “Good idea to head for the storm line. Once we're up there, we'll see if we can find an ice field we can dodge around and maybe we'll lose em.”

Dev put the pretty rock down and reached over to close her fingers around Jess's hand, feeling the chill in it. “Should you get dry?” She said. “It will be a while to get to the storm.”

Jess straightened up and nodded. “Yeah and I need some kack. Want some?” She waited for Dev to nod, then she stood up and patted her on the shoulder. “Good job, Dev. I wouldn't have thought to dump the water.”

“Thank you.”

Jess went to the back of the control area, where she'd stored their gear. She unsnapped the catches on her jumpsuit and stripped it down to her waist, picking up a piece of cloth from her pack and drying her skin with it. The rain hadn't penetrated the fabric, but the thunderous wash of tank water had, and she felt rubbed raw from the power of it.

Too damn close. She examined her shoulder, but it seemed to be healing and by some odd luck she hadn't taken any more serious damage to anything but her ego when by rights she should have been fish bait herself halfway down to the bottom by now.

She peeled off her jumpsuit and traded it for a dry one, very glad to get out of the half water filled boots she was squishing around in. It felt good to be dry, and the warmth of the control room was slowly seeping into her, their sojourn in the spa already just a half misty memory in her mind.

She went to the portable kack dispenser she'd brought up to the control room and started it brewing, resting her hands on the counter and listening to the drone of the engines. “They gaining on us?”

“No, it doesn't appear so.” Dev responded.

“Good.” Jess considered their options. They would have to lose the chase boats before she could even think about turning east, maybe in the ice pack. She'd make them think she was on a run home, and then maybe..

“Jess?” Dev called softly. “We're being hailed.”

Jess rolled her eyes and walked over. “Assholes think we're going to answer?” She said. “Give me a break.”

'It's not them.” Dev handed her the ear cup. “It's Base 10.” She said. “It's being relayed through the carrier.”

Jess felt a shock jerk through her. She fumbled with the cup and got it set in her ear, then touched the receive node. “Copy. Copy Tac Base 10?”

“Ops.” The voice answered. “Recall. Urgent. Ack.”

Jess blinked. “Repeat?”

“Ack. Recall urgent. Copy acknowledge.” The voice returned, with an edge. “Code 12.”

“Acknowledge, in work.” Jess responded, then she released the trigger. “Shit.” She looked at Dev. “Something bad must happened. They're recalling us.” She removed the ear cup and handed it back. “Plot a course back to that iceberg, Dev. Looks like this mission's scrubbed.”

That, at least was easy. Dev pulled the coordinates off her comp and plugged them in, not sure whether she should be disappointed or relieved.

Disappointed, she supposed, for not being able to finish the mission, but also relieved that with the enemy already chasing them that they would not get into more trouble trying to get into the enemy lab. There seemed to be a lot of opportunity for discomfort in that, and she didn't want to see Jess getting hurt.

Jess set a cup down for her and took her seat on the stool again. “So.”

“What do you think happened?” Dev asked.

“No idea.” Her partner said. “Never been recalled like that before. I just know the codes.” She cradled her cup between her hands and took a sip from it. “Now I wish we weren't so far. Bain wouldn't have pulled us for something trivial. When we get back to the carrier, you can do an encrypted session and maybe we'll find out what's going on.”

The light was fading outside, and the rain was falling harder. Dev propped her scanner up and set it to probe their path, the she took a moment to take a drink from the cup, wishing they'd stopped for a daymeal while they were on the island. “Okay, I'll remember to do that.” She said. “But it's going to take a long time to get there.”

Jess sighed. “I know.” She put her cup down and got up. “Nothing we can do about that unless we pass those pirates again and steal their carrier.” She rooted in the carry sack and pulled out some fish packets, bringing them back to the console and plopping them down. “Damn it.”

Dev reviewed the rear scanner, noting the ships were still chasing them. But their speed now was enough to keep them ahead, and as they plowed into the increasing swells, she hoped it would stay that way.

So now things were changing again. The big question was, were they running away from trouble, or running to more of it?

IF BREAKING THE STORY INTO TWO BOOKS THIS IS A REASONABLE BREAKPOINT*

There was a roll of ever present thunder, under dark skies, over a dark sea as a single hulled fishing boat hurled itself through the waves and plunged through swells as it headed in the relative direction of home.

The ice pack loomed in the darkness, it's incessant crackling and popping sounding over the waves. Jess pulled herself back inside and came back to study the comp, peering at the rearward facing scan intently. “Did we lose them?”

Dev was finishing up some data. Then she turned and studied the scanner, her shoulder coming to rest against Jess's. “We haven't gotten ping backs on anything in about two hours.” She commented. “Since we saw that cone.”

“Sometimes I hate weather, sometimes I love it.” Jess agreed. “Okay let's run along the ice. At least we've got some cover if something comes at us.” She let her eyes slide to Dev's outline. “I like that suit.”

Dev glanced down at herself, her body encased in her new lined jumper It was very warm, and very comfortable, and she was really happy with it herself. “Me too.” She said. “Maybe we can go back and get you one sometime?”

Jess sighed. “Not for a good long while Devvie.” She sat down on the stool next to the captains chair and leaned her elbow on the arm of it. “I have no idea if they popped lava on that one. Might have taken out the whole place, since the place where we were? Inside? Those are tubes.”

“Tubes.” Dev repeated slowly.

“Lava tubes.” Her partner responded. “Charles could be flash fried by now if he didn't get out in time. Happens.” She shrugged. “They know the risk.”

Dev didn't speak for a moment, then she turned and looked at Jess. “Do you mean all those people might be dead?”

“Might be.”

Wow. The bio alt felt a chill down her back. All those people, even the girl who'd cut their hair. She watched Jess's face, seeing nothing other than vague interest there. “You knew what was going on.”

“Sure.” Jess said. “I've been near one of em a couple times. I caught the bumps. They did too, set the alarms off. So some people would have gotten off. Rushed the boats, that's why I wanted to get ours off first.”

“Should we have helped the others?” Dev asked, hesitantly.

“No. That's not our gig.”

“I see.” The bio alt said. “Interesting.”

“Anyway.” Jess gently blew in her ear. “Enjoy your duds. They've got a back door to grab creds from us, and from the other guys for stuff. Long as you don't get contraband no one cares. This isn't.” She touched the sleeve. “Some of us don't care. I do. I always use my own cred for them.”

“So I could have done that too? I have my card.”

“You could have.” Jess agreed. “But I.. “ She paused, and made a small face. “I didn't mind doing it. I know you get cold. Better to keep you warm so you don't drive us into a berg.”

“I see.” Dev considered that. “Thank you, Jess. It's very comfortable. I feel a lot better now wearing it.”

A relaxed and happy smile appeared on Jess's face. “You're welcome.” She responded. “I never had a tech I wanted to buy stuff for before. It's a kick.” She admitted. “Besides, I can't wait to see you wear that thing in the citadel. There are a ton of us who never made it out to the market much less on their first month.”

“And now they might not get a chance.” Dev commented mildly. “Isn't that what you said before?”

“Oh, Charles'll survive. He's an old salt.” Jess got up an stretched. “He'll just dig out and start over. I don't think for a minute he didn't get out probably has a tunnel dug down to water and a boat waiting.” She turned and studied the hammock. “Mind if I sack out for a while?”

“Absolutely not.” Dev said. “If anything unusual happens, I will wake you up.”

Jess rolled into the swinging bed and exhaled, allowing her body to relax for the first time in a day. She was disappointed that the mission had been cut short – and yet – based on her near ass kicking she now had to wonder if she really had been ready for it.

Was this just fate's way of covering her? Maybe she could figure out another plan and after they got back to the citadel, talk Bain into letting her take another team with her. It wouldn't be as status as if she'd done it herself, but she had a legit med marker after all.

Wasn't her fault the mission got called, was it? She wondered what the emergency was, and then, she wondered if it wasn't a status call on her part for Bain to recall her specifically for it. Could even be a better chance with less risk for advancement, that Code 12.

Good opportunity maybe, for her. For them, she corrected herself in her mind, glancing over to where Dev was seated, busy checking controls. The pale light from the console outlined her body and Jess wished briefly that they could tuck into a safe spot in the ice and she could take the time to peel her partner out of that sexy number.

Jess sighed, and closed her eyes, folding her hands over her stomach and letting her body accept the rhythm of the waves. She was almost asleep when she sensed motion close by, and then the added warmth of a blanket being tucked around her, then the gentle touch of Dev's fingers closing on hers.

It made her feel happy. She returned the squeeze and opened one eye, to find the bio alt gazing down at her with what could only be a look of affection, something Jess only barely remembered from her childhood.

Then Dev tucked the blanket in a bit more and smiled, moving past her to refill her cup from the dispenser.

Jess smiled back, letting her eyes close and her mind release itself into sleep. Fate. Her last conscious thoughts mused. It had to be fate.

**

Dev was glad to see dawn light appearing in the sky, giving outline to the ice pack to her right, and the choppy ruffled waters beneath them. It had been a long dark night, and she was tired, both from struggling to keep the boat on course and the strain of picking her way through the stormy weather and not crash into anything.

Jess had remained peacefully asleep this time, and Dev was going to give it a little while before she woke her partner up. She was looking forward to it, imagining how good it would feel to curl up in the hammock herself and close her eyes and she took a deep breath and released it as she peered along the ice outside.

It was white in all the grayness, the clouds overhead roiling and moving though the rain had stopped for now. White, with glimpses of beautiful blue in the cracks, the edge of the flow here high above the boat's level.

It was interesting, and it gave her tired eyes something to look at while they rolled along. She'd gotten used to the motion now, and it was starting to feel natural to her – she was standing at the controls and swaying with the waves and had been for some time.

Suddenly, motion caught her eye and she looked to the left, seeing something in the water. Surprised, she blinked and stood a little taller, reaching over to code the scanner and direct it forward. As the boat got closer, she could resolve the movement and realized it was an animal swimming.

The animal turned it's head towards her and she let out a tiny gasp of surprise. “Oh!” She hopped a time or two. “I think thats a bear!” Its fur was white, though plastered from the water, and it had dark eyes and a big dark nose. Dev cut the engines and felt the boat slow, not wanting to risk hitting the animal.

The motion change woke Jess. “Whoa.” The agent said, groggily. “Don't tell me I slept all the way back. Devvie you didn't let me do that didja?”

“No. no.. “ Dev raptly watched as the animal got to the wall of ice, then stopped swimming and stuck a paw out of the water, scraping at the surface. “Oh, Jess. Look. It's a bear, isn't it?”

Her partner obligingly rolled out of the hammock and joined her, leaning on the console. After a minute of study, she grunted. “Yeah it is.” She patted Dev on the back. “Congrats! Ya found one.”

“What's it doing?” Dev put the engines in idle, watching the animal.

Jess studied the bear. It was clawing at the ice, it's head tipped up looking at the ridge high above it's head. “I think it's screwed.” She said. “Musta fallen off the top there, and can't get back out of the water.” She pointed at the high edge of the flow, where there was a visible chunk taken out.

“Oh.” Dev felt her elation fade. “What will happen to it?” She looked up at Jess.

The agent shrugged. “Eventually it'll get tired and then drown.” She said. “Nowhere for it to go.”

“Oh.” Dev repeated, softly. “Wow. That's terrible.”

“It's just a bear.”

The bio alt turned to regard her seriously. “Wasn't it just a seal, that time?”

Jess remained quiet for a long minute, her eyes blinking gently as she watched the bear. Then she turned her head and looked at her partner. “Why do you always want to go around helping people and things?” She asked. “People and things you don't even know?”

Dev accepted the question at face value. “Because that's how I was made.” She responded. “I'm supposed to help people if I can. Take care of people. Like people. You're supposed to expect that of me.”

Jess nodded slowly. “Techs aren't like that.” She said. “Agents aren't. We all sort of hate on each other most of the time.” She straightened. “But you are different, huh?”

“Yes.” Dev seemed sad about that.

“Maybe I am too sometimes.” Jess scrubbed her hands through her hair. “Let me throw my jacket on and see what the hell I can do for that damned bear. Keep the boat steady.” She went to the door, grabbing her coat on the way as she shook her head. “Please come save me if the damn thing starts to eat my head.”

Dev put her hands back on the controls and trimmed the engines, waiting for Jess to appear on the bow. She kept her partner in view, watching her go to the front of the ship and peer over the side as the boat edged towards the animal.

She was glad Jess was going to try and help it, even though it had seemed that the idea put her into some discomfort and the thought of that sent a surge of energy through her that pushed back the exhaustion.

If for no other reason than she had to figure out what to do about the bear if it started eating Jess's head.

**

Jess put her hands on the rail and peered at the bear, who was paddling in circles next to the ice flow. The animal was beginning to tire, and it only eyed her warily as it tried to pull itself up onto the wall.

“Why am I doing this?” She wondered aloud. “Hey bear! C'mere.”

The bear continued paddling.

She watched it try to climb up again, and then an idea occurred. The bear would be trying to pull itself up onto a berg, whose edge was much closer to the water. Problem was, there were no bergs around, nothing low enough for the animal to scramble onto.

With a grunt, she went around the side of the boat, down the channels on either side of the control chamber and through the tunnel to the rear deck.

Emerging onto it, she went to the very back of the fishing area, to the rear where the big wheel was that pulled the nets on board. Behind it was a hatch, and she remembered the hatch being open when the nets were being reeled and the water pouring onto the deck.

“Hm.” Jess went to the elevated section where the controls were and climbed up, still a bit foggy from sleep. She sat down on the seat and studied the knobs and switches. She pressed the one for comms and leaned closer. “Hey Dev?”

Silence for a moment, then the comms crackled back at her. “Yes, I”m here.”

“Turn the boat around so the back's facing the ice.” Jess said. “I”m gonna try something.”

She felt the shift under her immediately, and as she explored the knobs, the view around her changed from gray mist and open sea to the white of the ice flow. She could hear the bear splashing and as the boat stopped moving, she found the the controls for the back hatch and triggered them.

A large section of the back deck folded down, and the water flowed across the deck towards her. “Dev.” She triggered comms. “Back up.” But as she did, she could feel the engines shift into reverse as her partner realized what she'd done. A faint smiled appeared, as they started to move slowly in reverse, heading forward the paddling animal.

Jess leaned on the console and waited, as the engines cut out and they were drifting towards the ice. After a moment she could see the bear through the gap, and as she watched, she saw the animals head turn towards her and then it's body changed direction and headed towards the half sunken deck.

Instinct? Jess observed in fascination as the bear reached the boat, and half climbed, half sprawled onto the open deck, panting hard. “Hey bear.” She waved at it, hoping like hell it wouldn't decide to attack her.

But the animal just lay there breathing hard, staring at her.

Triggering the hatch, Jess closed the back of the boat up and leaned on the comms key. “Get moving, Devvie. Let's find someplace to let this thing off before it recovers and decides to have us for lunch.” She tapped her fingers on the console as the engines re-engaged, noting the movement was not really much to the bears liking. “Take it easy, buddy.”

The bear pushed itself up into a sitting position, it's tongue hanging out. It was a startling pink color, vivid against the yellowish white fur, and the black nose. As the speed picked up, it looked around in some alarm, shaking itself and sending a shower of water over the deck.

It was bigger than she'd imagined. It's body was twice the length of hers, and it's feet were gigantic, and as it turned its head towards her and opened it's mouth, she spotted fangs as wide as her hand.

“And I brought your fuzzy white ass up on the boat with us.” Jess mused. “Damn I'm an idiot.”

Despite that, it seemed sort of cute to her, and she noted it's small, cupped ears and appealing expression. “You got lucky, buddy.” She informed the bear. “If the owner of this thing were here you'd be a rug already.”

The bear regarded her, then it lay back down on the deck, apparently not quite recovered from it's swim. It seemed content to accept it's ride at least for the moment, so Jess decided she'd leave it there and go back upstairs and get herself properly woken up.

She suspected Dev was hopping up and down waiting for her turn to look at the bear anyway. Jess smiled, as she climbed down from the control stand and ducked into the tunnel, heading back to the control center.

**

“Oh my goodness.” Dev felt her eyes widen, the chill hitting the sides of her eyeballs as she climbed up onto the control platform and peeked over the console. There, sitting in the middle of the deck was the bear, looking huge and furry and more amazing than anything she'd ever seen.

“Don't go near it.” Jess's voice warned in her ear cup. “You'd make one mouthful for it.”

“I won't.” Dev promised, leaning her arms on the surface and avidly watching the animal. It was looking around, blinking it's eyes as the wind blew over the deck and ruffled it's now drying fur.

It was gigantic. Dev thought it hadn't looked so big when it was in the water, but now on the deck it sure did. “Hey there.” She called out to the bear, holding her breath as it's head swung around and it looked at her. Hesitantly, she waved at it. “Don't worry. Jess is going to find a nice iceberg for you to climb up on. Okay?”

She wasn't sure if the bear understood language. Doctor Dan had once told her about something called a dog, which understood some words, and another called a monkey that could use symbols to communicate but she wasn't sure where the bear fell on that bell curve.

It's head was roundish, and she wished it would get closer so she could see it better – and just as she thought that it did.

It got up, and walked around in a circle. It's front legs were a little shorter than it's back ones, so it looked sort of funny when it walked, but then Dev got back behind the console when it reached the wall and stood up, stretching it's front feet up over it's head.

“Wow! You're tall!” She peeked cautiously out at it. It's feet had big black nails on the ends of it's toes, and as she watched, it scratched long, deep grooves into the metal of the ship. “Oh no! Don't' do that! The fisherman won't like it!”

The bear looked at her, and now, closer she could see that it's eyes were a deep brown, not black as she'd first thought. They were deep set, and they watched her with what she thought surely was

some intelligence. After a moment, it dropped back down to all four legs and sauntered over to where she was, sitting down on the deck and opening it's mouth.

The teeth were equally gigantic. Dev wondered what the bear ate. “Hey Jess?”

“Yes? He's not doing anything is he? I can't see him.” Jess's voice answered, sharp and intense.

“No, just sitting here.” Dev said. “Should we give him some food?”

“Like what, your leg?”

“I was thinking more like the bait, like what we gave the dolphins.” Dev responded, grinning a little as Jess's dark humor. 'Can we give it a name?”

“No.” Jess's tone lightened. “Please don't give it a name.”

Well ,that wasn't a no to the fish. Dev climbed down from the control room and went to the locker, opening it and peering inside. There were buckets of half frozen fish bait inside, and she picked one up, taking it with her and bringing it back to the control console.

She climbed back up and peered out, finding the bear now rolling on it's back on the deck, waving it's legs in the air. This exposed the animal's belly and she got a better look at it's underneath parts. “Hey Jess? I think it's a girl.”

“Really?”

“I think so.” Dev removed a chunk of frozen fish from the pail and tossed it onto the deck, waiting to see what the bear was going to do about it.

Hearing the thunk, the bear turned it's head and then turned over, sliding across the wet surface and sniffing at the chunk. It opened it's mouth and sank it's teeth into it, then shook it's head and ripped off a piece, chewing it with evident enthusiasm.

“I guess it eats fish.” Dev commented, tossing the animal another chunk from the pail. “Cool.” She pronounced the word carefully. “That's cool, right?”

The bear sat down on the deck and grasped the second fish between it's feet, holding it so that it could chew at it. The act was so people like, it made Dev grin. “Can you see it, Jess?” She called into the comms. “It's sitting here eating fish.”

“Stop making me hungry.” Jess responded “Aren't you for that matter?”

“Yes.” Dev tossed another fish out to the bear. “Sorry about that. Would you like some of this frozen fish?”

A low snicker sounded in the comms. “Not unless you're changing your name to frozen fish.”

Dev cocked her head in a puzzlement, as she threw more chunks out. “Why would I do that?” She finally asked. “Do you not like my name?” She watched the bear get up and fetch the last piece, then without warning, it came over and stood up, putting it's feet against the outside of the control platform and peering in at her. “Oh!”

“What?” Jess answered instantly. “Dev?”

Dev stared at the bear, now only an arms length from her. She could smell the fish on it's fur, and the musky pungency of the fur itself, and see the nostrils on the big black nose flaring. Without really thinking about it, she held out a last piece of fish to the bear.

It sniffed it then opened it's mouth and very gently took it from her, before it sat down again to finish it's meal

“DEV!”

Dev nearly jumped out of her skin “Yes!” She blurted. “Yes, I'm fine! Sorry!” She leaned against the console and stared the bear, her heart beating fast. “I was just giving her the last part of the fish.” She watched the bear lick her lips with satisfaction and yawn, exposing those huge teeth.

It was so amazing.

The animal got up and walked back over, jumping up to put her paws against the metal of the console. She poked her head inside and snuffled at Dev and before she could think better of it, the bio alt extended her palm out to the moist looking nostrils.

The bear sniffed her fingers, then the pink tongue appeared and licked them, feeling warm and rough in an explosion of sensation that made Dev's eyes open up wide. “Oh. Wow” She whispered, extending her hand just a little and touching the fur under the bears jaw.

It was soft, and oily feeling. For a moment, the bear regarded her, then she pushed off the console and went back to the middle of the deck, sitting down and yawning.

Dev bounced silently in place, then she scrambled down from the platform and bolted for the steps to the control center, eager to tell Jess about the bear, and its cold, wiggly nose, and it's fur.

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Jess blinked. “You touched it?”

“Yes.” Dev nodded. “Just a little. It licked my fingers.” She held up her hand, displaying all five digits. “Then I touched it here.” She reached over and touched Jess under her chin. “It was amazing!!!”

“It's amazing you still have your arm.” Her partner told her wryly. “You're a nut, you know that?” She gazed at Dev with what actually seemed like a touch of envy though. “I've seen one of those things rip a man apart.”

“I think she was glad I gave her the fish.” Dev said. Then she grinned. “I'm glad I got a chance to do that.”

“Crazy.” Jess ruffled her hair.

Dev came over and threw her arms around Jess, hugging her fiercely. “Thank you for saving her, Jess. That was so awesome.”

That had been so terribly pointless and stupid.. Jess enjoyed the hug anyway, and the enthusiasm that came along with it. “Anything for you, Devvie.” She replied simply. “You make me want to be a complete idiot. Good thing for both of us for some reason I'm really liking that.”

“Um. I don't mean to.” Dev muttered. “At least, I don't' think I don't mean to.”

Jess took her hands off the controls of the ship and put her arms around Dev, savoring the tingle as their bodies pressed against each other. She took a deep breath, feeling an ache in her chest that shortened her breathing and nearly made her lightheaded.

“Wow.” Dev reluctantly released her. “So should I get some of the rations? And I'll make hot tea, okay?” She felt Jess's arms tighten, and the pressure of her lips against the top of her head, before she was released in return, to let the chill of the steel chamber once again brush her skin.

That was somewhat uncomfortable. Hugging Jess was definitely nicer. Evaluating the frown on Jess's face, Dev decided Jess maybe thought that also.

She lifted her eyes and met Jess's, as her partner took back hold of the controls, and exhaled. “It would be nice to find an ice cave at this time, wouldn't it?” Dev asked in a serious tone.

Jess smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. “If we weren't under recall, we'd already be in one.” She said. “I already broke the rules messing around with that bear, and if they find out at base I'll be under discipline, so do me a favor, huh? Don't tell anyone.”

Dev went over and started preparing the tea. “What does that mean?” She said, after a pause, glancing over her shoulder. “Helping the bear was incorrect?”

Jess settled herself in the command chair and pushed the hair off her forehead with one hand. “What does that mean.” She repeated, with a sigh. “When you get a recall like that, you're supposed to do an immediate return to base. No stopping, no side tracking, nothing.”

“It didn't take very long.” Dev commented.

“It's the idea of it.” Jess said. “I'd get about... probably six zaps for it.” She flexed her hands, her body twitching a little. “Most I ever had before now was four.”

Dev brought over some hot tea and honey, and set it down in the little swinging holder that kept it steady with the motion of the boat. She leaned on the chair arm. “I don't think I understand.” She admitted. “I don't have any programming for that.”

“No you wouldn't. Techs don't get zapped. They don't make the decisions.” Jess responded. “That's my job.”

“Ah.” Dev touched Jess's wrist, running her thumb over the prominent bone on the edge of it. “It's a bad thing, then.”

“It hurts. A lot.” Her partner agreed “Doesn't leave any marks, but it's like touching a power port. You ever do that? Makes your whole body go stiff, and then it hurts.” She picked up the tea and sipped it. “That's what being zapped is like. They do it up in the assembly hall, where we had the induction ceremony.”

“I see.” Dev said, though she really didn't.

“They don't want us to break the rules.” Jess flexed her hand again, with a small grimace. “You get zapped enough times, you stop wanting to.”

Dev considered that for a while. “But you helped the bear.”

“Yeah I did. Because you wanted me to.” Her partner sighed. “I don't know what's wrong with me. I know better.”

“Jess, I would feel a lot of discomfort if you got in trouble and got hurt because you did that.” Dev said. “Just for helping a bear.”

Jess leaned back and studied her, dark lashes fluttering a little over her pale eyes. “I didn't do it for the bear.” She smiled briefly. “Don't worry about it, Devvie. They won't know unless we tell em. No recorder on this thing.” She reached over and traced the fine, pale brow over the bio alt's right eye. “You got nice lines.”

Dev felt a slight sense of confusion, caught in that intense gaze. Then she nodded and smiled, reasoning that her partner must know what she was doing, after all. She squeezed Jess's wrist, and then she went back to the preparation area and investigated their supplies.

Now that the excitement was mostly over, she could feel tired again and she did. “Jess?”

“Hm?”

“Will you wake me up when you let the bear go?”

Jess chuckled softly. “Sure.” She looked up as Dev brought over two portions of fish, poached in some kind of spicy liquid. “Feel like sacking out? You look tanked.”

Sacks. Tanks. Dev put a piece of the fish in her mouth while puzzling this out and then her eyes popped open wide. “Wow!” She spit the fish out and stared at it. “Ouch!” She went over and got her tea, sucking down a mouthful. “What is that?”

“Fish.” Jess snickered. “Not used to those spices, huh?” She broke off a piece of her own and chewed it “I like it. Reminds me of mudbug boils we sometimes did back home.”

Dev stared doubtfully at the chunk of regurgitated fish in her hand, then sighed, and closing her eyes, popped it back in her mouth. She chewed it stolidly, then swallowed with an obvious effort, chasing it down with another long swallow of tea. The fish burned her mouth, and the scent of it got back up into her nose and made her sneeze violently.

Very discomforting. Dev looked unhappily at her meal. “I don't think I can eat this.” She admitted. “Would you like the rest?”

“Give it here. Go get something else.” Jess held a hand out. “At least I found one thing I can do that you can't.” She took possession of the offending food. “What a relief!”

Dev handed it over without delay. “I think I'll just get some rest.” She said “I can have something later, after we let the bear go.” She added. “And you know, Jess, there are lots and lots of things you can do that I can't.” She added seriously. “All I can do is drive the carrier and make tea.”

“And you're modest too.” Her partner said. “I think that's what I like the most about you, Devvie.” She shifted in her chair and studied their course, as the boat plowed stolidly through the waves. “You don't talk about how good you are, you just do it.”

Dev climbed into the hammock, curling up with a soft ball of fabric for a pillow, and a piece of the same to cover her that still carried Jess's scent on it. She lay there quietly with her partner's words turning over and over in her head, feeling the impact of them as they thrummed deeper and deeper into her consciousness.

They touched something inside her, something she realized went deeper than programming. "Hey Jess?"

"You talking in your sleep?"

"No." Dev smiled, a little. "You know what I like the most about you?"

"Uh oh." Jess chuckled. "What?"

"You.

**

Jess watched the wall of ice go by, her eyes blinking a little, her thoughts a million miles away.

Or more precisely, about arm's length away focused on the soundly sleeping figure in the hammock just behind her.

She didn't grudge her partner the rest. After all, Dev had piloted the boat through the night, letting Jess get a whole shifts worth of sleep herself. But she wished the bio alt was awake so she could talk to her and hear her voice.

There was something odd and weird about that. Jess swung sideways in the chair so she could study Dev's quiet breathing. She knew it was out of the ordinary for her to be so fixated on something other than her job. She knew it wasn't right that it was impossible for her to focus her attention on the mission, or even the operation of the boat when her thoughts kept drifting back to Dev's smile.

Jess lifted one hand and pinched the bridge of her nose, aware of how unsettled her body felt, and how her breathing was uneven. Was she sick, maybe? Maybe she'd picked up a case of coastal flu, she reasoned. There was a sense of dislocation in her head, that she remembered from the last time she'd gotten it.

Or she thought she remembered it. Certainly it hadn't been accompanied by the almost irresistible urge she had to get up and join Dev in the hammock, craving the feel of her body and the warmth of the skin on skin contact though, now had it?

With an unhappy sigh, she forced her attention back to the water, feeling a sense of intense aggravation at the never ending white ruffled surface, and the glacial slowness of their progress. Though even getting to the carrier wouldn't do much, because they'd have to go right back to the citadel.

Right back to the citadel, to whatever problem it was waiting for them. No time probably to relax, and tumble into that nice, soft bed together, able to focus on the pleasure of being together and not having to worry about some damn wave turning them turtle.

Her breathing shortened, as she thought about what that moment would think about, finding her eyes closing, and her heart starting to pound.

"Shit." Jess shifted and stood up, picking up her now cold tea and taking a swallow. "Drive the fucking boat." She muttered, glancing at the vid and knowing a moment of deep envy as she spotted the bear curled up fast asleep on the deck of the damn thing, the wind coming over the railing ruffling it's fur.

But a moment later, she half turned again, leaning against the console as she watched Dev sleep, curled up on her side, the faintest of smiles visible on her face.

"So, what is it about you, huh, Devvie?" Jess whispered. "Are you making me crazy?"

She thought about that for a few minutes, and grinned wryly. "More crazy?" She sighed and sat back down, resting her head on her fist as she adjusted the throttles, her eyes tracking out over the water searching for the slightest sign of a berg. The first one, she decided, she'd head for so she could get rid of the bear.

The fact that Dev had asked her to wake her up when she did really didn't factor into it at all. She was content to let her partner get what rest she could before that, wasn't she?

Sure.

Her thoughts circled back around, and she carefully let those last words Dev had spoken sound in her head again. “So.” She muttered. “The thing she likes most about me is me.” She gazed soberly through the big glass windows “What in the hell does that mean?”

A low rumble of thunder attracted her attention, and she immediately turned to the scan, checking the radar and peering past it out the window. Along the horizon, she spotted a dark, almost black cloud and knew the exactly opposing emotions of exasperation at the weather and elation at the knowledge she'd need to find shelter from it. “Hot damn!”

“What?” Dev was half out of the hammock before she was properly awake, blinking her eyes. “Is something wrong? Are you all right?” She put her hands on the back of the chair as Jess muffled a laugh. “ Is the bear okay?”

Jess resisted the urge to turn around and hug her. “Yeah, sorry about that.” She said. “Storm's up ahead. I'll need to find some shelter in a while. Didn't mean to wake you up – gwan back to sleep.”

Dev was peeking past her at scan, watching the bear stretch out on the deck, flexing it's feet in contentment. “Okay.” She agreed, rubbing her eyes. “Does that mean we'll have to stop?” She asked, after a pause

“Yep”

“I see.” Dev pondered. “Won't that break the rule?” She countered. “I don't want you to get in trouble, Jess.”

“Can't control the weather and they know it.” Jess said. “Don't worry about it. Just get some rest. It might even bypass us.” She told her partner. “I'll try to keep my yap shut now.”

Dev gently put her hands on Jess's shoulders and briefly leaned against her. Then she climbed back into the hammock and curled back up, closing her eyes as she waited for her heart to settle back down. Waking that suddenly was uncomfortable, and she relaxed her muscles, her ears pricking a little as she caught the sound of Jess shifting.

She really didn't want Jess to get into trouble. The whole zapping thing sounded profoundly discomforting and yet.. Dev exhaled slowly. And yet, she wanted nothing more than for them to stop and find shelter, and be able to lay down in the hammock and practice that sex thing together.

After they made sure the bear was safe, of course.

Dev rubbed her fingertips together, where they'd touched the animal, remembering the softness of it's fur. Maybe she'd get a chance to touch it one more time before Jess got it to safety.

She hoped so. There was something about the bear, about those deep, interesting eyes that made her care about what happened to it.

To her. Just like there was something about Jess that made her care, almost to the point of it getting her crazy. Dev squirmed around a little in the hammock so she could keep Jess in her line of vision, watching her partner's shoulders shift as she moved in her chair.

It was hard to keep her eyes open but she wanted to. She saw Jess lean her elbows on the chair arms and rest her head against her fist and the motion almost made Dev climb back out of the hammock and go and hug her again. There was a visible discomfort about the posture and it made her breathing catch.

She didn't want anything to be wrong with Jess.

With a light sigh she closed her eyes and started the process of putting herself down for a while, making a picture in her head about setting the bear free and letting that play behind her closed eyelids as she let the motion of the boat rock her to sleep.

Jess exhaled, slumping to one side and leaning on her elbow as she rested her head against her fist. The chair moved with the ships motion, for which she was grateful since other wise she'd have

nailed herself in the temple twice already. She studied the horizon, noting the curve of the ice field and picking up the portable scanner.

She laboriously pecked out a request, keying in the coordinates with one finger as she looked up to check the location finder before she submitted the order. The scanner percolated through it's routines in electronic silence and she set the device down, going back to watching the view through the windows, tired half to death of the never ending waves.

“How in the hell do they do this?” She muttered under her breath. Months at sea, only stopping now and then on a berg, or in a cave, or on the market island.

No rad, no relief from the motion... Jess realized she was developing a lot more respect for the fisher folk than she had in the past, remote relations or not. It would be hard, she thought, to be stuck on this ship with all those people, no matter they were family, having to work the way they did, and risk what they risked out on the sea.

There was a self sufficiency about it that appealed to her, but as she sat here in the captains chair, she knew she wouldn't trade her life for one like this. It was too raw, no matter how many jars of honey you ended up with.

The scanner beeped, and she picked it up and reviewed the results, her eyebrows edging up a little. She traced a path with one finger on the screen, then she set it down and turned to the nav console, looking back and forth from it to the screen as she carefully entered the settings. The boat's nav system was rudimentary, but once she'd finished and keyed in the complete, she reviewed the plotted course with satisfaction, as she shoved the throttles forward a little more and hoped for a cup more speed from the old tug.

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As shelters went it wasn't going to be much. Jess leaned forward and peered through the worsening weather, the gale force wind shoving the bow of the boat to one side as she searched for the inlet.

Hours had passed, long ones in which she'd crouched in the command chair and worked to keep the boat from turning turtle in the waves. A glance at the monitor screens showed her the back deck, where her somewhat unwelcome passenger was now huddled against the inner wall to escape the wash of surf rolling across the rear of the boat.

Trip from hell. Jess sighed, then nearly catapulted out of the chair when she felt a touch against her back. “Yeoop!” She jerked her head around to find Dev standing behind her, a bemused expression on her face. “Oh it's you.”

Dev looked around her then back at her partner. “Were you expecting someone else?” She asked, in a serious tone. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to alarm you.” She peered out the window. “Wow.”

Jess felt her heart start to settle, and she unlocked her muscles, returning her attention to the storm. “Yeah, piece of shit weather.” She said. “I'm trying to make for an archipelago we can hide in – see?” She squinted and pointed through a break in the squall at a smudge of slightly darker gray against the gray of the sky and the gray of the water. “We get in there, we can let our friend out back off and tie up.”

Dev studied the nav comp. “Oh. This is not so far from where we got on this boat.” She pointed out. “Wouldn't it be better to try to get there? It seemed like good shelter.”

“Sure, if you want them to shoot your buddy on the back.” Jess said. “Not to mention, shoot us. We made better time back then I thought we would figured we had another day of this to get back that far.”

“Oh.” Dev frowned “So then how are we going to get back to the carrier?”

“Let me get back to you on that. One potential life threatening disaster at a time.” Jess fought the controls, as the seas rose suddenly and rocked the boat.

“Want me to take this now?” Dev asked, diffidently. “You look cold.”

Jess wasn't going to argue. She slipped out f the chair and let Dev take her place, noting the bio alt seemed freshly scrubbed and had a fresh jumpsuit on, with her lined one over it with the top part draped down behind her unfastened “Wait a minute. How long have you been awake?”

“About a half hour.” Dev got herself settled and adjusted the throttles. “I didn't want to bother you when you were concentrating.”

Holy crap. Jess stared at her partner's slim back in shock. Had she really been that oblivious? “Well.” She grunted. “Least you got some rest.”

“I did.” Dev agreed in a cheerful tone. “It was nice. I liked how the motion felt.”

Holy crap. Jess went to the back of the control center where they'd brought their things and got herself sorted out. She could see where Dev had changed and repacked her carry sack neatly, and the carefully folded packet that had contained some fish she'd apparently consumed.

The blanket on the hammock was also neatly folded, and, as Jess regarded the station, she saw her own meal had been set out for her, with a covered cup of tea next to it. She touched the cup with her fingertips and smiled. “Thanks.” She called up to the front.

“You're welcome.” Dev answered, as she turned the bow a little and headed closer in to the ice.

Jess undid the catches on her suit and stripped out of it, ignoring the chill of the air as it hit her now bare body though it made her start shivering. She took a sanitary kit out and wiped her skin down, giving her shoulder a cursory glance before she changed. The injury was almost healed as she'd expected, and she pulled the sleeves up over her arms and fastened the suit over her.

It brought immediate warmth and she exhaled in relief as the mild shivers abated. Braced where she was between the console and the wall, the motion of the ship was no more than annoying, and it felt good to be standing after all the hours crouched over in the chair.

She felt stiff, and a little achy though.

Cautiously, she flexed her arms and twisted to either side, relieved to only feel mild discomfort from her back. Maybe that one, too, was finally healing. “About fucking time.” She muttered under her breath.

Med had told her, matter of factly, that the toxins on the knife had almost killed her far more surely than the six inch cut it made but even knowing all that didn't ease the frustration of dealing with how long it was taking her usually robust body to recover from it.

Ah well. Jess uncapped the tea and sipped it while she opened the food packet with her other hand, bracing her body against the wall. “You're so nice to me, Devvie.” She commented. “I notice you left me the spicy one though.”

Dev smiled, visible in the reflection from the windows. “I'm sorry. I really just can't eat that.” She admitted. “I've never encountered anything like that before.”

Jess chewed the fish with a sense of melancholy appreciation. “My mother used to cook with these kind of spices.” She said. “Reminds me of her fish gumbo. Most of the time the citadel doesn't use anything more exciting than sea salt. Wonder where these bastards got this from? I didn't see any at the market.”

“I don't know.” Dev said. “We didn't have anything like that in the creche. I am sure they would have tried that on us if there had been, they tried everything else.”

“Don't feel bad. Same for us when we were in school. I ate seaweed so many ways I thought for sure I took on a green skin tone there for a while.” Jess commiserated. “My favorite thing back then was pizza.”

“Pizza?” Dev carefully piloted the boat through a pair of back to back waves. “I don't think I've ever heard of that.”

“It's kind of a flat bread thing, with soy cheese and little sardines. They used to get rid of the crap from the nets that way but I liked it.” Jess finished one packet, and started on a second, aware of being really hungry. “Wish I had one now. There's just so much of this cold crap I can handle at one time.”

'That sounds interesting." Dev acknowledged. "They don't have that at the base?"

"No. They consider it junk. Don't want to give it to us. We're supposed to put stuff in our bodies that makes them work better. That's the theory anyway." She swallowed the last of the second packet and started rooting around for more. "That's why those parties are so damn popular. We get stuff we don't usually get."

"Like those brown things."

"Exactly."

"Those were really good."

Jess chuckled. "I knew we were two of a kind when I saw you scarfing those.." She drained her tea and put the cup in one of the holders, then she went over and joined Dev at the controls. She studied the cloud pattern, and put her hand on Dev's back. "Can we go any faster?"

The slightly darker lump on the horizon was now visible as a gray, craggy outline, rising from the surging sea. She could hear the surf roaring as it broke against the stone, and around the edges a thick roiling fog was drifting. "See if you can get between those shoals."

Obediently, Dev pushed the throttles forward, and aimed the boat for the looming rocks, as the storm rolled over them with increasing fury. She'd been through so many storms by now though, that the lack of sight and the wind didn't disturb her that much and she was able to concentrate on properly steering the boat.

The rocks looked dangerous. "I don't remember seeing those before." Dev said. "We were further to the south going the other direction."

"We were." Jess agreed. "We're up into the Greenland Archipelago. Should be safe though, never had much population." She draped her arm over her partner's shoulders as they eased between two tall, jagged spires and as they did, the winds dropped, and the seas got calmer.

"Wow." Dev noted. "That's much better."

It was still raining almost sideways, but the boat now made better headway as they threaded their way through half hidden rocks outlined in white and green froth as the stone walls rose up on either side of them. Past the rocks there were further gray lumps and over all a mist was rising.

"Yeah, that is much better." Jess studied the landscape. "Haven't been here in years. There's just this small southern bit that's not under ice. See the glacier picks up there." She pointed. "Mostly seals live here."

Dev brightened. "Really?"

"Mm." Jess pointed at a rock escarpment. "That's where I killed my instructor. We use this as a training base."

"Oh." Dev watched the water calm as they moved further inside the waterway, where bare stone rose on either side of them. They were protected from the wind, and the waves, and as she throttled down the engines, they both heard a loud sound from behind them.

Jess responded instantly, bounding over and grabbing her blaster from it's holster, getting to the door and through it before Dev could even open her mouth.

The hatch slammed.

"I think that was the bear." She said, to the empty room.

A moment later, the hatch slammed open and Jess popped inside. "Bear." She explained briefly. "I think it wants to go home." She closed the hatch and rejoined Dev, dripping rainwater all over the deck. "See that inlet there?"

"Yes." Dev turned the bow towards it. "Is this where the bear lives? How did you know that?" She peered at her partner in bewilderment

"Bears live here." Jess said. "I don't know if this one does, but we can let it off there." She pointed at an outcropping of rock that overhung the water just barely. "It can figure out what to do after that."

They heard the loud noise again, a rough, barking roaring sound that made the metal vibrate under Dev's fingertips. “Is the bear mad?”

“Bored. Sounds like me when I'm stuck inside too long.” Jess replied.

Dev didn't really think the bear was bored, but she merely nodded and continued to edge towards the sheltered area, seeing a rock overhang just past it where they could probably let the boat sit for a while while the storm passed. She watched through the window intently, looking for evidence of the seals Jess had mentioned, highly entertained with the idea of seeing both animals here on one trip.

“You know what it sounds like?” She said, after the bear made the noise again. “It sounds like she's calling out to someone.”

Jess regarded her with a tolerant grin.

“Maybe there's another bear here.” Dev didn't catch the look. “Maybe she has a friend.” She put the engines into idle as they neared the rocks, and drew in a quick breath as she saw something moving “Oh! Look!”

Jess thumped lightly against the console and peered out the window, blinking a little as she saw two fast moving off white forms galloping towards the boat. “What in the hell?”

Dev's eyes lit up. “They're little bears!” She bounced in place. “Oh! Look at them!” She grabbed the scanner and flicked through it's programming, selecting the record function and focusing it on the animals. Then she set the scanner down and swung the boat sideways a bit, putting the back of it up against the rocks. “Jess, look. She knows them!”

Jess sighed. “She does.” She admitted, watching the bear scramble up onto the side of the boat and then jump to the rocks, where the two smaller animals met her. “Gimme those controls. Go look at it. Chances are you'll never get to see this again.”

Dev didn't hesitate for an instant. She grabbed the scanner and went to the door, working the hatch and popping through it. She scrambled down the steps and forward onto the bow, going around to the side against the rocks where she could get a good look at the bears.

The big bear was greeting the the little ones with every evidence of happiness, licking them as they stood up on their back legs and patted her with their front ones, making small, cawing sounds.

Dev got it on the scanner, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. The little bears didn't seem to mind either the rain or the noisy boat idling next to the rocks, and she got a good shot of them as they raced around the bigger bear in circles.

The bear sat down and let them climb over her, and then rolled on her back and patted them with her front feet.

It was amazing. How had Jess known to bring her exactly here? Dev felt a sense of awe at her partner's intuition. She had known! Of all the places in the whole wide ocean, to bring the boat here, right where the two little bears were waiting for her?

Amazing! She turned and looked up into the control center, seeing her partner leaning on the console and watching the bears with a big grin on her face.

Even if she pretended not to care, she did. Dev nodded a little to herself. Sometimes the proctors were like that. Sometimes, even Doctor Dan was. But the truth of them would shine out at times, like it was with Jess right now. She could see her face, and see the unguarded happiness in it and she knew.

She knew there was a good and big heart in her partner. No matter what she said about her conscience.

Then the rain started to come down harder, and Dev felt the boat move away from the rocks towards the overhang. She walked along the rail, keeping the bears in sight as long as she could, then waved at them as they pulled past.

The big bear looked up at the motion, and opened her mouth, letting out one of the roars.

Amazing. Dev grinned, shutting the scanner down as she shook the icy rain from her eyes and headed back for shelter. It didn't even matter that she was now wet through and cold, not if it meant she'd gotten to see that. She trotted back up the steps as the boat pulled under the overhang, then she paused as it became evident that the overhang was much more than that.

There was a cave there, and the engines sounded suddenly much louder as Jess steered into it, and then they were out of the storm entirely and in a big, dark space.

Jess turned the boat's lights on as Dev entered the control room, and she looked out in surprise as the cave became visible. There was a very rudimentary dock there, and weather worn equipment lockers, and she recalled Jess saying they trained in this place. “That was amazing, wasn't it?”

Jess smiled. “That was pretty cool.” She admitted. “You don't get to see cubs very often.”

“Is that what they were? They were really beautiful.” Dev observed the scanner, bringing up a shot of the two smaller animals and showing it to Jess. “See?” It was a closeup of the two, their appealing faces turned towards the scanner, small pink tongues showing along with the dark eyes, and the small curved ears.

“Mm.” Jess idled the engines. “That one.” She put a fingertip on the screen. “Is almost... almost as cute as you are.” She watched Dev blush a little, then she looked up and her expression changed completely. “Now that on the other hand,isn't cute at all.”

The lights had swept to the deeper part of the cave, and now outlined a large, hulking form that was all too familiar to both of their eyes.

“It's a carrier.” Dev said, after a long shocked moment.

“Bet I know which one it is too.” Jess replied grimly.

“The one that attacked this boat? The one with the pirates?” Dev shifted the scanner and started a routine. “Is this where they are?” She paused and looked up. “Are they here?”

Jess's eyes were flicking everywhere, her hands tense on the controls. “All very good questions Devvie.” She muttered. “Let me park this thing and let's find out. At the very least.. we found us a faster ride.”

“I see.” Dev ran her fingers through her damp hair. “That's very interesting.”

“Could just be getting way too interesting.”

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Jess finished tying up the boat, her ears cocked to pick up anyone approaching. So far, the cavern had been silent and was apparently empty, but she was old timer enough not to trust that.

Dev was standing on the dock, scanning the interior of the cavern with her hand held comp. She had her tech jumpsuit on, and her jacket over it, the gusty wind puffing the pale hair on her head in various directions. Jess watched her for a moment, and then she went over to join her, peering over her shoulder. “Anything?”

Dev studied the screen. “Nothing alive.” She said. “Just the carrier and some frozen dead animals.” She shifted the pack on her back, twin to the one Jess was wearing that contained all their gear.

They had left all the stuff they'd bought for the scientists on the boat, and also, a few of the black diamonds. The rest were tucked into Jess's pack along with the few things they'd picked up for themselves.

Jess relaxed a little. “Let's scope the place out. See what we can find before we steal that carrier.” She started across the ice, pausing for a moment to lean a gloved hand against the ice, lifting her boots up one after the other and slapping her steel spikes into place. “Slippery.”

Her partner nodded, having already extended her own boot appliances. She dug her feet into the surface a little as she followed Jess, conscious of the steady stream of vapor coming from her lips in the cold.

The carrier crouching balefully in the end of the cavern stirred in her a very mixed emotion. Certainly that would get them home faster, but Dev felt a sense of profound disappointment that they weren't going to have just a little while to be still.

And practice that sex thing. Dev sighed and squared her shoulders, putting thoughts of that aside as she climbed up the slanted ice path that led away from the water.

The cavern didn't look lived in. Aside from the few old crates, and some rusted ladders half buried in the ice there was no sign of human habitation, and as they moved up the slope her scanner confirmed that. There were no residual bio markers, save a few traces she tracked to the carrier itself.

That, she reasoned, was likely the one that had attacked them. It had the same silhouette, and the markings on it matched the pictures she'd taken during the battle. She slowed as Jess did, the agent pulling her blaster from it's holster and holding it ready in her hand.

A motion of her thumb, and the safety was off. Dev could hear the faint sound of the internal power pack spooling up and she glanced down again at the comp, sweeping the area past the carrier to see if anyone was going to try and stop them. “No bio returns.” She commented, in a low utterance.

“Good.” Jess said, as she swept the pad the craft was parked on incessantly, her peripheral vision hunting for any motion past the edges of the iced shelf. Even if Dev's comp didn't pick up anything, she was never really sure until her own senses confirmed it.

Quirk of the brain. She knew the tech could be trusted, and she knew in fact this particular techs tech could be trusted, but still. There was a place for human instinct in their business and few knew that better than she did. So she cautiously moved forward onto the platform, feeling the bite of her crampons against the ice. “Carrier giving off heat?”

“No.” Dev said. “Exterior temperature is ambient.”

“Good news.” Jess approached the craft and paused, then knelt to pick up a small piece of ice. She stood and considered, then she tossed the ice at the carrier, both of them twitching a little when it hit the hull and dropped with a faint thunking clang.

Dev studied the comp readout, seeing no reaction in any of the electrical spectrum's to the intrusion. “No scans” She said, as Jess moved very carefully over to where the entrance door was. “I'm not getting any indication systems are active on board.”

She slid the comp into it's holder and walked closer to the vehicle, studying the external engine housings that seemed very old and misshapen to her eyes. She ran a cautious hand over the edge of the surface, feeling it flex under her touch. Her eyes lifted to watch Jess, who was studying the entry pad. “Do you think you can open it?”

“I'm sure I can open it. Question is, can I open it and still have it be operational or anything more than a scattering of burned metal bits coated with my blood?” Jess mused “Ah, hell. Life's short.” She pulled her glove off and reached up to put her hand on the pad.

Dev blinked in surprise, her breath catching as she waited for a response from the carrier, knowing what the systems were programmed to do when unauthorized persons tried to enter them. For a second, she thought she sensed a power surge, then the hatch opened with an anticlimactic click and swung outward.

It smelled old inside. Musty air and the scent of burned electronics wafted out, and Dev's nose wrinkled. “Reminds me of some of the old storage chambers in the creche.” She said.

Jess regarded the inside and shrugged. “G”wan in there and see if we can get airborne in this thing. I”m going to hunt around, see if the pirates left anything.” She watched Dev climb cautiously inside and then she picked up a big chunk of dirty ice and put it in the entryway, so the hatch couldn't close all the way if it developed a mind to. “Be back.”

Dev eased inside the carrier and wrinkled her nose. The inside was dirty, the floor caked with mud and bootprints and all of the surfaces scuffed and worn. There was even adhesive tape holding things together, and Dev spent a moment just looking at everything and wondering if it wasn't safer for them to just stay with the boat.

With a sigh, she edged her way up to the pilot's chair and brushed some caked mud off it, then sat down and put her pack down by her boots. She reviewed the controls for a minute or so, then she

nodded to herself as programming kicked in and she touched the comp and systems boards, mildly surprised when they responded.

On batts, of course, and they were nearly drained. Dev damped the comp and focused on bringing the engines online, hoping the dirty looking pods outside didn't just either blow up or fall off.

She triggered the startup sequence, drawing enough power to bring the propulsion systems online with a slow, tired whining sound that set her teeth on edge. She watched the readouts anxiously, trimming the power leads when they spiked erratically.

For a moment everything went out, then came back up and engines started generating power, sending a light shudder through the frame of the carrier.

Not normal or good. Dev frowned unhappily at the console and scooted up a little closer, concentrating on coaxing the old components into service. It was all mostly off-balance at the leads, and it was obvious to her that no one had done maintenance on the carrier for a very long time.

Senseless, if they had to fly on it. She clucked her tongue a little and started making adjustments, tweaking the batteries as they started to take on charge. Every few seconds she glanced up through the mud and ice encrusted windows, seeing nothing but crashing waves at the entrance and a solid wall of rain outside.

The boat was rocking at it's dock, and very briefly, she wondered if the bear and her little cubs had gotten under cover before the storm hit.

She hoped so. She was glad she'd gotten to see them, in any case.

At last the consoles started to come online and graphs were settling, as she balanced the incoming power from the engines and gave the batteries enough juice to power up everything else. She regarded the comp as it flickered into focus, unsure of whether to even trust anything it was telling her.

The carrier was totally compromised. She could see tape and cables with ports snaking out of places they didn't belong, and she assumed the systems had been hacked to allow anyone to drive it. In their carrier, the controls were keyed to the chips and the bio scans of herself and Jess – even the techs who serviced it couldn't actually start it up and fly it.

Hence, why she had to perform the commissioning flight when the carrier had been put back together. This craft, on the other hand, didn't even check her identity – she hadn't felt the twitch in the chips at all, and the hatch had opened at just a touch, there was nothing in comp that indicated it knew who had opened the door.

Dev glanced outside, then peered around to the side, where Jess had disappeared. There was no sign of her partner and she found that was making her very unhappy. It took a lot of effort to drag her attention away from that thought, and back to the carrier.

With another sigh, she started a pre flight routine, her hands a little hesitant on the much older controls. Once that had begun, she got up and started examining the interior, checking to see what was inside it that might be useful to them. There was no expendable storage anywhere, everything seemed to have been stripped out to make room for people to ride inside it and it was mostly bare frame and strapping.

The weapons console was so battered, there was no legends on anything anymore. Just a couple of knobs and the grips that would fire the guns. The chair was a bare frame too, and Dev wrinkled her nose as she though about the contrast between this, and the new chair Jess had been so happy with.

She hadn't regarded their craft as either luxurious or comfortable, but compared to this one, it certainly was. Dev checked the water supply and found it empty, then peered into the extremely basic sanitary facility and wished she hadn't. “Hm.” She hoped they wouldn't be in this thing long, just long enough to fly it to the other cavern and pick up their own.

Unless Jess would want to bring it back to the citadel for them to study, of course, or... Dev paused, wondering if her partner might not just want to destroy it, so that no one could use it again.

That seemed likely. Her peripheral vision caught motion, and she turned and peered out of the hatch, hoping to see Jess's familiar form heading her way. Instead, she saw a sleek looking animal jump out of the water onto the ice, making a loud noise that startled the life out of her.

It was far away, on the pier next to the boat, and she watched it in fascination as it galumphed along the ice. It had a small head and it was gray, and as it got closer and she could see it's face, she wondered suddenly if it was a seal.

Wow. She bounded back and got her comp, and brought it back over to scan the animal, hoping it was, since she really wanted to see the creature that had so appealed to Jess.

Dev smiled as it came closer.

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The cavern was crude and basic, and always had been. Jess made her way along a hand chopped passageway, listening carefully for either cracking ice or pirates. She had her blaster in one hand and her knife in the other, and she was moving with as much grace as she could on ice with crampons on.

She was really glad they'd found the old carrier. It meant she could get back to the citadel a lot faster, find out what the recall was about, and, as a bonus, get props for finding the old thing and a pirate hideout.

Pure dumb luck, of course, but she'd take it.

Now she just had to check the back cavern to make sure she wasn't leaving any of the bastards at her back and she could take off with Dev, go pick up their carrier, and get back home.

As she neared the end of the passageway she slowed, cocking her head forward and listening hard ahead of her. There was nothing but the crackling of ice, but she stopped anyway, opening her mouth and drawing in the air, trying to taste any hint of anything out of place on it.

A puff of air hit her, and she twitched as the smell of death got into her nose. She started forward with more caution, her breathing starting to slow as her focus tightened. After a few moments, she stopped and triggered her comms on shortwave. “Dev, Dev.”

After a pause, the earpiece rustled. “Here.”

“Secure.” Jess uttered. “Tac.”

“Ack.” Her partner responded at once.

With a nod, Jess released the comms and continued forward. As she came around a bend in the passage, she got a lungful of stench, and grimaced. “Ah, this ain't gonna be pretty.” Another bend, and she could see the back cavern ahead of her, a large space she remembered them using for tactical storage and the ice class.

Now as she entered, she stopped and quickly scanned the space, finding both death, and the source of the stench which wasn't it. Sprawled over the ice were large, heavy looking animals she recognized, and that was what smelled, but scattered among them were black forms frozen in the ice splayed out in patches of red stain.

One of the animals spotted her, and barked.

Jess held her ground, hoping the sea lions weren't in the mood to rush her and edged closer to the first of the bodies.

Frozen solid, it's face was stretched into a rictus of pain, one arm and part of it's shoulder blown away by what looked like a blaster. It might have been one of the attackers from the other night – the body was encased in a jumpsuit just like hers, but the face wasn't familiar to her.

It made sense if they were the same. Jess walked over to the second body, which had been cut completely in half. She studied it, then pointed her own blaster at the ice and set it to heat, directing the beam at the frozen form until it separated from the ground.

She turned it over and found herself looking at someone she did know. “Damn.”

A strong prickling tweaked her shoulder blades, and she looked quickly around, seeing the sea lions start to shift around and move. She took a step back and turned slowly in a circle, searching for the source of their disturbance. Across the cavern she spotted a half buried box, and she moved around the open water in the center to examine it.

The sea lions shifted, and one dove in the water, disappearing underneath the surface. Jess remembered there was an undersea entrance to the place, and she was careful where she put her boots as she felt the ice under her shifting. A brief grin touched her lips, remembering the dare she'd won over that narrow, icy cold gap.

Counting the bodies, she nodded as the tally seemed to match the party that attacked them. She got over to the box and kicked it open, surprised when she recognized the contents as Interforce tactical gear.

New. She picked up a kit and looked at it. Brand new, with the current quarter's dates on it.

“Huh.” She could see another passage behind the box, that she didn't remember. She triggered comms. “Dev Dev.” She was reasonably sure the most dangerous thing around her was that bull sea lion who'd been eying her, but something inside her tickled her to contact her partner anyway. “You there?”

“Here. Is everything all right?” Dev responded.

“Yeah. The bus up?”

“Yes.” The bio alt answered. “There is a .. I think there is a seal near me.”

Jess grinned briefly. “Sea lion. Found a lot of em back here. Going to check out a hall. Be back over there in two minutes.”

“Excellent.”

Jess clicked off and stepped around the box, ducking past the embedded glow lamp in the ceiling and moving down the passage. As she half suspected, it revealed a crude living space, full of sleeping bags and furs, and the remnants of human garbage.

If nothing else, it confirmed these pirates had stolen the Interforce name, nothing else. She'd expected to find at least one chamber kept in their style, but even the least grungy was still unbearably messy. She walked inside it though, and studied the interior.

Very basic. Just a hole chopped out of the ice, with a single lamp giving a very dim light inside. There was a hammock with both ends pinned into the walls, a plastic box for storage, and in the corner, a round metal pipe with a cover, that was sunk down into the ice.

Jess grimaced in pure human reflex, at the thought of using that very primitive sanitary facility. She shook her head and went to the box, opening the top and looking inside. Her jaw tightened and she reached inside, picking up a set of creds, and a small plastic case she could see the glitter of chips through the top of. She tucked them into a pocket and sorted through the rest, mostly cans of stale looking biscuits and tea.

“And you gave us up for this?” She muttered. “Shithead.” She left the detritus where it was and moved on, going to the end of the chopped corridor and poking her head into what was apparently their main living chamber.

It contained nothing but a mixture of hacked together chairs and a surface frozen into the ice that was probably a table. Everything was strewn everywhere, and it occurred to her that whoever had killed the pirates had probably also taken whatever valuable items they found.

She pulled the case from her pocket and regarded it. Then she put it back and stood still, letting her head swing from left to right, committing the scene to memory. She turned and walked slowly back up the corridor, stopping to look inside all the chambers and duplicating the scan.

Techs had comp. Agents had eidetic memory that was inbred but also trained, to make record of things when comp wasn't available or practical. Jess knew she could have asked Dev to come

back here with her scanner, but this would work as well, once she let them put the leads on and replayed her memories.

Not exactly as reliable, when you were up against discipline since there was always a chance you could forcefully misremember something, but in this case, it would do.

Jess left the chambers and went to a small rise of ice, jumping up onto it and repeating her slow review of the bigger cavern. The sea lions watched her curiously, but didn't seem inclined to do anything else and she hopped down after a minute and started towards the back tunnel.

So. Someone had found the pirates, and obliterated them. If that was the case, why not also destroy the carrier? That was a valuable transport despite it's age, and leaving it seemed off kilter to her. On the other hand, the carrier had been left intact, and so had the Interforce credentials – maybe it was a message to them?

To her? But how in the hell would they expect her to happen by here?

The precise blaster fire pretty much fingerprinted the other side. The question foremost in her mind though was, why? The pirates were doing their best to trash Interforce's reputation – so why would the other side object? Why weren't then, in fact, behind the whole scheme?

Wasn't really adding up. Jess picked her way among the bodies and edged around the sea lions, most of whom were sprawled asleep, strangely uncaring of her human presence among them. Motion caught her eye and she turned her head, to see one of the big animals ripping at one of the dead pirates, chewing a chunk of frozen flesh and blinking amiably at her.

Jess shrugged wryly. “Bon appetite.” She got up onto the ledge that led to the boat dock cavern, glad to leave the stench behind her as she entered the narrow passageway and thought about how to phrase her report to base.

Training camp compromised. Jess wondered when the last class had been held there? Probably not anytime in the recent pass, based on what she'd found. It had been a while since the last class graduated, after all. Jess emerged into the cavern and paused, spotting the carrier, now obviously powered, the engine cowling emitting steam into the air. Seated across from it was a big sea lion, watching with intelligent interest as the various control planes moved as Dev tested them. “Hey bubba.” She waved at the sea lion.

It barked at her.

Jess saw Dev's head turn in the window and spot her, and a moment later the hatch creaked open. With a sense of surreal normality she boarded the carrier, glancing around at the decrepit interior with a grimace. “Hey Devvie.”

“I”m glad you returned.” Dev said. “There are others approaching this area.”

“Uh oh.” Jess stripped out of her coat as she sealed the hatch, moving forward to look at the scan. “Maybe they're just looking for shelter. Storms about to come over the top of us.” She studied the readout. “Ident?”

“Not Interforce.” Dev said. “Preliminary comp indicates two RS25007 medium long range transports.”

“Bad guys.” Jess sighed. “Well let's stay put and quiet. See if they pass us by. There are a ton of caves in the area.” She leaned on the back of the chair Dev was sitting in. “They're heavy armed. We could take them out in our rig, but from the looks of this one it'll be enough for us just to fly.”

Dev nodded emphatic agreement. “The power packs are at only 10 percent effective. I don't know how much we can send to the weapons systems.”

“Definitely stay put.” Her partner gently blew in her ear. “Maybe we can find out what they're doing and earn us a bonus.”

Dev regarded the comp, then she turned her head slightly and looked up at Jess's profile. “Right now?”

Jess kissed her. “Not exactly right this minute.”

“Excellent.”

**

The storm finally subsided, and as far as Jess was concerned, that kinda sucked. Her body was all warm and sensually stimulated and she really wanted nothing more than to keep sharing that big, and rickety bare shelf she and Dev were perched on and to hell with the bastards outside.

Jess sighed, convinced she was likely losing her mind.

“Comp shows them moving.” Dev commented.

“Yeah, I know.” Her partner agreed. “Guess we better get our asses going, huh?”

Dev considered that. “Well, do you want to chase after them, or let them get away without seeing us?”

Jess made a deeply thoughtful noise in her throat. Then she surrendered to duty and got up, running her hands through her hair as she pondered the idea that coincidentally it seemed her bio alt companion was also losing her mind in the same kind of way.

Weird and odd and exciting and completely absorbing to the point she had to wonder if they weren't going to fly themselves right into an iceberg because of it and not even care.

Dev had gotten up and gone to the pilot's seat, perching on it as her hands started their disciplined dance over the controls, pausing only to hitch her jumpsuit back up onto her shoulders and fasten the catches Jess had so recently undone for her. She ignored the comms from the carrier, settling the buds connected to her own portable comp instead.

“This thing going to lift?” Jess went over and sat down on the raw rack provided for the weapons station. It poked her in the back with extreme discomfort and she seriously hoped Dev would not be doing any of her more extreme aerobatics before they could get back to their own carrier and her comfortable new bucket.

“I think so.” Dev looked back over her shoulder. “Should we try?”

Jess sighed and waved her hand. “Go for it. Might as well find out inside the damn cave. If we crash land at least I can swim.”

“I can sort of swim.” Dev settled her hands and feet on the controls and triggered the lifting jets. With a drunken stagger, the craft lifted up off the ice, skewing sideways before she got enough thruster control to steady their flight. “Hm.” She made some adjustments. “I don't remember this device looking so unstable when it attacked us.”

Jess was holding on tight to her seat, peering up at her partner. “That didn't sound good.” She ventured. 'I was only halfway joking about the whole swimming thing. If this is going to take a dive, put it back down.”

“I find it very hard to understand how someone would keep a carrier in this type of condition when they expect it to fly.” Dev's voice took on as much of a disapproving tone as she was capable of. “It's just not correct.” She made another adjustment and the carrier leveled out, the engines producing a more normal rumble. “Hmph.”

“Wrencher.” Jess chuckled softly. “Bet you cant wait to get back to our bus.”

“Absolutely.” Dev said, working hard to keep the carrier going in a correct direction. “Very much looking forward to it.” She aimed the vehicle at the entrance to the docking cavern, watching the scan closely as they emerged into the free air, the rain still coming down and coating the bay in a deep gray mist.

The gray masked them, and against the rough water, the carrier was almost invisible. Dev hovered a moment, getting a feel for the directional jets before she moved cautiously out over the ruffled surface, glancing in the rear scan to find nothing but ice behind them half obscured with rain.

She took a deep breath and settled into her seat, keeping low to the water as the scan picked up the two transports rising on the far side of the bay.

“Jess.” A touch on her back made her twitch a little, but then Jess was leaning on the console next to her. “There they are.”

“There they are.” Jess repeated. “And what they are, is the bad guy's stock transports. What in the hell are they doing up here?” She studied the profiles. Both were about as wide as the old carrier they were in, and twice as long, designed to hold cargo or people on long haul voyages.

Lightly armed. Jess searched the sides of them for mods, and found only the standard guns forward, no unusual profile that might hide the kind of heavy weaponry they had on their own rig.

She checked the nav, pondering the possibility the damn things were just lost. They were in the no man's land, after all, just the wrong side of the continental shelf that marked the start of her side's territory.

Dev eased the carrier forward, using the craggy islands in the middle of the bay and the mist to hide their presence. She suspected the enemy had scan too, but why they hadn't reacted to it by now was a mystery to her. She could see them lifting up cautiously, and then she realized why they hadn't seen them as the side of the forward one cleared the edge of the island and they could fully see them.. “Jess, look.”

Jess was busy looking. “Took a hit.” She studied the hole in the side of the transport. “From one of ours. That's a sigma twelve land based.” She tapped something into the portable comp, and then leaned on the console again. “Wonder which base they came close enough to for that.” She drummed her fingers on the console. “They stray too close to Sidney?”

Dev slid closer, as the two transports hovered, the one that was damaged moving around as though testing stabilizers. Given the gaping hole in the side, she understood that, and now that she was looking for it, the other transport was missing a directional tail fin. “They are both damaged.”

“Sure are.” Jess said. “Now I know why they didn't look for us. They were hiding to save their skins.”

They were both looking at the hole when a flutter of motion turned the gap from black to white to black again, and then they could see bodies struggling.

“What in the hell?” Jess leaned further. “Get that on comp.”

Dev held the carrier steady and directed the portable scanner at the action, as the fight continued for a brief moment, before the transport abruptly heeled over and then pitched skyward, it's engines revving as it sped off. The second craft bolted after it, leaving them in their old, stolen rig behind.

“W.. “ Jess bit down the urge to chase them. “Let's get our bus.” She said. “Somethings going on.” She pushed off the boards and headed back to her seat.

Dev nodded. “Yes.” She agreed. “Let me recalibrate this for nav and.. “ She paused, blinking at the screen. Then she made an adjustment and peered at the readout. “Jess.”

Hearing the tension, Jess swerved back towards her and peered over her shoulder, as Dev manipulated the image on the screen and set it to maximum zoom.

The hole in the transport abruptly resolved, and the faint, far off struggling figures sharpened into recognizable forms. Two of the bad guys, one that she knew, and a third that made Dev suck in her breath in shock. “Doctor Dan!”

Then all three disappeared and the transport started moving, the image ending in the comp.

Jess straightened up, for a long moment completely still and silent Then she exhaled. “Bet I know what that recalls' about.” She said, grimly. “They must have gotten to Base 10.”

Dev felt stunned. “They've got Doctor Dan!” She said. “They were hitting him!”

Jess picked up the scan and replayed it. “He was hitting them back.” She remarked dryly "C'mon, Dev. Let's get our rig and get back to base. See what they want to do about it.”

Dev put her hands on the controls again, but slowly. “We're not going to go help him?” She asked, in a soft, distressed voice. “Jess!”

“Not in this thing.” Jess nudged her. “Get moving. We need to get an encrypt and decent guns.” She went back and took her seat as she felt the carrier lift and start to speed up. “Son of a bitch. Did they grab him from Base 10 or was it an inside job?”

Incredible. The first attempt had seemed audacious, but they'd turned it back and she figured they put a bigger guard on.

Or did they? Could it be part of the leak? Jess glanced up at the window and saw Dev's expression, a mixture of anxiety and fear that surprised her a little. “They took him for a reason, Dev. They won't hurt him at least until they get him back.” She offered.

“We should help him.” Dev said, quietly. “He's a good person.”

“We might end up doing that when we get back to base. Bain will tell us what he wants us to do.” Jess said. “We might have been recalled specifically for that.”

Dev's eyes met hers in the reflection of the curved window. “Why do we have to wait, though, if they want us to do that? Wont' that take a lot of time, going back there?” She asked. “Won't they get away? What if they hurt him?”

“What if... Dev, we have to go back because they recalled us.” Jess said. “It's a rule. We don't obey it they'll send someone out to take us down. That won't help him either.”

Her partner was silent for a long moment. “I see.” She nodded faintly. “I understand what that means. I just wish we could talk to them and see if they would let us go.” She paused, then cleared her throat. “Or not ask them and go anyway.”

Jess felt a little dumbfounded. The last thing she expected her biological alternative, born and live by the law partner to be suggesting was a deliberate breaking of the rules. “Um.” She sorted through her options. “I said maybe we could get an encrypt session back on our bus, and maybe.. hey maybe when we call in they'll send us back for him.”

That seemed to cheer Dev up a little. “You think they would do that?” She pushed the throttles forward a little, getting the lumbering craft to speed up. “I”m sure they'd want us to go help Doctor Dan.”

Would they? Jess fastened the bare straps of the seat around her. She'd gotten a sense that Bain and he were friends, but in the corps friends were negotiable currency. Would Bain use him if he had to? Jess guessed that yes, he would. That was one of their skills, after all.

No sentimentality. You just achieved your goals, and there was nothing personal involved. Jess glanced up to find Dev still watching her in the reflection, a look of worried trust on her face.

Yeah. Nothing personal. Jess sighed and rubbed her temples.

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Hard to say which one of them was more relieved when they came around the last bend of ice in the middle of a sleet storm and saw the iceberg that housed the fisherman's main docking facility. The place was deserted, according to the scanner which picked up only the residual markers of their carrier itself.

Dev set the old carrier down outside on the top of the ice sheet, and shut it down as quickly as she could. The engine pods had almost stopped generating power, and though she hadn't wanted to bother Jess with it, since her partner seemed to be thinking hard, their environmental systems had shut down a short time before.

She released her restraints and put on her jacket, fastening the catches as Jess opened the hatch and ducked a face-full of stinging sleet.

“Put your hood up.” Jess seated her blaster and extended her crampons, turning her back to the wind as she got out of the decrepit vessel and fastened the chest straps on her pack. “Hurry up Dev. Storm's getting worse.”

Freaking storms. Dev was developing a true dislike for them, since they seemed to always be preventing them from getting somewhere they needed to be. She got her pack on and followed Jess, sucking in a shocked breath as the icy wind blasted her.

She grabbed the hatchway and held on, as she was buffeted hard, then felt a grip on her arm and then Jess was pressed up against her. "Wow."

"Yeah." Jess locked arms with her and they moved cautiously along the ice, bending over to keep a lower profile against the wind. "Stay down. If it shifts and blows us into the water, we're screwed."

Dev didn't even bother wondering what that meant. "Okay." She agreed, as she took a firm hold on her partner and concentrated on keeping on her feet as they inched their way down the ice wall towards the water.

She was disturbed and upset. But she knew concentrating on that and not on climbing would likely end up with her being in extreme discomfort and so somehow she put her upset aside for a while and trusted in Jess to know what was best for them.

She was a natural born, after all.

"Easy." Jess ducked, as a wave crashed against the wall and doused them both. "Oh crap."

Brr. Dev found words driven right out of her by the chill. She blinked hard to remove the seawater from her eyes and then grabbed for Jess as another wave caught her and almost pulled her off the wall. She gripped a crack in the ice with one hand, and hauled her partner back with the other, feeling the sting of the sleet against her skin.

Highly discomforting.

"Thanks." Jess got her grip on the ice back and glanced at her. "Let's get our asses down from here." She moved faster, hopping over some icicles and starting downward with Dev right behind her. They reached the base of the iceberg just as rumbling peal of thunder vibrated through them and shivered loose a chunk of the ice wall.

"Jess!" Dev caught it out of the corner of her eye and bolted forward, thumping into the taller woman and sending her hopping forward as the ice crashed down behind them and dusted them with sharp, cold particles. "Oh!"

Jess went with the motion, hurdling the last chunks of ice and bolting into the ice cavern hidden by the curve of the burg. "Dev!" She twisted around, trying to catch sight of her tech. "Hey!"

"Right here." The bio alt skidded in after her, crashing into the wall as they were abruptly protected from the vicious weather. "Wow."

"Wow." Jess repeated, shaking herself. She pressed back against the wall and cautiously peered past the curve of it, wary even though the scan had marked it empty. You never could tell, after all. Sometimes the ice made comp crazy, and you could find yourself on the wrong end of a blaster that way.

But there were no boats in the dock, and the inside of the big cavern was, in fact, empty. Jess relaxed a little and moved in further, running her eyes over the carrier parked on the rear deck. "Glad to see that thing."

"Me too." Dev said, quietly.

They walked quickly across the frozen floor and up the ramp to the back area, Jess striding ahead quickly and touching the hatch pad on the side of their rig.

The hatch opened and the ramp extended, welcoming them with a scent of fresh new components and silicone. Jess waited for Dev to slip past her and then she closed the hatch, sealing them into a small bit of peace and quiet and safety. She went over and stowed her pack, then went to her seat and dropped into it. "Ugh."

Dev got her own pack into it's holding position and stripped out of her heavy outside jacket. She hung it on the back of her pilots chair then sat down herself, very glad to feel the seat conform to her and swivel into position. It felt very good to be back in this space, and she took a moment to savor it before she faced the consoles and contemplated starting every thing up. "Should we call the base?"

She looked in the mirror when Jess didn't answer, finding her partner peering up at the ceiling with her hands clasped over her stomach. "Jess? Maybe they'll tell us to go help Doctor Dan."

Jess got up and walked over, taking a seat on the ground next to Dev's chair. "They won't tell us that." She said, quietly. "They would already have sent us." She clasped her hands together, her long fingers twisting slightly. "Dev, we have to go back to base."

Dev exhaled. "What if they hurt him?" She asked, in a soft voice. "You said he was a friend.. that he was part of Interforce, didn't you? Wouldn't they want you to help?" She leaned forward and put her hand on Jess's wrist."Why wouldn't they tell us to go help him?"

Jess sighed. "It's not that simple, Dev." She said. "They recalled us. That means they need us there. It might have something to do with them getting him out. They could have really damaged the citadel. People there could need help too."

Dev fell silent. "I see." She finally murmured.

"So soon as it stops sleeting and the winds drop, we'll get going." Jess said. "Maybe... maybe when we get back there, I can talk to Bain. See if he'll let me take a squad out." She watched Dev's face, seeing the sadness of understanding there. She knew she wasn't fooling her partner ."Or maybe he won't, but we need to go back." She acknowledged the point.

Dev knew. If they waited even another little while, there would be no tracking the transports and she would never see Doctor Dan again. She knew it, and looking into Jess's pale eyes, she knew her partner knew it too. She also knew Jess didn't owe her any explanation and that her insistence was giving her a lot of discomfort.

It made her very unhappy.

Jess put a hand on her knee. Dev looked up to find an unexpected compassion in her partner's eyes, and that made her feel even more unhappy. "I"m sorry."

"Sokay." Jess rubbed her knee with the side of her thumb. "He's a friend. It's tough."

"Yes."

"I know." Jess said, looking away. "After my father retired, he kept low key as hell, but one day.. " She exhaled "They got him. They took him. My mother called me and I went to ops and.." She stopped talking. "I argued with them and that's what got me four zaps."

Dev covered Jess's hand with her own, feeling a lot of discomfort both at her own upset and now at her partners. "Oh Jess."

"They sent his body back in pieces." Jess concluded. "So it didn't help either of us."

Dev felt extreme discomfort, unsure of what to say.

"So I get it, Dev." Jess raised her eyes. "But if we break this rule, I'll get a lot more than four, and you'll end up going back topside."

Dev felt her heart give a double thump. "What?" She stammered.

"They'll wash you out." Jess said. "They won't deal with a tech who breaks ranks.. breaks rules." She saw Dev's eyes grow round and wide with horror. "They'll cancel your contract."

Back to the creche? Dev's mouth went dry and she knew a fear of a totally different kind. Back to the creche, and have to leave Jess?

Go back to being just one of the many?

Dev found out right at that moment just how human she actually was as she was flooded with an intense wash of utter self interest that nearly made her faint. . "I see." She took a breath and released it. "Okay. I understand." Her eyes lifted to Jess's. "I don't want that to happen."

"No."

"I don't want to leave you." The bio alt added, in a very small voice.

"No." Jess repeated softly. "No I don't want that either."

They both looked at each other, and at the same time, sighed. Dev licked her lips and swallowed. "I don't like thinking about this."

Jess grimaced a little. “Me either.” She got up and went to the dispenser, glancing outside. The sleet was still coming down and she could see huge rollers crashing against the iceberg's entrance. “Let's get something hot into us.”

The blond woman swiveled around back to the controls, and started doing her preflight checks. The first thing she checked was the recorder, scanning it quickly to determine if anyone had approached the carrier.

They hadn't. She was glad. The systems were all as she'd left them, power levels were normal, everything seemed fine. Except for her. Dev spared a hand off the console to rub the bridge of her nose, hoping her stomach upset would go away before it overwhelmed her.

She checked comms, but other than the forwarded recall, there was nothing in storage. Still feeling a lot of discomfort, she started turning up systems, bringing the consoles online and spooling up the engines. Jess's words kept echoing in her head, though, and she felt her breathing tighten every time she thought about going topside.

It felt even worse than thinking about Doctor Dan.

Something in her knew that was selfish, but she was helpless against the chill in her guts even thinking about going back to her sterile little pod, and seeing the looks from everyone up there. Back to being a dev unit. Just another failed idea.

Oh. Ugh. And maybe... without Doctor Dan?

A shiver worked down her back. Dev forced herself to set aside her worry and focus on her work. Her work was important, and she knew Jess was counting on her to get them home.

Home. Dev swallowed hard and got everything online, slipping her ear cups on and tuning comms to listen. The external sensors of the carrier brought her the sound of the storm, and the crackling of ice and she nearly jumped when Jess very gently curled her hand around a warm cup. “Oh!”

“Take it easy.” Jess patted her on the back. “Don't freak out on me, okay?”

Dev took a sip of the hot liquid. “I won't.” She said. “I don't even know what a freak is, much less how to get one out.” She exhaled slowly. “I hope the storm stops soon. I don't want us to get in trouble.”

“It's gonna be fine, Dev.” Jess said. “We'll work it all out when we get back. We don't.. I don't think we have enough information to know what's going on anyway.”

“Okay.”

Jess let her hands drop onto Dev's shoulders, but she remained quiet. She watched the ruffled water as she started up an absent, gentle massage, listening to her partner swallow. As she felt her own breathing come under control, the tension under her fingertips relaxed.

Dev glanced at the comp. “I think met is showing a break.” She said. “Should we go?”

“Go.” Jess said, releasing her and returning to her console, dropping into her seat and fastening the body restraints as she felt the rumble of the engines as the power to them increased. She reached over and picked up her own tea cup, leaning back as the landing jets fired and they started to move.

She had a little time, now. Time for them to fly from where they were to the base, a long flight since they wouldn’t be stopping at Quebec to break it.

Time for her to think, and to consider things. Review all the comp. “Want a snack, Dev? I'll fire something up once we get clear of the ice.”

There was a long moment's silence, then her pilot cleared her throat. “I'm not really hungry, thank you.”

Jess sighed and closed her eyes. Plenty of time to deal with her freaking out tech. “Yeah me either.”

Maybe too much time.

**

It was dark and there was another storm. Dev blinked and rubbed her eyes, focusing hard on the forward scan that filled in details of their path she couldn't see through the window. Her shoulders were tense, and she was tired, but she'd kept quite the last few hours while Jess worked over the comp in her station.

A glance in the mirror showed her partner leaning forward, staring at the comp pad with her elbows resting on her knees and her chin braced on her fists, a perceptible furrow creasing her forehead.

Dev went back to her controls, flexing her hands a little as she checked the course. She had the carrier on autonav, but the weather was shoving them around a lot, and she didn't want to stray too far from the throttles.

Deciding they were on safe course for the moment, though, she triggered the release on her strapping and stood up, stretching her body out as she walked quietly over to the drink dispenser.

“How's met?” Jess asked, after a moment.

“We are going around the edge of a storm.” Dev answered promptly, as she selected a beverage and watched it be assembled. “I think once we get past it our flight will be smoother.”

“Anything on comms?”

“No.” Dev took her cup and turned, leaning against the console and regarding her partner. “Just two nav beacons on autonomous.”

Jess leaned back in her chair and put her hands behind her head. “That's strange.” She said. “Should be some chatter.” She regarded Dev's slim form, encased in it's lined jumpsuit. “Do an all scan and see if you pick anything up. At the least, Northern should be checking in – we're not far from there.”

Dev nodded, “I will.” She said. “Do you think someone saw or heard the other machine blowing up?”

Jess's lips tensed into a smile. “You'd think, huh? That old training cave is inside Northerns scan range. I should get them on comms and tell them I took care of their pirate problem for them.”

“I think they will be surprised.”

“I think you're right.” Jess pulled a pad over and synced comms to her station. She put her headset on and tapped out a code, setting the comms channel to scan the local bandwidths. “Let's see if they have a beacon out.”

Dev went back to her seat, but didn't take it. She stood by her chair watching the consoles, giving her back a chance to straighten and lose it's stiffness. She could feel the rumble of the carrier's engines through the soles of her boots, and she resisted the urge to close her eyes.

She was still upset, and still worried about Doctor Dan. But she was also tired, and looking forward to getting back to the citadel. Maybe Jess was right, and they had more information about what had happened, and then they could figure out what to do about it.

Maybe they were already doing something about it – she thought maybe the man Bain might have sent someone out already, to try and help, or at least find out where they were taking him.

She hoped so. Maybe by the time they got back to the citadel, it would be over and Doctor Dan would be safe. Dev leaned against the front console and looked out into the darkness. It would be nice to get just some time to rest and sleep, she reasoned, in the comfortable bed in her quarters.

“Huh.”

Dev turned, and saw the frown on Jess's face. “What's wrong?”

“Not getting anything on scan.” Jess muttered. “Not even a listening beacon.”

'What does that mean?”

Jess folded her arms over her chest. “I'm not sure.” She admitted. “It could just be met interference. Happens sometimes, or maybe the rig at Northern got knocked off line. That happens sometimes too.” Her eyes flicked over the pad. “I don't want to send a squirt out – it'll ident us.”

Dev set her cup into it's holder and walked back over to where her partner was sitting, coming round the side of the weapons console and looking at the comms display Jess had up. The spectrum was empty, that she could see herself, without even the background scatter she was used to flickering once in a while. “That is quiet.”

“Too quiet.” Jess said. Then she exhaled and pulled the pad over, bringing up the control surface and keying in an encrypted data channel. “I didn't really want to do this.”

Dev just watched quietly, one hand on the back of Jess's seat, as she finished setting up the call request and initiated it. She pressed her ear cup a little more firmly and concentrated, as they waited for a response.

For a very long moment there was nothing. Then a soft burble sounded and the comms link went from pulsing to green. “Ten, ten.” Jess said.

“Ack.” The response came back.

“Inbound, passed North. No sig.” Jess reported.

“Ack.” The response repeated. “Standby.”

Jess settled back in her seat. “Least we got a response.” She remarked. “I wonder if they heard something.”

“Drake.”

The voice coming back startled both of them, and made Jess lean forward. “Here, sir.” She started moving her knee in a nervous motion.

“Don't bother with North.” Bain said. “Where the hell have you been?”

“As far as Market Island, sir. Had to transfer back via boat, steal a pirate's old carrier, blow that up, get my bus back, and now we're inbound.” Jess said, succinctly. “Situation?”

“Just get here as soon as you can, Drake.” Bain said. “We've got trouble.”

Jess felt a mixture of excitement and pleasure, along with a tinge of apprehension. “Ack.” She fell back into battle speech.

“Tell him about Doctor Dan?” Dev whispered, anxiously watching her face.

Jess hesitated, then triggered the comms again. “Sir.”

“Drake?”

“We spotted two black trans outbound with battle damage.”

Now the silence was on the other end. “Ah.” Bain finally said. “Interesting coincidence.”

Jess and Dev exchanged looks. “I'll squirt the comp.” Jess said, when the silence continued. “We saw activity.”

“Do not bother, Drake. Just get here.” Bain said. “Out.”

Jess studied the closed channel for a moment, then she reached up and canceled the sub carrier. “So.”

Dev went back to her area and sat down in her pilot's chair, triggering the restraints. She leaned forward into flight position, and ran her eyes over the controls, trying hard not to throw up her recently drunk tea. “So I guess you were correct.” She said, after a minute. “They wouldn’t send us.”

“No I figured they wouldn't” Jess answered quietly. “They knew what my vector was. They'd have rerouted us when they sent the recall.”

“I see.”

“Sorry, Dev.”

“It's all right.” Dev said, after a bit.

Jess got up and came over, sitting down on the carrier deck next to her chair and leaning back against the console. She extended her long legs out and sighed. “Let's wait until we get back there and find out what happened.” She said. “I know I keep saying that, but I don't know what else to tell you.”

Dev glanced down at her. “It really is okay.” She said. “I just remembered something that Doctor Dan once told me. He said it was so important to get all the facts first, before you do something because, for example, if you're thinking of walking out a door, it would be very helpful to know first if there was vacuum outside.”

Her partner chuckled softly. “Yeah.” She acknowledged. “It's a hoary old saying in the corps. Know what teeth are in the mouth you're sticking your hand into.” She reached over and put her hand on Dev's calf. “Glad you get that.”

Dev did get it. She wasn't entirely sure she agreed with it, but she understood that she had very few options to do anything else. One of the other things she'd learned from Doctor Dan was patience, and now she knew she had to be patient and wait to see what would happen.

“Want some rations?” Her partner asked. “We've got another twelve to the base.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “But maybe we could get some rest. My eyes are bothering me.” She admitted. “We're past the storm now and met's clear the rest of the way.”

Jess smiled more easily. “In that case, let me get the bunks set up. Chances are we don't get any downtime when we get back so we'll take advantage of some good weather now.” She got up and patted Dev's shoulder, heading back to the rear of the carrier to put the sleep platform in place.

She wasn't sure if she should feel anxious or not. The fact they'd gotten Bain on the wire as soon as she called in seemed like it was a good thing, but he'd sounded pissed off about her taking so much time to get back. She pulled the shelf down into place, and popped the doors on the sleep bag storage, tugging the two plush bags out and sliding them into place.

Well, she'd been halfway across the planet on a mission. Jess patted the two bags and turned to rummage in the ration case when she stopped, staring into it as her mind registered what she was doing. She looked over at Dev, who was taking readings and adjusting knobs, pretty much what a tech was supposed to do, but here she was not only catering to her partner but enjoying doing so.

What the hell?

“Thank you.” Dev had joined her. “Should I get you some tea?”

“Um.” Jess pulled out two ration kits and handed her one. “Yeah, sure.. ah. Thanks.” She sat down on one of the fold out stools and opened her meal. It was fish rolls and mushroom cakes, and just looking at it felt like being back in the citadel. “That stuff on the boat was better than most of this.”

Dev was seated next to her, busy with her own box. “Do you not like it?” She took a bite of the fish roll. “I think it's fine. A lot better that some of the things we had in the creche.” She felt a sense of anxiety thinking about that suddenly, a mental image of being back there, at those tables, looking at those sterile trays coming up into her mind. “The food on the boat was good too, but the best thing was those shrimps. “

“In Quebec?”

“Yes.”

It seemed so long ago. Jess smiled, and bit into her fish roll. “We'll get back there again.” She said. “Y'know they have a winter festival in a month or two. We can go for that. Most of the citadel does.”

“Is that like a party?”

“A little.” Jess felt herself relaxing. “But it's more fun.”

Dev remained quiet for a while while she ate. “I think I'd like that very much.” She finally said, when they were almost finished. “I hope we get a chance to do it.”

“We will. I promise.” Jess put her wrapping away in the recycling bin and unzipped her jumpsuit, stripping it off and letting it hang from her waist. She sat down on the edge of the sleeping platform and pulled the aid kit from the drawer underneath it, removing a cleaning pad and wiping off the almost healed wound on her shoulder.

Dev put her wrappings away and finished her tea, setting the cup into the holder and walking over to the sleeping shelf. She pulled the catches down on her lined over-suit and took it off, feeling a sense of slight chill as she folded it up and tucked it neatly into one of the two lockers built into the carrier wall.

That left her in her under-suit, and she sat down on the shelf, letting her legs dangle as she waited for Jess to finish. “Your cut is almost gone.”

“Yeah.” Jess had smeared some antiseptic cream on the jagged line. “Just don't like to take chances, specially after that damn stab in the back.”

Dev reached out and stroked her arm, tracing the burned in patterns. “Jess, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Jess eyed her partner.

“Can I get one of these, when we get back?”

Jess stopped moving. “One of what.. one of these?” She pointed at her markings, watching her partner nod. “You don't have to do that, Dev. Techs don't.”

“I know. You said that.” Dev said, in a calm voice “But... if they do end up sending me back I would like to have one, so I can remember it.” She looked away. “And remember you.”

Jess merely sat there, stunned. Both by the bio alt's words and by the gut wrenching upset they stirred in her. She opened her mouth to deny the possibility and then stopped, finding herself unwilling to lie to her partner. Or to herself for that matter.

“Sometimes.” Dev continued quietly. “They take stuff from you. In programming. They erase stuff.” She gazed thoughtfully at her feet. “But I don't think they can take one of those things away from me.”

“Dev.”

“Doctor Dan said he'd make sure I could keep everything but..” Dev paused. “I don't know what's going to happen now.”

Jess let her hand fall and exhaled. “Yeah, okay. If you really want one I'll do it for you.” She said. “Give you one for the last run we did, and this one even though we didn't finish it out.”

Dev nodded in what looked like relief. “Thank you.” She said. “I'm sorry if that caused you discomfort.”

Jess finished her tending. “Yeah well it's gonna cause me a lot more discomfort if they try to send you back because they're going to have to go through me to do it.” She pulled up her under-suit and stripped out of the jumpsuit, draping it over the bars and hoisting herself up onto the sleeping platform next to Dev. “Discomfort to the point of blowing my head off. Lay down. Let's get some rest.”

The lights dimmed as they both settled down next to each other, the soft rumble of the engines sending a rhythmic vibration through them. Jess folded her hands over her stomach and looked up at the overhead, visible in the dim lighting as a blur of gray dark weave.

After a few minutes she turned her head, to see Dev curled up on her side, head resting on her arm, eyes closed. As she watched the bio alt's face, those eyes opened and met hers. She felt like a physical thing the sadness there, and she reached out to put her hand on Dev's arm. “We'll be okay, Dev.”

Dev smiled, and put her fingers over Jess's, letting her eyes close again.

Jess closed her own eyes and let her mind go still, only to be nudged by a memory that surprised her. Her father, in one of the few, last meetings they'd had before he'd been taken by the other side when he'd joined her for an unexpected dinner, at the citadel.

She hadn't even know he was visiting. He had just shown up at the entrance to her quarters that night and she'd been so happy to see him she hadn't thought to ask him why he was there.

Plain dinner, just talk about home, and family, and her progress in the corps. She'd said something about them, and us, and her father had swirled his drink in his cup and sipped it, watching her over it's rim.

“Jesslyn. Those are powerful words, us and them.” He'd told her. “Be careful. One day you might find yourself to be the us, and this.. “ He'd circled his finger to include the citadel. “Might be them.”

She hadn't understood then. But now, lying here in the dim light, she suddenly did because when she'd just said 'We'll be okay.” Her and Dev had been we, and Interforce had somehow, become them.

Jess wished, now, that she'd asked him if he'd ever had that happen. She knew he hadn't met their mother until after he retired, but something somehow, now in her memory told her there had been a personal knowledge there

Hm.

**

Dev took the controls as they came within range of the citadel. From the outside, the huge cliff side looked unharmed, and in the pale gray light of midday there was little action to be seen around it. “Control, this is BR27006, inbound.” She enunciated carefully into the comms, once short range beam had come up.

“BR27006, acknowledge.” Control came back in response. “Stand by for deck open.”

“Sounds normal.” Jess commented, from her fully strapped down and activated position. She had her hands on the weapons controls and the guns had power, but were for the moment quiescent.

Having little to compare it against, Dev just nodded. She curved the carrier around the craggy peak and then slowed to hover, as the hanger roof started to peel back.

She felt well, and rested. They had slept almost all the way back, and she'd woken to find herself tucked into Jess's arms which had surprised her but in a very good way.

It wasn't even raining. Hadn't been for several hours, and Dev wondered if they might have a minute or two to go to that little shelf and look out at the sea.

The roof finished retracting, and Dev tipped the carrier forward a little, inspecting her path before she settled lower and engaged the landing jets. “We're entering the bay.”

She saw the weapons active indicators switch off, as she gently moved lower into the cavern, descending through the rings of lights. “Control, this is BR27006 requesting a landing pad.”

“Stand by, BR27006.”

Dev could see a lot of activity around the cavern, there were at least ten carriers on pads, and four more in tech prep, more than she'd seen there before.

“BR27006, please land pad 67, stay to taxi path.”

“Acknowledged.” The bio alt located the slot and boosted a little, sliding over and then descending to the pad where she could see a tech team waiting for them. She let the carrier down lightly and then cut the jets, shunting power back from the engines to the battery store.

Despite how discomfiting it all was, she was glad to be back in the citadel. There was a safety there that made certain parts of her relax having the solid walls around them. “Landed.”

“Felt it.” Jess shut down her station and released her restraints. “Send the logs and let's get our gear off.”

Dev waited for the hookup to latch on, and the lights went out briefly as they switched to ground power. She ran through the shutdown process and saw from the corner of her eye the bio alt crew coming in to service them. No foam spray this time, just quiet, serious faces intent on the external ports and the engine servicing.

“Bet they're glad we brought it back in one piece this time.” Jess chuckled.

“Almost. There is some damage to the rear, and one side.” Dev said, mournfully. “But not like last time.” She saw the incoming log request and set up the sync, then shut the comp down. “Done.”

Jess was standing in the rear, stuffing things in her pack. “Busy outside.”

“Very.” Dev had carefully finished putting her things away and swung her pack to her back, cinching the straps tight and walking back to join her partner. “Okay to open the hatch?”

“Sure.” Jess got her pack closed and ran one final check on the weapons rack, making sure all the portables were shut down. She got behind Dev as the hatch opened, blinking a little at the flood of mechanical chaos that flooded in. “Wow.”

A speaker clicked on overhead. “Drake, NM-Dev-1, to debrief, urgent.”

“Ah.” Jess felt paradoxically relieved. “Let's go, Devvie.” She followed the bio alt down the ramp and onto the walkway, lifting a hand to return the greeting of some of the senior mechs. “Let's find out what the hell's going on.”

Dev paused and stepped a little to the side to let Jess get ahead of her, and then she followed down the hall and through the gateway into the security passage that led to the debrief rooms. There was no one else heading that way, and they didn't meet anyone.

Jess paused before the door and put her hand on the pad. “Drake, NM-Dev-1 for debrief.”

The door slid open immediately and they went inside. A fraction of a second later, Stephen Bock and Bain entered from the other door, both looking harried and upset.

“Stephen.” Jess greeted their supervisor. “Sir.” She gave Bain a nod, as she sat down in one of the comfortable chairs. “Sorry it took us so long to get back here. We were far outland.”

“So you said.” Bain leaned against the table. “Glad you are finally back.” He turned his attention to Dev. “And you too, my dear.”

“Sir.” Dev replied briefly, folding her hands on the table.

Bock sat down and rubbed his temples. “Where do I start.”

“Agent Drake already knows part of the matter.” Bain said. “Since she saw the transports, and I assume by the way she said it, the unwilling passenger aboard.”

“It's in the comp.” Jess said. “But yes, we saw Doctor Kurok.”

Bain studied her. “And you didn't go after them?”

Jess leaned back in her seat. “We weren't in our carrier at the time.” She said. “We were in an old rig being used by ice pirates to give Interforce a bad name. Wouldn't have lasted five minutes in chasing them.”

Both men blinked at her.

“Ice pirates?” Stephen Bock repeated. “We got a squirt about that from Northern. Said you'd gone crazy looking for ice pirates in the Northlands.”

“So crazy I found them.” Jess said, in a mild voice. “More to the point, they found me, attacking a fishing craft halfway through no man's land.”

They both blinked again.

“I added the information to the comp transfer.” Dev spoke up for the first time. “I got it on the portable scanner.”

Bain and Bock looked at each other. “This rather changes matters.” Bain said cryptically. “Drake, how close did you get to target?”

“We'd just left Market Island when we were recalled.” Jess said. “So probably.. six hours?”

“Shit.” Bock cursed. “It was a double cross.”

Jess looked from him to Bain. “Mind telling us what's going on?” She asked. “We were damn close to terminus on this.” She indicated the screen. “Roll comp. See for yourself.”

Bain grunted and sat down. “As Bock here said, where to start.”

“I don't even think the beginning will help.” Bock covered his eyes with one hand. “Shit.”

**

Dev regarded the stone wall in her shower, the slate dark from the water she was standing in the path of. It felt wonderful, hot and mineral scented as it warmed her body and rinsed all the travel stains off her. She soaped herself clean and rinsed off, then shut the water down and got out to dry herself.

She put on fresh underthings and a clean off-shift jumpsuit and settled behind her workspace, regarding her quarters and thinking about everything she'd just learned.

The transports had been an envoy from the other side coming to talk – a truce, caused by the destruction she and Jess had caused. Scientists, they had met with Bain, and Doctor Dan too, and Doctor Dan had agreed to go with them, along with some other Interforce people to a place to sit and talk, in a neutral area.

So Jess had been right. Exactly right when she had said they didn't know everything.

They had been recalled along with all the other teams so that nothing bad would happen while they were talking. Dev understood that well, and Jess had nodded, too. That would have put the people talking in danger, and if they had reacted then maybe Doctor Dan and the others would have been killed.

So Jess had been doubly right.

But then they had gotten a message, short and desperate, saying it was all wrong, and Doctor Dan and the others were being taken back to the bad guys place.

And then the people at North Base had tried to stop them.

They didn't know what happened there, but no communication had been had from that base since.

Jess had been very angry at all of them, asking how they could have believed the other side wanted a truce? Bain had just said sometimes you have to take a chance.

Take a chance? Dev exhaled. So now Doctor Dan, and the people from Interforce were somewhere being held and they couldn't do anything about it because everyone thought they would be hurt if they tried to get them back.

So they were trying to figure out what to do, and that's also why they hadn't just sent them after the transports.

It would have been very wrong for them to chase the transports. Dev felt a little humble, remembering what she'd thought about letting them go, and why they hadn't just gone to help.

But all the teams were here now and surely, they would make a plan, and just as surely, that plan would include her and Jess because Bain had even said they had been waiting for the to get back to decide what they were going to do about it. The man Bock had said it was a shame they'd recalled them in fact, because if they had finished their mission, they would have something to bargain with them with and now they really didn't.

Bain said he thought the whole thing was to get them to stop Jess from her mission, and that Jess should be very flattered because they had turned over half the earth in the assumption that she'd have been successful.

Jess did seem happy about that, in a reserved kind of way. Dev had just found herself wondering why Doctor Dan had decided to go with them. He was smart. Wouldn't he have realized how unusual the request was?

Dev left off thinking for a while and got up, going to her dispenser and retrieving some kack and a package of the small seaweed crackers. She took them up to her relaxation area and lay down on the couch, very glad to have a few minutes just to sit quietly and what was it Jess had called it? Decompress.

Which was really strange because where she came from, decompression was definitely not something anyone would find relaxing.

She sipped her drink and opened her crackers, nibbling on them and stretching her body out along the comfortable couch with a sense of contentment. Jess had told her she had some time before they would be expected to do anything else – she was doing something, and said maybe when she finished they would go get some rad.

But right now, she could just lay back and have her crackers and be glad she wasn't having to drive something. She paused as she heard sounds in the next room, the door closing and two voices.

Jess's, of course, and she thought the other one might be Jason.

Maybe Jess was getting her mark. Dev considered that, and hoped her partner would remember that she'd asked to get one too. She wasn't sure Jess really approved of it, but the more she thought about it, the more she really wanted one. If nothing, nothing else, if she ended up going back to the creche for sure she'd be the only one there with one.

Unique. Dev regarded the ceiling. Unique even if they made another of her set, because that other Dev wouldn't have this mark. Only she would have it and she wanted that.

She faintly heard Jess laugh, and the male voice raise in exasperation. Then she pulled her book from her jumpsuit pocket and opened it up, bracing it against one upraised knee as she sipped her drink and started to read.

After a few pages, her comms beeped. Surprised, Dev regarded the small, embedded unit, then she put her cup down and reached over to trigger it. “Hello.”

“Ah, hello, is that Dev?”

“Yes.” Dev responded. “Clint?”

“Yeah, yea, it's Clint. I heard you guys got back and just wanted to know if there was anything special you needed checked on the bus.”

Dev considered that thoughtfully. “The port side took a pretty big hit and the rear panel.” She said. “We escaped a cone and ended up in an ice cave for shelter.”

“.. a cone?” Clint sounded confused.

“Yes, a big round thing in the storm, that made a lot of wind?”

“Oh. A tornado.” Clint replied. “Got it, we'll check. Glad you're back safe and sound.”

Dev smiled. “Me too. It was a very exciting trip.” She mentally marked down the tornado word, so she could call the cone the right thing the next time. “Thank you.”

“Okay, well, later!” Clint said. “Bye.”

“Bye” Dev closed the comms and nodded to herself. “He is a nice man.” She decided, and the went back to her book, smiling when she came to one of her favorite parts.

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“Jason, don't start with me.” Jess dropped into her chair and indicated the one across from her. “It's not my damn fault I was halfway across the planet when this all went down.”

“It was crazy.” Jason sprawled across from her. “I thought the whole friggen base had chewed weed. Peace talks? Truces? I mean, what the fuck?”

Jess lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “Maybe they thought they could game them.” She said. “Bain didn't say why he did it. Just threw the facts at me.”

“Crazy” Jason shook his head. “I hear maybe they went for North?”

“I passed North on the way in. No comms, no scan, no nothing.” Jess said. “Dev couldn’t even pick up a sideband.”

Jason shook his head again. Then he eyed Jess. “How's the kid doing?” He asked. “See she brought your bus in right side up this time.”

“She's fucking brilliant.” Jess said bluntly. “Best tech I've ever seen.”

“You shitting me?” Jason leaned forward. “She's been here two weeks.”

“Drives the bus.” Jess ticked off her fingers. “Drove an antique bus probably older than I am neither of us could have started up. Drove a damn fishing boat. Rigged the damn portable scanner to penetrate the water and find a god damned school of fish big enough to fill their whole tank.”

“No shit.”

“No shit.” Jess picked up her steaming cup of grog and sipped it. “Started off thinking this was bullshit but no more. Wouldn't trade her for nothing.”

“Huh.” Jason grunted. “At least the whole tech thing's settled down. No one thinks they're going to get a knife in the back so much. Everyone figured he was turned and that's it.”

Jess considered that. “Or that's what everyone wants to believe, either to avoid getting another bio alt or just because that's what they want to believe.”

Jason shrugged. “We're working again. “ He said. “The other newbs are settling down.” He studied Jess. “Sandy didn't respond to recall.”

Jess straightened up. “What?”

“Was out on a recon south. Got a positive accept on the recall, but no response. No one's heard from her for two days.” Jason watched her face. “Comp lost contact with her signal after the recall. Bock's going to send a team out to see if they see any thing at her last coordinates.”

“Damn.” Jess frowned. “I saw a couple of the regulars at Quebec. Couple more at Market Island, and the old shark was at the fishery. No one came after me though. Market boys made me, and I offed Brenegan.”

“Yeah?” Jason looked surprised. “Didn't hear that on the recap in ops.”

“Just filed.” She indicated the pad. “Wanted to make sure Dev got all her props. She handled being in the out lands like an old timer.”

Jason smiled a little. “You like her.”

Jess looked away, then back at him. “Yeah, I really do.” She said in a straightforward tone. “Never worked with another female before. A lot less of that competitive crap.” She opened the desk storage and removed a bag, opening it and pulling something out. She tossed it to him. “Here. Fell all over the deck of the boat when Dev got us out of that damn volcano going off on Market.”

Jason whistled, and his eyes widened. “Wow. Nice one!” He held the black diamond up to the light. “Clean!”

“Big blast.”

He glanced at her. “For me?” He held the stone up, grinning when she nodded. “Sweet! Thanks bud.” He tucked the diamond away. “You give one to Dev?” He asked, with a teasing tone to his voice.

“She's got her own bag.” Jess responded dryly. “I split the take with her. Only fair since I'd be fish food if she hadn't figured out how to out power two long guns heading out after us.”

“She' allowed to own that stuff? She is a jelly bag, remember.” Jason remarked. “I don’t' think they own stuff.”

“She's a field tech and they do own stuff.” Jess said. “Let em argue with me about it. Can't have it both ways, Jase – if she's got her life on the line for us, and doing the job – you can't come back and say she's just a bio.”

“Huh.” He grunted. “Well, anyway.. you want your mark? I figure we're all gonna be headed outbound real soon so might as well do it now.” He removed the heat gun that had been holstered at his hip. “Too bad you didn't get to go all the way on it, Jess. I heard talk in the mess it would have been a real big score.”

Jess stood up and came around the side of the workspace, unfastening her jumpsuit and pulling it down. “Yeah.” She took the seat next to Jason and braced her arm. “So give me two kills, and two levels. Leave the third level blank – who knows? Maybe I'll get to go back.”

“No med for you this time though.”

Jess smiled. “No, just this hit.” She touched her chest, and the fading wound. “And that was my own stupidity, on the boat. That's where the first kill was.”

“Guy you asked for ident on?”

“Yeah. He was with the pirates. Led the attack on the boat.” She indicated the bag. “I brought back his tags. Was he active? Name wasn't familiar.”

“Disappeared. Used to be one of Sydney's boys.” Jason heated up the gun and put his hand on Jess's arm, picturing the pattern he was going to burn into her skin. “Way I heard it there was some kind of three way action going between this guy, and Sydney and his tech.”

“Huh.” Now it was Jess's turn to grunt, and she did, taking a deep breath as she heard the gun trigger. “They were working the Northlands.. maybe he was doing it to trash old Syd's rep. “

“Ready.”

“Go.” Jess closed her eyes, as the heat and pain started. “Maybe that's why he shut down when I asked him about the pirates.”

“And why he sent that squirt.” The soft sizzle of burning flesh was loud between them. Jason carefully traced the outline of the mark. “Bastard's always had it in for you.”

“I screwed him over.” Jess kept her breathing even. “He has reason.”

“Does he? Way I heard it he brought it on himself.” Jason said. “Color.”

The buzz changed slightly and the burn became more intense. Jess kept her head down, the pain bothering her more than usual. Maybe she was still tired. “Yeah maybe.” She exhaled. “Dev wants me to give her one of these.”

The buzz stopped and Jason leaned forward to look her in the eye. “What?”

Jess blinked at him. “What part of that didn’t you get?” She asked. “Finish the damn thing so I can stop sweating.”

The buzz resumed and she closed her eyes again, and the silence extended until it was finally over. Jess straightened up and ran her fingers through her hair, glancing at the red raw burn on her arm “Thanks.”

Jason put the gun down. “Did I hear you right? Your rag doll wants a mark?”

Jess erupted up out of her seat so fast it startled both of them and the loud crack as her fist hit his face echoed harshly against the walls. “Don't fucking call her that!” She lunged at him and took them both to the floor, seeing red in her vision as growl emerged from her throat.

“Jess! Jess!” Jason rolled onto his back and put his hands flat on the floor. “Jess! Hold it! Stop! I'm sorry!” He kept his breathing steady as he saw the ice cold eyes bore right through him. “I'm down. I'm sorry Jess. Sorry.”

For a moment the mask didn't change – and then Jess's eyes blinked and she released him, rocking back to take the weight of her knee off his chest. “That's my partner.” Jess rasped. “Don't you say crap about her like that.”

“Okay.” He held his hands up. “Sorry, Jess. Didn't mean to trigger you.”

Jess half stood and dropped back into the chair. “Yeah, been a long couple of days.” She rested her elbows on her knees and exhaled. “Just don't be an asshole, okay?”

“Hey.” He got up can cautiously sat down in the other chair. “Maybe I'm jealous.” He watched the tremors in her hands, wound up until they started to ease. “I'm not used to them being more than custodials, Jess. You've worked with her I haven't.”

“Yeah I know.” She slowly leaned back, feeling exhausted. “If we go out together, you'll see.” She glanced at him, then got up and went to the sanitary unit, grabbing a cloth and wetting it, then bringing it back over “Here.”

He wiped his face, studying the blood that stained it. “You always had a truly kick ass punch.” He stated mournfully. “She must be good cause you never hit me for dissing a tech before no matter where they came from.”

A soft knock came at the inner door, and after a pause it opened and Dev poked her head inside. “Everything correct in here?” She asked. “I heard a noise.”

“You heard your partner breaking my nose.” Jason told her. “And I'll be on my way to med to get a reduction kit and plas.” He got up and reached for the burn gun, but Jess put her hand over it. “Right. See you folks later.” He kept the cloth against his face as he left, and the door slid shut behind him.

Dev crossed the floor with a diffident expression, sliding her book into her thigh pocket. “Are you all right?”

Jess gestured her towards the other chair. “Yeah, I'm fine. Just got ticked off at something he said.” She propped her arm upon the desk. “He just finished giving me this.”

Dev leaned closer to examine the mark. “Oh.” She clasped her hands. “Can I get that one?”

Jess grimaced. “You really want one?” She asked. “It hurts. Really hurts.”

“Yes, I do.” Dev responded at once. “Will you do it? I'd rather if you would.” She reached over and put her hands over Jess's. 'That would make it very special.”

Jess felt her heart rate settle, and her body relax as she looked into Dev's eyes. The anger finally leached out, and with it went the twitching and the urge to hurt something. It had surprised her, that reaction but now seeing the look of somber affection bathing her, it didn't surprise her any more.

She was caught. A faint smile appeared on her face. “I'll do it.” She leaned forward and brushed her lips against Dev's. “And maybe we'll get lucky and we'll get a night at home tonight.”

Dev's eyes brightened, and she grinned. “I”d like that.”

“Me too.” Jess picked up the burn gun and adjusted it. “Take your suit down, partner. Let's make you a marked one.”

Dev felt a sense of crazy pride erupt in her. She undid the catches on her jumpsuit and pulled it down to her waist like Jess's was, straightening in the chair and tucking her boots under it. “Go ahead.”

Jess put a hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eye. “It's really going to hurt.” She warned her. “A point of pride with us is, you don't scream.”

“Okay.” Dev agreed. “I”m ready.”

“I hope I am.” Her partner muttered, as she got the gun into position. “Hang on, here we go.”

Dev heard the buzz a brief instant before it touched her arm, and then she blinked, as a searing pain lanced into her skin. It built faster than she'd expected, and she only barely had time to focus past it before her body reacted. She concentrated on her own heartbeat, hearing the hammering in her inner ear as the buzz grew and faded, and then grew again.

It did, as Jess had warned, really hurt. But she'd learned how to deal with that in the creche, in the long hours and days of various tests and trials and the brief training on what it would be like if they did wrong and had to face discipline. So she thought of other things, of the things she'd shared with Jess, and their missions so far, and the cones, and the shrimps at Quebec and...

The buzz stopped. The pain didn't, but now Jess was putting her hand on Dev's knee and she knew it was over. She opened her eyes and looked at her partner. “Did I do okay?”

Jess's lips tensed into a smile, one that warmed her eyes as well. “Like you'd been taking them for years.” She said. “Let me get some cream for ya, and for mine too.” She got up and went to the sanitary area, disappearing for a moment.

Dev took that time to look at her arm, which now had two areas of horribly reddened, burned skin visible. The pain was vivid, but it was now a throbbing ache rather than being on fire and she examined the pattern with a sense of lightheaded fascination.

They started at the tip of her left shoulder, one set with some colored balls and bars, and then the second, with only two colored balls and an empty bar on the bottom. It was fuzzy and indistinct

looking, due to the swelling but she could see when it healed it would look like the brown marks that patterned Jess's arms.

That made her very happy, happy enough not to mind the pain. She looked up at Jess as her partner returned, and studied her new marks. “It's almost the same except for this bit.” She indicated a small area on her skin.

“Uh huh.” Jess carefully smeared some healing cream on herself, then turned her attention to Dev. “That little bit is mine. It means you are.”

Dev felt lightheaded again. “I'm.. yours?”

“Yes.” Jess gently treated the burns she'd made on Dev's arm. “You are my partner, right?”

“Absolutely.”

Jess finished putting a light gauze bandage on her, and handed her a small jar of the cream. “Put it on often. It'll help it heal.” She said. “Hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Let's go get some chow.” She eased the jumpsuit up over Dev's shoulders and fastened it. “Know what?”

Dev flexed her hands a little, and gave a small nod. “No, what?”

“Glad you did that.” Jess leaned forward and kissed her again and this time it went on for a while and she felt her breathing shorten as Dev's hands fit themselves along her ribs making her nape hairs prickle. It felt insanely good and it was very hard not to unfasten her partner's suit and move over to the bed.

So hard. Dev's breath tickled her collarbone and then their lips met again and she knew she either had to pull back or take it forward and finally the newly scorched skin on her arm tipped the balance. Jess let her head rest against her partners and savored the moment, as Dev very gently put her arms around her and gave her a hug.

That made her smile. She exhaled regretfully and stepped back, fastening her own suit and running her fingers through her hair. “I sure hope we won't be heading out until tomorrow.

Dev produced a rakish grin. “I hope so too.” She admitted. “But I think it would be good to hurt a little less first.” She regarded her arm. “You were right.”

Jess ruffled her hair.

The bio alt shifted her gaze back to Jess. “You were also right about going after Doctor Dan. I'm sorry I gave you discomfort over that.”

Jess rested her arms on her shoulders. “Trust me, Dev. I learned the hard way so you maybe won't have to.” She grinned briefly. “C'mon. Let's go to the mess, then you can come back here and help me unpack this stuff of my father's my brother had sent here.”

Dev regarded the bags and containers tucked against the wall. “Sure.” She followed Jess out of the door. “What is it?”

“What was left in the house.” Jess evaded the moving bodies in the busy hallway. “Maybe you'll get lucky and get to see a picture of me as a kid.”

Dev smiled and put the ache of her arm aside. “Excellent.”

**

It was late. Dev had put the cream on her arm, and was settled back on her relaxation couch in her tank top and short pants, after another shower, and dinner with Jess.

They were expecting some information. No one knew when that would happen for sure, and Jess was in the control place trying to figure it all out. There were two teams investigating, one that had gone north, and one south, and everyone was waiting for them to report.

The techs, herself, and the others, were sent to get some rest, so here she was, very comfortable and relaxed, glad to get some time to just be quiet.

Instead of reading, she had her headset on and she was listening to a comp report, items that had happened while she and Jess had been gone. Updates to schedules, maintenance notes... a running inventory of detail she was glad to absorb and digest.

She'd gotten through one report, and halfway through another when the door between her quarters and Jess's opened and her partner stuck her head in. Dev waved at her and a moment later, Jess was trotting up the steps to join her in her space. She took her headset off and stopped the report. “Hello.”

“Hey.” Jess took a seat on the floor. “They got some real senior guys involved in talking to the other side. Trying to work out a deal.”

“For Doctor Dan?” Dev felt heartened.

“For all of them.” Jess said. “There were six of them that went.”

“I see.”

“So in the meantime we're just cleaning stuff up. They don't want me to leave the citadel, don't want a chance of the other side either grabbing me, or me causing a situation.” Jess said, with a brief grin. “So I guess we get some downtime.”

Dev smiled back.

“They found Sandy.” Jess went on, her face sobering. “Looks like they ran their carrier into an EMF swipe. Nothing much left of it.”

Dev studied her. “They died?”

Jess nodded. “Both of them.” She drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “Carrier was fizzled to nothing. Both of them inside. They're bringing the bodies back for ident and disposal.”

That took a bit of thinking. “You said flying in that was dangerous.”

“It is.” Her partner agreed. “Sandy knew that. Not sure what happened there.” Which wasn't exactly true. She suspected Sandy decided to respond to the recall regardless of the danger and pushed it, figuring to get back first and pull whatever prime slot the emergency offered.

She, on the other hand, had stopped to rescue drowning polar bears. What, really, did that say about both of them?”

“Wow. That's very sad.” Dev eventually remarked.

Jess grunted softly. “Anyway, wanna come over to my place?” She gave Dev a somewhat rakish grin. “Help me unpack those trunks?” She waggled her eyebrows. “Have a cup of grog?”

“Sure.” Dev removed her headset and swung her legs off her couch. “That sounds excellent.”

They crossed into Jess's quarters, which were lit with a quiet cool light around her workspace. There were the boxes that had been delivered earlier, and Jess pulled one closer to the chairs, gesturing Dev to take a seat while she diverted her own attention to a pair of mugs and a bottle.

“What are all these things, Jess?” Dev asked, regarding the dull gray cases. “You said they were from your family?”

“Not exactly.” Jess poured out, then handed Dev a cup as she took a seat next to the box. “My mother decided she didn't want all the reminders of my father around the house. So she had my brother send them here. He figured I'd appreciate them or something like that.”

“Oh.”

Jess took a sip from her cup then put it down. “So let's see what we got. I figure most of this is from his office in the house. He used to keep all his souvenirs there.” She touched the panel on the box, which glowed briefly and then retracted, and the top of the case slid open.

A puff of air emerged, full of the smell of paper, and steel. Jess peered inside, and lifted out the first thing in it. She put it on the worktable and went back for a second. “That's a fishing award he got from the compound we lived at.”

Dev picked it up and looked at it. It was a piece of stone or rock, carved into the shape of a fish half curved around. “An award?”

“Yeah.” Jess studied a worn blaster, side mount and very old, covered in rakes and scars. “Every year they had a competition who could free-dive and catch the most. He won that time. I remember it, sorta.

Dev put the item down. “Is that like the fisher people on the boat?”

“No.” Jess put the blaster down and dug for something else. “That's with nets and mech and stuff. For this, you just dive into the sea and catch the fish with your hands.”

Dev's eyes opened very wide. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Jess opened a folio, stiff and aged. “He was good at that. Could stay down forever.” She leafed through a few pages of notes, handwritten, and almost illegible. Just common stuff, things they had to do around the house, stuff he had to pay off. “Ah.” She opened the other side and saw color and images. “Here ya go.”

She handed one of them over to her partner. “That's me, on leave, around fifteen I guess.”

“Ah!” Dev examined the image. It was her partner, but a slighter version of her in a gray jumpsuit like the ones the new people had arrived in. She had close cropped hair and a grudging smile in the picture, outside a structure. “You appear attractive.”

Jess chuckled. “I look like a goon.” She was sorting through the pictures. “Here, I was four in this one. You'd never know it was me.”

Dev looked at the square, seeing a child with wild, curly dark hair dressed in a brief outfit that appeared wet. “What is that you have in your hand?”

“Conch shell.” Jess answered absently. She opened a folder tucked away in a back pocket of the case, finding a couple of very old plas images inside. “Here's one of my father at field school grad.” She found herself smiling a little at the tall figure, standing with his hands clasped behind him with three other classmates.

Dev craned her head around to see it. “Oh.” She observed. “You look like him.” The man in the picture had Jess's height and her dark hair and their faces were shaped alike. “You smile the same.”

“I do.” Jess acknowledged. “He had gray eyes though, not these funny blue marbles.” She put the picture down and went on to the next one.

Citadel, this one. “Must have been the intaking here.” She mused. “Looks so different. That was before they rigged up that deck on top.”

Her eyes tracked to the next picture in the stack, her eyes fastening first on her father's tall, relaxed form leaning against an old style carrier and then drifting up to look at the second person in the picture.

She blinked.

She blinked again, a chill running down her back as she studied the shorter man who was standing with arms folded, leaning next to him, dressed in a techs dark green, blacked piped jumpsuit with her father's elbow resting casually on his shoulder.

Slowly, she turned the plas over, searching the back intently and finding a small, scrawled, handwritten note on it. *Me and DJ, too young to know better.* “Oh.” She exhaled.

“Jess?”

Jess looked up, to find Dev watching her, brows knit a little. “Yeah?”

“Are you in discomfort?”

“Am I in discomfort.” Jess repeated. She turned the plas back over and looked at it, then, with a little sigh she put it down on the table between them. “No. But I just figured out why your friend Doctor Dan just reminded me of someone I thought I knew.”

Dev gave her a puzzled look, then she glanced down at the image and her eyebrows hiked almost to her hairline. Next to the man she now recognized as Jess's father was a much younger but definitely recognizable Doctor Dan himself. “Wow!” She blurted. “It's him!”

“It's him.” Jess agreed in a quiet voice. “Must have been the first or second year after my dad came out of field.” She touched the plas. “He was a tech, like you are.” She added. “I knew he was one of us but I didn't... “ She fell silent. “Why the hell didn't Bain say something?”

“It was a long time ago.” Dev was staring in fascination at the image. In it, Doctor Dan didn't look any older that she herself was, but she could see that look that was so familiar to her on his face, that half smile – she could almost see the twinkle in his eyes.

“Explains why you're so damn good at what you do.” Jess said. “It wasn't some random programming. He knew what to give you because he gut knew it.”

Yes, of course. Dev suddenly felt a mixture of emotion, relief and gratitude chief among them. “He was confident I could do this.”

Jess studied her profile. “This wasn't a last minute project I bet. “ She said “He had this in mind.”

Dev blinked, then she nodded slightly. “Maybe.” She answered in a quiet voice. “I hope they get him back. I'd like to ask him.”

“Yeah me too.” Jess sat back, still a little stunned. Not that Kurok had turned out to be Interforce – that she'd known for a while. But she hadn't expected him to come in that close.

Her father's partner.

His first partner, not the one who'd been with him when he retired. Jess remembered Janie – she'd retired herself two years after Jess had become an agent and she'd never liked the woman. Kurok had been his first, the one he'd rarely spoke of, but when he had, he'd always smiled.

DJ, he'd called him she now remembered, the very few times he'd called him anything at all.

She looked back at the plas. “Let's see what other surprises I can find in here.” She went back to the images, but her mind lingered on the previous one, questions starting to surface she wasn't sure she really wanted to ask.

**

In the end, Dev carried the conch shell they'd found buried in the bottom of the last trunk back to her quarters with her, while Jess got the rest of the contents squared away. The big structure amazed her, and she spent a moment studying it before she set it down on her desk.

It was all shades of pink, and it had spikes on the outside and a hard, polished surface on the inside, and she could put her whole hand inside it where it opened up. Jess had told her she'd found it in the water near their home and that it was rare to find one all in one piece.

It was beautiful.

She traced one of the spikes with her finger, and wondered what she should do next. Jess had seemed a little down, looking at all the stuff and she thought maybe she'd just want to go to sleep and get some rest. It had been a long day after a few other long days, after all, and even she had to admit she was looking forward to curling up in bed herself.

They would have time, she reasoned, to practice the sex thing since they would be staying around the citadel for a while, so she stretched and went over to her bed and sat down on it.

It was very quiet in her room, and she lay down on her back and put her hands behind her head, just absorbing that. In the creche, and when they were out in the carrier there was noise all around her but here, inside the stone walls at the end of the operations corridors it was silent and peaceful.

She let her mind drift to Doctor Dan, thinking about him being in the citadel, and doing the job she was doing. Remembering that picture of him, in his black suit, made her smile and knowing she was doing the same work he had made her smile even more.

Now his praise of her work meant even more, and she thought about that look of pride he'd given her when she'd gotten back from her first mission. He'd been so happy because she'd done the right things, because he'd taught her, he'd programmed her, and because he knew how important the work was.

It was so excellent.

She really really hoped the man Bain would make sure Doctor Dan was safe and get him back fast. She really wanted to talk to him now about the work, and find out how he changed from being a tech, to being the scientist she knew.

With a little sigh, she closed her eyes and felt the light dim around her and with a squiggle she got under the covers. Her body relaxed immediately, and she curled her arm around her pillow.

**

Jess leaned back in her chair, finally finished sorting. On her workspace, she had the folder full of pictures, the blaster, a small hide pouch of old style coins and a crypto locked recorder awaiting her attention.

It had been a somewhat weird, slightly uncomfortable ramble through her father's past. Aside from the surprise of the pictures, she'd found things he'd brought back from the field from sketches on pieces of slate to a heavy knit pullover she knew had come from the other side that even now held a faded bloodstain in the fabric of it.

Now there was the recording. Jess picked up the small device and touched it to her hand, feeling the faint twitch as it accessed the chips embedded under her skin and with a tiny click an interface appeared.

Amiably, Jess attached it to her comp and waited as it spooled. It was keyed to her, but it could be anything from his recipes for fish to field notes and after a minute or two, the screen flickered on and presented her with a page full of text.

That surprised her, a little. It was not only text, but handwritten text, scanned in and cropped. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees to read it, feeling a touch of unexpected anticipation.

Her relationship with her father had always been complicated, but maybe he'd left her a.. Jess blinked and focused.

Jesslyn.

Well, no doubt it was for her.

There's so much we'll never talk about that we should have. I hope this gets to you soon after I'm gone, but whenever it does, it does. It's the coward's way out, in any case since I'll write things here I'd never have the courage to say to your face.

Jess felt uncomfortable. This didn't sound like it was going to be fun and she almost reached up to turn the comp off before her conscience got the better of her and she clenched her hands instead. Her eyes lifted and went to the door between her quarters and Dev's, and she suddenly wished her partner was there next to her.

And then she was embarrassed to even think that. She forced her attention back to the screen and picked up her grog cup to take a sip from it.

You had no choice in what you became, Jess. Your mother and I bred knowing there was a good chance one or more of you would take my genes – but I know it hurt her when it was you because you were her little girl. She always figured it would be one of your brothers, but I knew from the start it would be you.

I had an inside look, after all. So if you're sorry it ended up like this, then I'm sorry because I knew it would. Luck of the genetic dice and all that. You never knew your grandfather, but I remember him showing up at my field school graduation and he gave me a piece of advice I'm going to pass along to you.

He told me to take life one day at a time, and enjoy it to the fullest you can because the bad times are a lot more frequent than the good ones.

That's true, Jess. I never realized it until it was too late. I was always too busy looking out for the next op, working the next angle to look life in the face and savor it. Don't make that mistake. I couldn't tell you that when I was still around, because the hypocrisy woulda killed me. Maybe you know what I mean by now.

Jess read and reread that, thinking hard about it.

You never took my path though, so maybe not. When I last saw you, you were going your own way through the corps and I think I figured out that it was at least your way, and you were showing signs of an independent mind. I can't tell you how sad and proud that made me.

She stood up and went to the dispenser, punching the code for some tea and waiting for it to come out. The message was more confusing and painful than she'd figured it would be, though she took some solace from the last little bit of it. She'd been so sure he'd thought she'd disgraced him.

Jess took the cup and sipped from it, waiting for her breathing to settle before she went back to the desk and settled into her chair behind it.

Anyway. I don't really have that much to say to you besides that. I don't know what got me in the end, or how it happened, or why, except I know it's them, that they finally got their revenge, that all those missions came home to me and I probably went in a room full of hateful sorts in a hell of a lot of pain.

Mark of my doing a good job for them, all those years, Jess, and with any luck, you'll have the same fate. I don't say that to be mean, kid, it's just what we are.

It was just what they were. Jess felt a little sad, reading that and she remembered, sometimes, seeing that look of sadness in his eyes too.

But I wanted to tell you this. If you're as much like me as I think you are, you'll never need to use it – but if you ever decide to go dark, and get lost, and you realize there's no place deep enough to hide you then find an outpost and steal enough coin for a squirt up to bio station 2. Ask for Dan Kurok. Tell him who you are

You'll be something to him. He'll help you. He's smart as hell and one of the best people I've ever known. He was a tech, and my first partner – and if I'm honest, he was also truly my last. Maybe I was just young, or maybe it was just one of those things but I trusted DJ like no one else and if I'd had as much courage as he did, my life would have been very different and you might never have been born.

Jess sat back and thought about that, not really sure what her father had been trying to tell her. On the one hand, he would probably be amused to know that far from having to find Kurok, the man had actually come and found her. On the other, she wondered about trust and courage, and what all that really meant.

At any rate – don't regret anything you've done, or will do, Jesslyn. You are who you are and you're from a long line of hell raisers and ass kickers so do your best to fight like a devil and make no apologies. Maybe you and I can have a drink together wherever it is people like us end up.

Dad.

Jess read the whole thing through again, and then she disconnected the reader and set it to one side. She picked up her cup and leaned back in her chair, and dimmed the lights a little, taking some time to just sit, and think.

**

Dev woke to find herself in warm comfort, but a little surprised to find herself not alone in bed. She was on her side, but pressed up against her back was a still sleeping Jess, one of her long arms curled around Dev's body. It felt nice, and she remained still, enjoying the sensation.

It was just before dawn. The lighting in her quarters showed that, the faint hint of pale light reflecting what she would see outside and it reminded her again to ask Jess if they could maybe have a sandwich together out on the little ledge where they could see the water.

Or maybe.. Dev considered their options. Maybe they could go swimming in the gym, after they got some rad.

Maybe they would hear some news about Doctor Dan.

Jess stirred behind her and then Dev felt a gentle pinch in the skin of her neck, putting a prickle up and down it. She lifted her head and peered behind her, to see her partner's eyes open, glinting softly in the dim light. “Hello.”

“Hi there.” Jess rumbled back. “You mind me stealing half your bed?”

“No.” Dev responded definitively. “Not at all.”

“Good.” Jess pulled her closer, and closed her eyes again. “Dev.”

“Yes?”

“I”m going to try and talk Bain into letting us try to go and get your buddy back.” Jess said. “I think we're the ones who can do it.”

Dev's ears perked up, and she turned onto her back, so she could see Jess better. “You do?”

“Sure. Don't you?” Jess propped her head up on her fist, leaving her other arm draped over Dev's stomach. “You want to see him back?”

“Absolutely!” Dev said immediately. “But I thought they said you should stay here, that we could cause trouble.”

Jess nodded slowly. “Oh I'm sure we can cause trouble.” She grinned briefly. “Anyway I'm going to ask him later. See what kind of mood he's in.” She put her head back down on the pillow. “Worth a try anyway. If' he'd send us out there, and we make good.. that's a lot of props.”

“I see.” Dev mused. “That would be a good mission, wouldn't it.” She fell briefly silent. “But I really don’t want us to get in trouble, Jess.”

“We won't.” Jess tightened her grip. “Not if he sends us, right?” She added. “I”m sure he wants to get him back. I just have to think of some good plan to get Bain interested.” Her eyes studied her partner's profile. “You scared of having to go back up to station?”

Dev nodded silently.

“Didn't sound that bad when you talked about it.” Jess said.

Dev wasn't really sure what to say about that. She felt bad about how she felt, and she didn't want to disappoint Jess. “I just like it here better.” She said, in a quiet voice.

Jess studied her profile. “You like being a natural born better.” She said, smiling faintly, watching the furrow appear between her techs eyes. “Who wouldn't? I don't blame ya.” She reached over and very gently traced one of Dev's fine, pale eyebrows. “Besides, I don't know what I'd do without ya anymore.”

That felt nice. Dev felt her heartbeat, which had gone up, settle down. “We're not supposed to feel like that.” She admitted. “We're not supposed to want to be like you.”

“Dev.” Jess touched her chin and turned her face so they were eye to eye. “You are like me.”

It was wonderful, and it hurt. Wonderful because to have Jess there, so close, looking at her with such a beautiful expression and saying those things was wonderful – and it hurt because Dev knew it wasn't true. She reached up and touched the collar around her neck. “Not really.”

“Tell me the difference between that, and these.” Jess pointed at her arm. “At that, or this.” She indicated the room around them. “You any more owned than I am?”

They were both silent for a while. Then Dev's expression shifted a little and she shook her head slightly. “That is an interesting question.” She said. “But I still think we're different, Jess. I don't feel like I'm natural born.”

Jess exhaled a little. “Then maybe I don't either.” She felt strangely adrift, her mind still disturbed by her father's notes from the night before. “Maybe I always felt a little different.”

Dev regarded her gravely.

“Or maybe I'm just being an asshole this morning.” Jess acknowledged. “Let's get up and go mess around. I need some rad. Maybe that'll knock the gloom off me.”

And so they did. An hour later Dev found herself dressed in an off-shift jumpsuit standing behind Jess in line in the mess. It was mostly empty this early and they claimed a small table on one of the upper levels, facing a tray full of processor provided items and hot kack filled mugs.

They were halfway through when Jason and Brent entered, waving casually at them as they went through the line and picked up their own breakfast. They came over carrying the trays and sat down at the table next to them. “Hey.” Jason said, briefly.

“Hey.” Jess answered. “What's the word?”

Jason shrugged. “Haven't been in ops today yet. You taking a turn?”

“Might as well.”

Brent cleared his throat gently, and turned his head towards Dev. “Tech depot delivered yesterday.” He said. “They got new mods in.”

“Really?” Dev's ears perked. “Did any navigation comp boards come in, do you know? We need to replace ours.”

Brent nodded. “Heard they did, and some gun systems tie ins. Gonna go scrounge after this. Interested?”

Jess's dark brow lifted sharply, and she gave Jason a look. He returned it with a mild expression and a half shrug.

“Sure.” Dev readily agreed. “I wanted to run some system tests anyway, after our mission.” She observed her now empty tray to make sure she hadn't missed any edibles, then she sipped her drink, as the room started to fill.

Working on the carrier seemed like a good way to spend the morning. She could make sure their machine was optimal, in case Jess's plan worked out and they ended up going out again and then, after that, she thought she might get some rad in herself, and do a sim.

Elaine and Tucker entered, and plopped down next to them. “Well that sucked.” Elaine said. “Just got off-shift in ops. I got the honor of doing the comms to Sandy's family.”

Jason grimaced.

“Shuttle inbound.” Tucker commented. “Got some big shots coming about the swipe.”

“Oh yeah like we need more of them around.” Jason grumbled. “I can't believe they haven't pulled together a response yet. I thought they'd be on it like sea lice when you got back, Jess, not put you in the can and sit around waiting for some gold suit to show up and tell us what to do.”

“Huh.” Jess grunted softly. “Bain must have something in mind.”

“How did Sandy's folks take it?” Brent asked, after a small silence. “Heard her talking about them. Never seemed liked she cared a crap or them her.”

Elaine shrugged. “Acted like I was bothering them to give em the news. So I guess you're right. I woke em up, wished I hadn't.”

Jason glanced up as the door opened, and four of the new agents and techs entered, still a little shy, and unsure of themselves. “You know how it is, Lain.” He said. “Once you're in, family's a lost cause. Mine always was. My mother told me to not bother even calling after I went to field school.”

“Mine too.” Tucker said, in a quiet voice. “They were really angry at me for enlisting as a tech.” He added. “They run a barnacle collection co-op and my dad thought I'd take it over from him.”

“Barnacle collection.” Jess repeated. “Kill me now.”

Tucker smiled slightly. “Exactly.”

“Your family's waterside, isn't it, Jess?” Jason asked. “I thought you said that before.”

Jess nodded. “Homestead's in Drake's Bay.” She leaned back and sipped from her mug. “My brothers are work in the processing plants, my mother's the northeast sector processing administrator. We grew up in the shoals scavenging – so trust me I know all about barnacles.”

“Drake's Bay... that's down near the base of old Mount Mitchell, yeah?” Brent asked. “Appalachian archipelago?”

“Yep.” Jess glanced at Dev. “Have to take you there sometime. You'd get a kick out of the seabirds.” She stood up and picked up her tray. “I'm going to ops. Meet you in rad later, Dev?”

Dev nodded, her eyes following her partner as she got rid of her tray and left the room. Since she was done herself, she gathered her things, and looked over at Brent. “Would you like to go to the hangar?”

Brent nodded, and stood up, following her as they made their way across the getting crowded mess and headed out the corridor towards the hangar. As they cleared intersection they heard boot steps hurrying after them and Brent paused and looked behind him. “Ah.”

“Hi” Doug, one of the new techs caught up with them. “You all headed to the carrier bay? Mind if I tag along? Still trying to find my way around here.”

“C'mon.” Brent answered gruffly and continued on his way.

Doug fell in next to Dev as they walked along. “So.. uh.. Dev.. I heard you all were over on the other side. See anything interesting?”

“Yes.” Dev answered promptly. “We saw polar bears, and sea lions, and some dolphins.” She said. “I thought they were amazing.” She glanced sideways at Brent, who had almost soundlessly chuckled.

“You did?” Doug looked at her with an quizzical expression. “What was so special about them?”

“I'd never seen any before.” Dev said. “So it was a very interesting experience for me.”

“Ah hah.” Doug nodded. “So that was all?”

“Everything else is in the comp log.” Dev said. “My programming instructed me to refrain from relating details outside that.”

Doug studied her. “It did?”

“Yours did too.” Brent told him. “Don't run your mouth off in the halls. Not everyone's field ops here.” He paused and looked at Dev. “Maybe they should send the next class up in space for a while.”

Dev assumed that was a compliment, and smiled in response. She reached up and palmed the latch to the hanger, pausing to let the other two techs go ahead of her as they entered the huge space. Even this early, it was very busy inside and the noise nearly made her cover her ears.

“Nice to have everyone busy again.” Brent commented, as he observed the activity. “Hey, move over. They're opening the roof.”

They all moved to one side and continued walking as the huge hatch ground it's way open above them. They were halfway to the service bay when a klaxon blared out, and after a frozen second everyone blurred into motion. Techs on the floor dove for the protection of the service bays and anyone near an already open hatch jumped into it.

Dev found herself close enough to her own carrier to bolt for it, palming the hatch open and turning to wave Doug and Brent in. “This way!”

The two techs didn't hesitate an instant. They scrambled in and Dev followed, sealing the hatch as they heard a set of loud rumbling bangs.

“What the fuck!?” Brent hopped forward to the front, so he could see out the wraparound windows, with Doug close behind him.

Dev went to her pilot's seat and sat down, powering up the carrier with automatic motions, bringing up comp quickly and starting an all scan. “What's going on?”

“ Can't see.” Brent flipped upside down so he could look up. “Get the screens on.”

“Yes.” Dev shunted power to the display systems and started her preflight check. “You should sit down.” She told Doug. “In case we have to move.”

Doug blinked at her, then he scrambled back to the gunner's seat and half fell into it, just as all the screens came live with a full view of the cavern around them. “Wow!”

Hovering over head, limping down, was a carrier so battered and blackened it was hard to distinguish it's outline. There were erratic flares emitting from it's engine pods, and the landing jets were only partially firing. It was listing to one side sharply, and drifting erratically.

“Oh crap.” Brent went flat on his back on the floor of the carrier, watching the screens. “If that thing blows it'll take half the cavern out.”

“Can't even see the body number.” Doug was peering intently at the screen at Jess's station.

Dev put her ear buds in and retracted her seat restraints. “BR27006, central operations.”

“Standby” The response came at once.

“What are you doing?” Brent asked. “You going to lift?”

“BR27006, centops. Status?”

Dev cleared her throat, programming kicking in strongly. “Centops, ready to fly if required.”

“Standby.”

All of a sudden Brent let out a yell as the half destroyed carrier near the ceiling pitched and rolled and headed ground ward. Dev reacted instinctively, jettisoning the umbilicals and punching the landing jets hard, the carrier lunging off the deck and heading skyward at a steep angle.

Brent latched on to the console he was lying near and Doug snapped restraints in place as they took on multiple G, then Dev was leveling out and pointing the nose of her craft in a line bound to intercept the falling carrier.

There was barely even a moment to react, or be afraid before the impact. Dev flinched, but sent power to the jets as they both started ground ward, feeling her carrier strain as a low rumble turned to a body shaking roar.

“Holy shit!” Brent curled himself around the console and covered his head. “You are nuts!”

Dev wasn't worried about that. She had her hands more than full with the carrier, fighting to keep control of it as the blaring horns out side rose to fever pitch and the shaking of the craft was making it hard for her to see as her eyeballs shivered from it.

She wasn't even sure what she was doing. She could feel the weight of the fractured craft above her forcing them down, and she knew she had only moments to decide what to do before they both crashed down onto the stone floor or worse, onto another carrier.

She needed more power. There were voices clamoring around her but she stopped, in her head, and bore down hard for a second, just thinking. Then she ramped the forward jets up and killed the rear ones, the carrier nose tipping up for just long enough for her to kick in the mains.

“Holy shit.” Brent whispered.

Now she had power. Dev concentrated hard, as their floor ward drop stopped, and she let them hover briefly, playing the side jets with a careful touch as she moved them both over a clear spot and started to drop again.

Power increase here, decrease there, adjusting the thrusters and main engines in a delicate dance in three dimensions. She heard the klaxon cut off abruptly, then the low bong of the huge transport cranes in motion.

“They're gonna grab them off you!” Doug yelled, in excitement. “Stripe of a skunk!”

“BR27006” The comms bawled suddenly. “Hold in position! Hold! Hold!”

“Never heard ops do that before.” Brent said, his eyes wide.

“Holding.” Dev answered calmly, though she was panting a little, her own eyes big and round, her hands making adjustments almost every second as she watched the big crane swing over, it's grapples dropping through the air with frightening speed.

A moment later, and they heard the clang as the grapples caught on, and Dev had just barely enough time to throttle back as the weight came off them and they nearly rocketed skyward. She

tipped the carrier on it's side and then rolled it over as she cut off the main engines and got the landing jets back in control.

“Ahh!” Brent yelped, as he was spun in the air, his arms suspending him from the console as they inverted, then returned to standard orientation.

“Sorry about that.” They were up near the ceiling now, and Dev tipped them forward a little so they could see the grapples moving the rescued carrier over to one of the service bays, where emergency teams were racing towards. “They got them!”

“Holy shit that was crazy making” Brent blurted. “How in the hell did you learn to drive like that?”

Dev waited a bit for her hands to stop shaking and then she let out a breath. “That was interesting.” She muttered, before she triggered comms. “BR270006 to central operations, cleared to return to pad?”

There was a bit of silence before comms answered. “BR27006 cleared.” They finally answered, with a roar of sound in the background, of voices and alerts.

“Thank you.” Dev shut down the engines and adjusted the jets, lowering them back to their landing pad as quickly as she could and feeling the intense tension in her body relax as they touched down and she could power down. She let her hands rest on the chair arms for a moment, then she started her shut down procedures. “That.” She half turned to face Doug and Brent. “Isn't programming.”

“That's crazy.” Brent sat up and rubbed his elbow. “You mean you didn't learn it?”

Dev shook her head. “Programming.. that lets me know what buttons to push and how to make things work but when I'm doing this.. “ She looked at her hands. “I just do it.”

Doug released the restraints on the chair and leaned forward. “You know what?” He eyed her. “That's hot.”

Dev swung around in her chair and regarded him, her head cocking to one side. “What?”

“That's hot.” He repeated. “You are the bomb.”

There was no real time to answer, because motion caught her eye and Dev turned her head to see Jess barreling toward them at top speed, leaping over bays and tools in a powerful flow of motion that immediately focused her attention. She released her restraints and stood up, her legs feeling a bit shaky as she moved across the floor of the carrier and triggered the hatch.

Jess bounded inside a breath later. “Are you all right?”

Dev looked around, then at her, then she nodded. “Yes.” She replied. “I think Brent bumped his head though when we inverted.”

“That was crazy.” Doug had hastily vacated Jess' s station.

Brent got up off the floor and dusted himself off. “No, that wasn't crazy.” He said. “That was just mad skills. She's got them.” He gave Jess a brief nod, then he slipped past her, with Doug at his heels leaving Jess and Dev alone together in the carrier, the hatch sliding shut behind them.

Jess put her hands on her hips. “I think everyone in this place now knows you have mad skills.” She told her partner wryly. “Whole ops center nearly went out of their minds when you lit off the rockets.”

Dev wasn't sure if this was all good or bad. “I had to.” She said. “The jets weren't enough to keep us from crashing.”

“I know.” Jess grinned. “But pretty much no one would have had the guts to do that because you could have just sent yourself into the cavern wall.”

“I wouldn't have done that.” Dev told her, seriously. “Really.” She looked past Jess. “Who was that? What was wrong with that machine?”

Jess turned “Let's go find out.” She paused, then turned back again, putting her arms around Dev and giving her a hug. “Glad you're okay.” She muttered. “You kind of freaked me out a little.”

Dev happily returned the embrace, reasoning it probably meant she did more or less the right things. “I didn't mean to.” She said. “I just wanted to help that carrier.”

“If anyone's still alive in that thing, you saved them.” Jess turned and triggered the hatch. “Let's go see.” She walked out with Dev right behind her. “You put a dent in the roof?”

“I hope not.” Dev said.

They cleared the pad, and as they did, Dev realized they were the center of attention. Then she paused in her mind, and realized actually that she was the center of attention. All the bio alts had been climbing up out of the pits and they were staring at her with wide eyes.

The other techs were. Even the maintenance supervisors were standing there, watching them walk by.

“Was that incorrect?” She asked Jess, a little embarrassed by the focus. “What I did?”

Jess put her hand on her shoulder as they walked. “No.” She answered after a long silence. “You did the right thing. Everyone is just sort of surprised that you decided to do it.”

“They are?”

Jess nodded. “But I wasn't.” She added. “Let's find out what's going on then we can talk about it.”

Dev felt better about that. She didn't think she was going to get in trouble, or that Jess was upset with her. But she hadn't really thought about that before she acted, and that did bother her.

Think and then act. That was what Doctor Dan had always taught them.

The bio alt safety teams were spraying down the damaged carrier and as they arrived at the work pad Jason and Elaine joined them, along with two of the new agent teams. Doug's partner April was there, and Mike Arias came trotting up with his partner Chester as they all came to a halt beyond the safety zone.

“Holy crap.” Jason said, after a brief pause. “Looks like that thing flew through a volcano.”

A medical team raced past, ignoring the potential danger as they set up a triage point. Stephen Bock was following them, but paused at the group of agents on the ramp, stopping right in front of Dev. “They program you for flights into insanity?”

Jess bristled.

Dev took the question at face value though. “No I don't think so.” She responded. “Just a lot about how to fly a carrier, and a little bit about parabolic dynamics.” She paused. “And physics.”

Bock looked at her, then he looked at Jess, taking a half step back at the expression he found on her face. Then he shook his head and went up to the med point. “Let's just hope it was worth it.” He called back over his shoulder. “And there's something still alive in this thing.”

“He is in discomfort.” Dev said, mournfully.

Jess relaxed, and chuckled softly under her breath. “All along, they've said you can't use bio alts in the force because they can't make a decision, Dev.” She turned her head and eyed her partner. “And you just proved that wrong. He's not in discomfort. He's scared shitless.”

Dev frowned, but remained silent as Jess draped her arm over her shoulders not sure if she'd done that at all.

**

Alexander Bain sat at the head of the ops table, elbows leaning on it, chin resting on his fists. The other chairs were filled with agents and ops management, with Stephen Bock taking an uneasy seat to his right.

Jess was in her usual seat at the other end, and she had her hands clasped on the table in front of her, her eyes fixed soberly on her folded thumbs.

The doors sealed, compressing the air in the room a little, and Bain cleared his throat. “Well, people.” He said. “Every day seems to bring us new challenges doesn't it?” He glanced at Bock and lifted an eyebrow.

“Five dead, two alive, both critically injured.” Stephen said. “Med thinks Syd will make it. The other one, not sure.”

“Hm.” Bain grunted thoughtfully. “Let's hope we get some information from one or the other., hmm? I am told the carrier systems are non functional.”

“That's true.” Stephen agreed. “Everything gave out just as they cleared the bay roof.”

“So I hear.” Bain looked over at Jess. “I hear your charming companion intervened to assist, saving us from a good deal more messiness.”

Jess nodded. “Dev launched and caught them as they dropped, kept them up long enough for the grapples to take hold.” She said, in a matter of fact voice. “Good piece of flying.”

“Never saw anyone do anything like that before.” Elaine said. “Not inside a space that small.”

Nods and murmurs. “Dev says, she got used to dealing with three dimensional movement up in space.” Jess said. “So maybe that has something to do with it. She's not oriented the same way, I don't think.”

“Hm.” Bain considered that. “I wonder if we could contract time on station, perhaps? As part of training.”

“Why not just get all our techs from there from now on?” Jason spoke up, in a mild voice. “I'm sold. I like Brent but holy crap.”

Bain smiled thinly, and exchanged looks with Jess. “That's for the future.” He said. “Right now, it seems we have a great deal of destruction to account for at Northern.” He glanced to his right. “Mr. Bock, please assemble a recovery team, and start there at once. Find out what you can.”

“Sir.” Stephen nodded.

Jess drew breath to protest, then stopped, when Bain's eyes swiveled back to her, and his eyebrow hiked. She kept her tongue still, rewarded with a brief smile from him.

“If the damage is as I expect.” Bain said. “It will not go un-countered.”

Jess relaxed, and settled back in her chair, sure in her own mind who'd be picked to execute that plan. She had no love lost for Syd, or any of his people but the corps was the corps and she'd take vengeance on them as readily as if they'd been part of Base 10.

“In the meantime, find out what you can from the condition of that vehicle.” Bain said. “The damage seems.. ah... more extensive that I would expect from the armament we saw on the transports.” He waved his hand. “Go.” His eyes drifted over. “Ah, Drake, stay behind a moment.”

Jess felt no apprehension about the summons. She waited for the room to empty then she got up and went around the table, settling into a seat nearer to him, but not in the front row. “So.”

“So.” He echoed. “We begin to see the potential of your biological alternative team mate.”

Jess smiled briefly. “Didn't surprise me.” She said. “I don't think Bricker had any clue what he was introducing in here but it works.”

Bain nodded. “She does indeed.” He said. “Which could put her in some danger.”

“I'll watch out for her.”

“I suspect you will.” He studied her. “I have received communication from our friends on the other side. A message arrived on the shuttle that recently landed.” He folded his hands over his stomach and leaned back. “To send back the four men from science sector and Doctor Kurok their price is you.”

“Me?”

“You.” Bain agreed. “They've agreed to a midpoint exchange tomorrow night, they will hand over their captives, we will hand over you, and they will take you and likely to horrible things to you before you die a slow, and no doubt very painful death.”

Jess considered this thoughtfully. Then she looked up and into Bain's eyes. “Shoot me.”

After a second, his face split into a smile.

“Or let me go, and see if they can take me down or if I'll take them out.” Jess said. “They tried that the last time. Didn't work out so well for them.”

“Ah, my dear.” Bain looked affectionately at her. “You did, indeed, breed true. No we can't do that, as one of the conditions would be to turn you over immobilized, and they would then inject you I am sure with something to keep you that way. They are taking no chances.”

“Then?” Jess watched his face closely.

“I have sent back an answer rejecting their request.” Bain said. “I told them to go ahead and grind them up for fish. That they weren't worth the price to me.”

Jess felt a little lightheaded. She took a few breaths, trying to absorb the words. “Hard on them.” She finally said. “Our guys that went.”

“Yes.” Bain agreed. “But that's why they pay me the big bucks. I get to make those kind of decisions.'

They were both quiet for a bit. “Kurok's a good guy.” Jess said.

“He most certainly is.”

“He's one of us.” She looked at Bain. “He was a tech.”

“Mm. Yes. He was actually much more than that.” He stood up and paced a little “He was as revolutionary in his own way as your charming companion is.” He said. “But going was his choice. Not mine, and not yours, and he knew there was a chance this would be the outcome.”

“Hm.” Jess grunted softly.

“I think he believed if he went, his presence would give some kind of safety to the rest.” Bain said. “He always was an idiot that way.”

Jess considered that. “Do they know who he is?” She asked. “Aside from a scientist from the bio station?”

“That's a very good question.” Bain responded “I suspect they are most interested in his current persona. They might know of his earlier one, but one never knows. I have not revealed that to anyone. Have you?”

Now it was Jess's turn to get up and pace. “Everyone who saw him in the shuttle bay knows he's got something to do with us. But I haven't told anyone but Dev who he was because I didn't know myself until last night.”

Bain turned. “Last night?”

Jess nodded. “My family sent me a few trunks of my father's things. There were some plas vid in there.” She leaned her weight on the back of a chair. “He and my dad.”

“I see.” Bain sat down again. “Well, it's irrelevant in any case. I regret abandoning him, and them, but we don't make bargains and we don't sell our people.” He watched Jess's reaction sharply. “Do you agree, Agent Drake?”

“I do.” Jess said, after a brief pause. “You start there, where does it end? No deals, no quarter. It's always been that way.”

Bain looked both relieved, and pleased. “Excellent. Now.” He shifted a little. “Let's discuss the future, shall we?”

Jess sat back down and rested her elbows on the table. “Sure.”

**

It seemed like a very long walk from the ops hall to rad. Jess felt like the stone walls were endless, though it gave her time to think as she made her way through the crowd.

She felt confused. Being told she'd be taking Bricker's place should have made her bounce like a crazy person. It was everything she'd ever wanted, or desired, though shed' felt sorry for Stephen who Bricker was going to send to rebuild Northern.

Awesome, right? She'd be in charge of the whole base, never have to put her ass out on the line, never have to sit in pain as yet another mark was burned into her arm, never end up in med for months or have to argue with the other agents.

The hitch, of course, was Dev. She'd be assigned of course to another agent, and Bain seemed to think she'd excel and not to worry about it. He was pleased with her, pleased with the program, and had already sent communication up to Life Force for them to proceed with producing more.

So yeah, it had all worked out great, for her, and for Dev, right? Bain had sure seemed to think she should think so, and she'd done her best to respond like he expected.

But.

Jess reached her rad station and entered, acknowledging comp and stripping off her jumpsuit. She winced a little as the fabric rubbed against her new mark but then she was free of it, and she walked into the open area, feeling the warmth as the system came on and bathed her in it's calming glow.

She sat down and exhaled. She didn't feel right about it. She just wasn't really sure why.

After a moment, she got back up and went to comms, pulling a pad over and requesting Dev's whereabouts. Not unexpectedly, her tech was in the mechanical store and she hesitated, then she entered the key for that area. “Let me talk to Dev.” She said, when it was answered.

A moment later, Dev's voice echoed softly down the link. “Hello?”

“Hey, it's Jess. You done down there? C'mon over to my rad.”

“Absolutely.” Dev responded, then clicked off.

Jess let her hand fall, and then she went back over to the couch and sat down on it. Dev deserved to hear it all from her, didn't she? At least she could reassure her that she wasn't going to head back up to the creche. Jess was pretty sure her partner...

Her partner.

Jess sighed. “I knew I shouldn't have done that.” She chastised herself. “Screwed myself over. Now I ...” She thought about Dev partnering with someone else, going out in the field with someone else, and to her surprise it made her really, really angry.

That was just wrong. Dev was a tech, and she was a really good tech, so why not want her to be successful?

Why not?

Jess stared at her hands, a brief flash of memory filling her mind's eye with waking up that morning in Dev's bed. Why not? Because she wanted Dev to be with her, not out in the field with someone else, someone who might want to share a sleep sack with her and then what would Dev do?

Her stomach hurt. Jess could not remember feeling this confused and in mental turmoil for a very very long time. It was unpleasant and she thought she might even throw up.

A soft knock came at the door, and she ran out of time for that. “Come.”

The panel slid open and Dev ducked inside, a smudge of silicon grease across the bridge of her nose. “Did you need something? It sounded urgent.”

Jess took a breath. “Yeah, c'mon in.” She said. “Let's talk.”

Dev shed her work suit and joined her in the rad area. “Some excellent parts came in. I got some of them for our carrier, and I'm going to see about getting them installed.”

Something abruptly crystallized in Jess. She realized just how important to her that one word our meant, and as she did, she felt the tension in her relax. “So let me tell you what's going on.” She said. “First off, Bain's really happy with you.”

Dev smiled immediately.

“He's happy with me, too, so happy he offered me a promotion.” Jess said. “He wants me to be in charge of this place. Take Bricker's job.”

Dev's eyes opened wide. “That's excellent!” She said. “Oh Jess!”

Jess smiled at her partner's delight in her good fortune. “Yeah, except I”m gonna turn him down.”

“You are?”

“I don't want to be in charge of this place.”

“You don't?”

Jess shook her head, feeling an odd, disjointed peace in herself. “Means I have to come in from the field.” She said. “Means I have to sit at a desk, and get a poof head.” She hesitated. “Means I have to give you up to someone else.” She caught Dev's quickly indrawn breath. “I'm not going to do that.”

Dev eased down on one knee and put a hand on her arm, her bare body almost glowing in the light from the rad. “But Jess... isn't it what you wanted?”

“I thought it was.” Her partner admitted. “I mean.. “ She shifted and rested her elbow on her bare knee. “It's what we're all supposed to want, you know? You can only be in the field for so long. You get too old for it. Then what? If we didn't want to be directors, or heads... what would they do with us?”

Dev felt highly unsettled. She realized rather quickly though that she was far more unsettled thinking about becoming someone else's partner than she was about anything else, even leaving the citadel. Nevertheless, she sorted through her thoughts trying to find something to respond with. “I don't know.” She confessed. “When we get to where we aren't useful anymore they put us down.”

Jess studied her. “Really.”

Dev nodded. “What else are they going to do?” She asked, in a quiet voice. “There's only so much room up in station, unless they move a lot of sets out. I've... I remember when it got crowded once.” She looked down at her hands, turning one over and studying the fingers of it. “It was just.. one night it was really packed in the dining hall and then the next morning it wasn't.”

Jess felt a chill go up and down her spine. “Wow.”

“So you should be in charge if you can, Jess.” The bio alt gave her an intense look. “Because only the people in charge can say what's going to happen. The rest of us just have to wait to be told.”

Oh, wow. It had come around the corner and surprised her. She hadn't expected Dev to.. “You want to go out with someone else”? Jess asked, cautiously. “Tired of me already?”

Dev's jaw actually dropped. She reached out and grasped Jess's arm. “No.” She managed to get out after a brief, shocked pause. “I don't want to be with anyone else. For anything.” She clarified. “But I also know it's good to be able to tell everyone else what to do.”

Jess exhaled. “I'm really confused.” She admitted. “I don't know what the hell to do now.” She felt both better and worse at the same time, a sensation that almost made her hiccup. “I don't want to give you up but I don't want someone else to take over and tell me what to do.”

Dev smiled faintly. “I think I should say I'm very flattered.” She murmured. “Anyway, please think about things, Jess. If this is an excellent opportunity it's important for you, isn't it?”

Her partner gazed thoughtfully at the ground. After a moment of silence her head lifted. “Is it?”

The questioning in her voice made Dev pause.

“Anyway.” Jess went on. “The other part of the news is they heard from the other side.” She said. “The price on your friend's head is my life.”

Dev actually stopped breathing. Then she started again with a choked gasp. “What?”

“They wanted me delivered to them in order to let the rest of them go.” Jess explained. “As a price.. I guess. For what we did over there.” She touched Dev's hand and stroked the top of her knuckles. “Bain told them no. We don't bargain.” She looked up into Dev's eyes. “Sorry.”

Dev let out her breath. “What will they do?” She said. “Will they hurt Doctor Dan and the rest of them?”

“They'll kill them.”

Dev felt like someone had hit her hard on the chest. “Oh.” She murmured softly. “Why?” She asked, in a distressed voice. “Why would they do that?”

Jess exhaled and lay down on her back on the couch. “Because we didn't give them what they asked for.” She let her eyes close, feeling the warmth of the rad on their lids. “Don't even know why they asked. They know better.”

There was a very long silence. Eventually, Jess cracked her eyes open and turned her head, watching Dev's still, silent face. “Sorry about your friend.”

Dev blinked. “Yes, me too.” She whispered. “Is it all right if I go back to my space?”

“Sure.” Jess touched her knee. “Go chill.”

Without a word, the bio alt got up and went to the locker, slipping into her jumpsuit and picking up the toolkit she'd been carrying. She left the rad chamber, the door sliding shut after her with a sense of metallic finality.

Jess folded her arms over her chest, at a loss to what to do with all the churning emotion going on inside her. She thought she'd settled on a course of action, and found peace with it only to be shaken out of her comfort by Dev's unexpected reaction – and – her stolid common sense about what it meant to be in charge of something.

Of course, a bio alt would understand that at a gut level. Dev had lived her whole, young life with the knowledge that anyone and everyone around her held power over her – of course she'd look at Jess's opportunity as a good thing.

Even if it didn't seem like a good thing for her. Even if it meant she would end up being a part of someone else's life instead of Jess's.

Surprising, really, how much that thought hurt her. Jess rubbed her chest. Literally hurt her. Here she thought she was being so noble and self sacrificing, turning the job down to stay with Dev when the bio alt had turned out to be more mercenary than she'd expected.

Ow.

Well, maybe it would turn out for the best for both of them. If she was in charge, Jess pondered, she could make sure Dev got a good partner, and good assignments, and she could look out for her, right? Maybe that was Dev's point after all. Maybe she saw a good opportunity to make a place for herself, getting close to Jess.

Its what Jess would have done, right? What she had done, in a way, in sucking up to Bain?

Jess suddenly found herself feeling very sad. It was a dull melancholy that she remembered from her recent convalescence, and rather than give in to it, she got up and shook herself, going over to the console and punching out.

“Session not complete.” The comp complained.

“Later.” Jess got into her suit and pulled her boots on. It felt better to be up and moving, and she headed out in a determined march into the hallway. Maybe she would go to ops, and get a head start on a getting that high level view Bain had spoken of.

Maybe she'd go to the gym, and get the kinks out. The memory of that goon wiping the deck with her rankled, and she figured at the least she should end her time in the field by being in good shape. Otherwise all that chair duty was gonna catch up fast with her.

So the gym, and then ops, and then maybe the other half of rad.

Jess nodded her head decisively, then looked up to find herself standing out side her own quarters, as surprised as anyone that her steps had taken her here despite her best intentions.

With a shake of her head she entered, and looked around, trying to keep her eyes from being drawn to the door that connected her quarters with Dev's

At least for now it did, until Bain put the change through, and she moved from this area, from the agents compound, up a level to where there was thicker carpet on the floor, and carefully inlaid tile on the walls. Where everything was plusher, and more comfortable.

She'd leave her blacks behind, and the heavy blasters, and use her mind more. Get hurt less. Not have to put it on the line every other day.

Great. Jess sat down in her work chair and rested her elbows on her knees, feeling sick to her stomach and with an ache inside she scarcely understood.

“Why in the hell do I feel like this?” She muttered “What in the hell's wrong with me?”

With a sigh, she leaned back and pulled over the bound case that had been her fathers. She opened it and leafed through the plas, the irony of knowing the position she'd just been given had been so coveted by him and yet one he'd never quite reached.

She flipped through the images at the end, slowing and stopping when she came to the one of him and Kurok.

A fragment of memory. Just a moment of time that had captured an image of two people in harmony with each other, body language relaxed and comfortable, secure and confident.

Comfortable like she and Dev were.

Jess regarded the plas in silence for a while, then she slowly closed it, got up, and walked over to the door between her and Dev, watching the door shiver into motion as she reached it and moving past into the darkness beyond.

**

There were too much emotions happening for her to cope with them. Dev was seated on the ground in the back of her quarters, her back to the wall. She had her arms folded around around her upraised knees, and she was fighting hard to keep herself from throwing up.

What a contrast. She had left the service bay in very good spirits, having spent her time discussing the new mods with Brent and Doug and feeling a sense of acceptance from them that made her feel very good. The summons from Jess had even made her feel better, and she'd been looking forward to joining her partner in rad and maybe telling her about the new gear.

Now she felt horrible. Just really horrible.

Thinking about Doctor Dan was making her cry. The thought of never seeing him again hurt so bad she couldn't stop the tears from running down her face.

Not only that, she knew the bad guys who had him would hurt him. Jess hadn't said that, but she could see it in the taller woman's eyes and it was heartbreaking to think of him suffering.

She didn't want to think about it.

It was hard to think about anything else though. Dev exhaled. She understood why Interforce didn't want to make a deal for him, and there was nothing in her heart that would allow the thought of trading Jess even to get Doctor Dan back.

There was no good at all in it. There wasn't any good even in Jess's opportunity for her, save that maybe it would mean Jess might make sure she could stay at the citadel.

Working with someone else.

The tears kept coming, and Dev rested her head against her forearm, feeling her chest heave in silent sobs.

Bio alts weren't supposed to cry. They were taught that in school, from the very earliest that showing natural born emotions was a bad thing. It made them uncomfortable, and Dev remembered clearly that grip on her face, and finger to the lips of the proctor when she'd slipped once after a hard fall.

But none of them ever really stopped feeling things, you just learned how to hide it, to keep it inside until you were alone, or in your sleep pod and no one could hear you.

She quieted after a few minutes and took a breath, releasing it as the hiccups eased and she felt the throbbing in her head lessen.

The door opening startled her, and she jerked up right, her shoulders hitting the wall as a tall figure entered and stopped, looking around. "Jess?"

"There you are." Jess came over to where she was crouched. "You sitting in the dark for a reason?"

Dev wiped her eyes, and sniffled. "I was just thinking."

Jess sat down and leaned on the wall next to her. "You okay?"

"I don't think so."

Jess sat there quietly next to her for a while, not saying anything. Then she cleared her throat a little. "You feel bad about your friend?"

Dev nodded, her throat aching too much to speak.

"He's pretty sharp. He probably knew what happened to them could happen."

"I know." Dev whispered. "I just feel bad about it." She cleared her throat and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" Jess's voice held a note of gentle inquisitiveness.

Dev had to think about that before she answered. "Why do I feel bad or why am I sorry?"

"Both."

Ah. "I feel bad because I like Doctor Dan a lot, and it.. it bothers me to think of him getting hurt or killed." Dev said, after a long pause. "And I"m sorry because I don't want to cause you discomfort." She concluded. "Or think less of me for it."

Jess reached up and rubbed the side of her nose. "Well." She leaned against Dev a little. "I don't really understand it all. But I know it bothers me that you're upset."

Dev sniffled.

"I know this guy was a friend, and all that, but you can't really do anything about it." Jess said. "It's not your fault what happened, so try not to freak out about it." She patted her thigh in an attempt to comfort her distressed friend. "Take it easy."

"Jess?" Dev interrupted her softly.

"Hm?"

"How would you feel if it was me?"

There was a long moment of absolute silence. "If it was you what?" Jess asked, cautiously.

"If it were me, being captured." Dev said. "Would it bother you?"

She waited for Jess to answer, but a very long time seemed to go by and her partner didn't. She looked up at her and saw her profile, very still and quiet, and intense, and after a second, Jess turned and returned her gaze.

"Would it bother me." Jess mused. "Boy that puts it in perspective don't it?" She went on, in a slightly wondering tone. "I wouldn't have let you go. It was stupid of Bain to let him go, or the rest of them. Anyone wet out of field school would have known there was something off."

"Oh."

"But if you had I'd..." Jess paused. "I think I'd have to do something about it." She sounded surprised. "Even if it meant our trading places and me croaking." She regarded Dev. "So all right, maybe I do get how you feel about it. A little."

Dev thought about that, in silence.

"It would bother me a lot if they took you." Jess added, after a while. "I like you a lot." She hesitantly put her arm around Dev's shoulders. "Kinda sucks they made me the price of his ticket. Does that freak you out?"

Dev shook her head.

“It freaks me out, a little.” Jess confessed. “That's a pretty big target on my back. Makes going out in the field pretty risky. Job's hard enough without half the planet gunning for ya.”

“You should take that new job, Jess.” Dev murmured. “I don't want you to get hurt.”

“Yeah, I should.” The taller woman agreed. “Better for me, maybe better for this place. Better not to piss Bain off with his itchy trigger finger.”

Dev felt a sense of additional sadness “I'll do my best to do good with the other person you put me with, Jess. I want to perform excellently for you.”

Jess exhaled, feeling a cascading torrent of conflicting emotions she had really very little experience with. It felt gut wrenching and cleansing at the same time and it made her body tingle from it. “I bet you'd perform excellently no matter what happened to you, Dev. You're just that kind of person.”

Dev smiled briefly, and looked away. “It's the way I was made.” She commented quietly “I don't really have a choice about it.”

“But I'm not ready to give you up.” Jess concluded. “And I'm not ready to join the powers that be.” She drew in a deep breath. “Leaving those guys out there to croak just to save my damn skin is wrong, Dev. No matter what Bain says, I can't just sit here and let them die.”

Dev turned her head and stared at her, a little open mouthed. “But.. uh..Jess..”

“But Jess what?” The pale blue eyes twinkled a little. “Life's short, Dev. You can't hold onto it. But I want you to know you've got a choice now to make. You get involved in a rogue op with me, you're done. “ Her face turned serious. “If you don't croak with me doing it, that is. You don't have to. I don't have to tell you anything else. I'll just disappear, and you wont' know anything so you can't admit to anything. They'll keep you. You're good.”

Dev gazed steadily at her.

“You've got a lot more to lose than I do.” Jess pressed her. “Dying has always been on my horizon. You've got a chance to make a new life for yourself here.” She paused a moment. “Listen, I know you don't want to go back topside. I don't want you to screw yourself up just because I am.”

Dev's eyes shifted and looked off into the darkness, then moved back to Jess's face again. “Are you saying you are going to go and try to help Doctor Dan?”

“If I can figure out a way, I might.” Jess admitted. “I might just do that despite what Bain wants.”

Then she waited, watching the dimly seen face next to her, faint illumination from the room's controls outlining Dev's gentle profile as she looked intently at her.

“Then take me with you.” Dev said, into a small, charged silence that had fallen between them. “If you go to do that, I want to go too.”

“Even if it means you get in trouble?” Jess asked. “Or end up back up on station, or dead?”

“Yes.”

Jess nodded slowly. “This could be a big mistake for both of us.” She said. “But you know - I don't give a damn. I'm not going to end up like my father did, toeing the line all his life and ending up with what? A blaster up his ass and a long, hard death.” She stared off into the dark shadows of the room, understanding that the instinct driving her was that same one she'd felt in the field, that she knew was perilous to ignore.

Insane as it often seemed. She felt that peace inside that had always guided her choices, and now, it seemed, Dev's choices as well because hearing her partner's words had brought a relaxation across her frame that she felt the twin of in the bio alts shoulders under her arm.

Take me with you. Jess grinned a little, thinking of how shocked anyone would have been to hear a bio say that. She felt the warmth as Dev's cheek pressed against her and just like that, the whole us and them thing came home to her again.

They sat there quietly together in silence, the sounds of the citadel penetrating dimly through the walls. Jess remembered the long weeks recovering from her injury not that far in the past, and

how that same remote echo had made her guts clench and now, now she only felt a sense of anticipation.

“Okay.” She finally said. “So the first thing we need to do is go back to what we were doing. Act normal.”

“Okay.” Dev replied. “What is acting normal?”

Jess chuckled wryly. “I'll go back to rad. You go back to wrenching.” She said. “Then I'm going to go to ops and get some intel.” She paused. “See what you can get out of your buddies in the pits down there. Details about what went on.”

Dev nodded.

“Find out everything. What rig they took, who went, what they loaded.” Jess told her. “What I want to really find out is, was this a real deal, or just a game?”

“A game?”

Jess nodded slowly, and lowered her voice, even though they were alone, in the back of the quarters furthest from anything in the whole citadel. “Somethings behind this. Maybe we can figure out what it is and whatever that is, will keep us alive.”

“I see.”

“Maybe it is on the level, and legit. Just a bad choice. Maybe it isn't.” Jess got up and extended her hand to Dev. “Let's go see what we can find out.”

“I think I should wash a little first.” Dev said. “This being sad thing is messy.”

Jess pulled her up and wrapped an arm around Dev's shoulders, guiding her towards the sanitary chamber. “Do my best to limit that being sad thing then.”

“Thank you.”

“Sure you want to do this?”

“Yes.”
**

Dev felt a lot better. She slipped back under the carrier's open engine, settling onto her back as she brought the portable comp around to take readings on the new mods.

Though there now seemed to be a much greater possibility of something bad happening to her, at least there was a hope that something better might happen to Doctor Dan, and she knew if Jess could make it all come right, she would.

Her head hurt, from all the discomfort and sadness. But her heart hurt less, and she was able to concentrate on the comp, studying the results of the tweaking she'd done.

“Hey Dev!”

Dev turned her head, to find Doug trotting up. “Hello.”

“Hey listen.” He flopped onto the ground on his belly, extending a hand held monitor. “Do you know what this is? I'm trying to tune that rust bucket they assigned us and I've never seen it before.”

Dev put her own comp down and half rolled onto her side to look. The small screen was displaying a diagnostic readout and after a blank moment, she felt programming kick in for it. “Oh.” She leaned closer. “That's very strange. It's the homing sensor but...”

“But it's pointed in the wrong direction, right?” Doug said. “It's transmitting somewhere else not locking on here.”

“Yes.” Dev nodded. “That's exactly right.” She looked at Doug, who was frowning at the device. “That doesn't make sense. Does it?”

“Nah. Ah, well, now that I know I'm reading this right, maybe it was just screwed up and needs to be reset.” He got up onto his feet. “They told me that carrier hasn't been used in forever. Who knows how long that thing's been bleeping.”

“Let's go look at it.” Dev grabbed on to the engine cowling and pulled herself up to her feet, pausing to grab her comp. “Maybe there are other things incorrect.”

Doug seemed quite happy for the company and they crossed the busy cavern over to the service bay the new team had been assigned. A carrier perched atop it, it's sides battered and scorch marks evident on most of it's skin surface. It was the same model as her own though, and had what appeared to be updated engine pods.

“Inside's a mess.” Doug worked the hatch and ducked inside. “They told us maybe they've got some new ones coming sometime but April figures we'll be stuck with this one for a while.”

The inside was a wreck. Not as bad as the old carrier they'd seen on their last mission, but it was evidently neglected and most of the racks and stations were being replaced. Dev crossed over to the open pilot's console and set her comp down, configuring it to read the mechanics inside. “It seems this needs all new boards.”

“Yeah.” Doug came and peered over her shoulder. “Thanks for taking the time to check it out with me. The rest of those guys act like they're doing a favor to answer a question.” He grumbled. “I know we're newbies but sheesh.”

“Well, “ Dev studied the readouts. “It took a few days for me to get settled as well.”

“I bet.”

Dev glanced at him, one eyebrow lifted.

“I mean, I'm just new.” Doug said. “But I came in the regular way. I know those guys must have freaked out about you, right?”

“A bit.” Dev went back to her comp. “But after a few days things got better. There was less discomfort.” She looked at the console log, and her brow creased. The last entries were dated prior to her arrival, and she noted the irregularities as she copied the contents into her portable mem.

“We heard about you.” Doug seemed content to watch her. “We heard rumors, and then, before we went for grad, they pulled us in and told us about you.”

“Really?” Dev considered that. “Why?”

“Well, us, the ones that were coming here, I guess because they knew we'd meet you.” The young tech promptly answered. “I guess so we wouldn't freak out. They said you were just an experiment they were trying out.” He watched Dev's profile. “Everyone at field school thought it was a gag, or something. Or some rig for a mission, to try and fake out the other side or whatever, No one really thought it was real.”

Dev closed her comp and turned, facing him. “So what do you think now?”

He grinned. “After that flight you took us on? I got no questions. “ He held a hand up. “I don't know how they did it, but I'm all right with you.”

“That's very nice of you.” Dev smiled briefly. “Since I have no control over what I am or how they taught me, it's good that some people think that's not so bad.” She indicated the comp. “if I were you, I would replace this unit, not just reset it. It seems to have a lot of old data in it that might disrupt your systems if you keep it on there.”

Doug grinned. “Glad to have the second opinion. I told Clint that, and he told me when he wanted my opinion he'd give it to me. If I tell him you said it, he'll hand over the part.” He winked. “So thanks, Dev! I appreciate it.”

“No problem.” Dev returned the smile, and slipped out the door, pausing a moment to decide what to do next. There was a lot of activity in the bay, and instead of heading back to her own pad, she detoured by where the damaged carrier she'd rescued was being held.

There were groups of bio alt techs around it, all of them working on salvage. The carrier was in such poor shape it was hard for them to find things to save, but they kept at the task and didn't look up as Dev paused to study the rig.

Only two persons had survived. But they had told her that even those two would not have even had a chance if it hadn't been for what she'd done. Looking at the carrier now, it was hard to believe it had survived long enough to get as far as their bay, and Dev was very cautious in her approach as she moved towards the open hatch.

One of the bio alts looked up, and hastily got out of her way as she eased inside. “Take care, tech.” He said, in a soft voice. “It's very unstable.”

Dev paused. “Thanks, Kaytee.” She replied. “I just want to look inside. I will take care.”

The bio alt smiled at her. “It was a big thing you did, NM-Dev-1.” He answered “Everyone was talking about it, downstairs.”

Downstairs, in the compound all the bio alts lived in, except her. Dev nodded. “It was an unusual thing.” She said. “I am glad it didn't put any of you in danger, and it assisted the injured people inside.”

“It was good.” The Kaytee stated. “Many were surprised. I think it gave some of the natural born discomfort.” He kept his voice very low.

Dev nodded. “I think so too. However, I am not going to perform with less than excellence because of that.”

“No.” Kaytee smiled again. “That's not your programming.” He lifted a hand and moved off, as two of Clint's supervisors approached. “Have a good day, tech.”

“You too, Kaytee.” Dev murmured, watching him leave before she turned and stepped very carefully up into the carrier. The Kaytee set were the most advanced set, she remembered, before they had sent her. They had a lot of specialized programming for mech, and she remembered some of them talking before they left the creche, proud of their advanced status.

Well, so was she. Dev paused and examined the inside. The smell of blood was strongly evident, and she could see the stain of it on the floor and on the weapons console. There were panels hanging from the walls, and mixing with the bio scent was the smell of fried electronics that made her nose wrinkle.

With so many people, it must have been terrible inside. Dev triggered her comp and did a scan, most of the systems dead and unresponsive. The only board that showed any readings at all were the main engines, and the damage to them had been extensive.

But what had made it? Dev adjusted the comp. The outside had shown huge fire scores, but not from any of the known blaster types. It was more as if they'd flown the carrier through one f the big electrical storms, it had that kind of disruption pattern to it.

Would they have done that? Dev remembered very clearly how cautious Jess had been about flying in the storms, preferring to take shelter no matter how much of a rush she'd been in. Maybe they had little choice though, with all the trouble, and those other people dead, or dying.

A signal caught her attention and she turned, moving over to the pilots station and dipping the comp down. She observed the results and frowned, checking the settings twice, before she ran the test again.

Then she flipped back to the readings she'd gotten from Doug's carrier and compared them. “This is unusual.” She muttered, saving the data and tucking the comp under her arm. Then she went over to the console and knelt, working the dead control panel off the side of the carrier, and setting it to one side.

She drew a small light from her pocket and turned it on, peering inside and then, sticking her whole head in the panel. The stench was awful, but she studied the burned boards intently, before drawing herself back out and resting her elbow on her knee.

Hm. Dev tapped her thumb against the side of the light. Was this something like what Jess had been talking about? Finding out what had happened? This wasn't really part of Doctor Dan's problem... or was it? She glanced up at the pilot's seat, it's surface stained with a coating of blood and the backbone of it snapped in two places.

“Hello, my dear.”

Dev nearly jumped out of her skin. She turned to find Alexander Bain in the hatchway, regarding her with those cold, sharp eyes. “Hello, sir.” She replied politely, feeling more than a little apprehension as the old man climbed into the carrier and approached her.

He sat down on the half destroyed weapons station though, and folded his arms over his chest. “What brings you here, hm? Was there not enough to do on your own machine?”

Dev settled on the floor, crossing her legs under her. “Well, sir.” She said. “I was just wondering about this one.”

“Ah, I see.”

“I want to understand what happened to it.” She went on slowly. “I don't want anything like that to happen to ours.” She explained. “It seems to be very damaged.”

Bain nodded. “It is indeed, my dear.” He said. “What do you think happened to it?”

Dev looked around the inside of the carrier. “It appears to have passed through a high degree of electrical disruption.” She said. “I think they flew through a storm.”

Bain smiled. 'They did indeed, young Dev. They had little choice, it seems.” He straightened up. “If either of the two survivors regains consciousness, we can ask them why. Until then – why is a mystery. These were all old timers. Certainly they knew better.”

Dev nodded.

“Thank you, by the way, for your very brave, and hm... expeditious action.” Bain commented. “It was most appreciated, especially by me.”

“I'm glad it helped.” Dev responded. “I hope we find out what happened to them.” She paused, and then stood up, tucking her comp into the big leg pocket designed for it. “Please excuse me, sir. I have to calibrate a new module for my system.”

“Certainly, my dear.” Bain stood and moved out of her way. “By the way, did Agent Drake tell you about the deal I turned down on her behalf?”

Dev paused. “Yes.” She said, in quiet tone.

“Do you, perhaps, think I should have proceeded with it? To get your friend Doctor Kurok back with us? He seems an innocent victim of our machinations, no?”

Dev looked him right in the eyes. “I don’t think that, no.” She said, honestly. “It just makes me sad.”

Bain studied her for a long moment. Then he nodded. “It makes me sad too, Dev.” He said. “I am quite glad you understand the situation. Gratified, in fact.” He gestured her to precede him from the carrier. “These things happen in our business, you know. Can't be helped.”

Dev watched him walk off towards the control center, everyone scrambling to get out of his way. Then she turned and instead of heading back to the carrier, went to the inner corridor and started up the hall towards central operations. Hopefully, she would find Jess there.

Hopefully.

**

Jess entered ops and took a seat at one of the big consoles, lifting her hand in brief greeting to the board runners and exchanging a brief grin with Jason. “Hey.” He grunted.

“Hey.” Jess pulled a pad over and keyed in a request. “Anything interesting?”

“After that whole thing earlier? What could compete with that?” Jason remarked. “Stephen almost pissed himself, y'know.” He added. “Did not like it all one bit.”

Jess shrugged. “Would he have liked that thing coming down on top of everyone more?” She asked. “Dev did what she had to.” She studied the reports on the boards, and leaned on her elbows. “Any word on Syd?”

“He's in the tank. Broken back, both legs, dislocated shoulder, and neural disruption.” Jason recited. “No idea how he flew that thing in. Dom's pretty close to flat line.”

“Huh.” Jess read through the ops logs, recalling the ones from days prior. “He was a jackass to me when I was out there, but no one deserves that much med.”

“He's always a jackass to you.” Jason got up and came over to the console she was seated at, taking the chair next to her. “So.”

“So.” Jess kept her eyes on the screen.

“I hear Bain's going to put Stephen out at North on a permanent basis.”

“Someone has to do it.” Jess muttered. “Don't envy him. That place is a pit. Was a pit.” She corrected herself. “ Wonder if the damage estimates were as bad as they think.” He didn't answer, and she looked over to see him watching her, one eyebrow lifted. “What?”

“What?” He echoed back. “You and Bain talk?”

“Sure” Jess went back to her screen.

“And?”

Jess glanced at him. “I'm not stupid enough to flap my jaws about his business. If he wants everyone to know, he'll put out a bulletin.”

Jason grinned. “He has.” He slid a bit of plas over to her. “Congrats.”

Shit. Jess glanced at the plas, which had about six lines of text on it, and Bain's creds. “I hadn't formally accepted yet. Bastard.”

Jason chuckled, but kept his voice down. “Only went out to upper grade field ops and at that, just to need to know so they'd hike your creds in here. You're still under cover to everyone else, so you've got a little time before the shit hits the intake tunnel.” He bumped her shoulder as she let out an aggrieved sigh. “C'mon, Jess. Who else would he pick? You know he likes you.”

“And that's the reason you should pick a director?” Jess kept her voice low also. “Because you like someone? Best I was hoping for was Stephen's gig, Jase. I wasn't looking for that much crap this fast.” She glanced around. “Maybe I don't think I”m ready for that or even want it.”

He grunted. “Good thing Sandy croaked. She'd have split a lung right in the mess if she'd lived and gotten this note.” He tapped the plas . “We all figured he had an eye on you when he talked you down at the shuttle. Otherwise, why care?”

Now it was Jess's turn to grunt.

'Most of the old timers are gone. Syd was the last of them anywhere near us. Seriously, Jess, who else? The active agents here are either from our class, or the kids who just came in. We lost a whole damn generation the last couple months.”

Something about the words stirred something in the back of her mind. “Huh.”

“Anyway, consider my sucking up to start right now.” Jason drummed his fingertips on the console. “Just like everyone else, except what I want is your driver.” He nodded a little, giving her a sideways look. “Please don't hit me again. I'm still aching like crap from the last time.”

Jess studied him in silence for a minute. “I won't. What made you change your mind?”

“You hitting me when I dissed her.” Jason replied in a straightforward way. “Something you value like that – one thing about you, Jess. You don't bullshit. I trust your gun at my back and your likes and dislikes.”

“Except Josh.”

“Really?” Her fellow agent cocked his head. “You trusted him? Or even liked him? For real?”

Jess remained silent, but her nose twitched a little.

“That's what I thought.” Jason drummed on the table again. “Well I'm just the first to ask. Won't be the last, but at least you know me.”

“I know you.” Jess agreed. “But I'll take my time making that decision. I like the kid.”

Jason chuckled. “Yeah, we guessed.” He nudged her. “I always said you had good taste. Glad the whole jel... bio alt thing didn't inhibit stuff.”

Jess frowned, “It's not like that.”

“It's not?” Her companion seemed astonished. “You've been hanging all over her.. you didn't take her in the sack?”

“Jason.” Jess shifted, and looked up as the outer door opened – surprised and then relieved when she recognized Dev's slight form entering. “Hey Dev. Over here.”

Dev crossed over to them at once, her eyes flicking to Jason before they settled on Jess's face. “May I show you something?”

Jess nodded, but put a hand on Dev's wrist. “Excuse us a minute, Jase.”

“Ssssuuure.” The tall, muscular man stood up and meandered off, winking at Jess before he disappeared behind the main console.

Jess sighed.

“Is there something not correct?” Dev asked, softly.

“No.” Jess said, gruffly. “Well, yes... maybe.” She amended. “Anyway, what's up?”

Dev pulled her portable comp from her leg pocket and turned it on. “I saw something interesting and I thought you might want to see it too.” She set the machine down and moved a little closer. “I was taking readings on the new mods and one of the new techs came to ask me a question.”

“Them too, huh?” Jess rested her elbow on the console and her chin on her fist.

“Excuse me?”

“Go on.”

A soft bong interrupted them. “Stand by.” Jason's voice echoed softly. “This is Base 10, copy.” He paused. “Ack, standby.” He stepped back and looked over at them. “Jess?”

Jess felt a jolt of surprise. “Here.” She answered. “What is it?”

“Call, for you.”

For her? “Put it here.” Jess grabbed a set of ear cups and slid them in place, as a tracer lit up on the board. She triggered it and leaned closer. “Drake.”

“Jess, this is Jake..”

Her youngest brother. “Yeah, what's up JJ??” Jess felt a chill, and she sucked in a breath, feeling a warmth on her arm as Dev put her hand there. “Everything all right?”

“Not so much.” Her brother replied. “Mom's air bike slammed into the rock face in a storm. She's gone.”

Jess felt her mind go blank with shock. Of all the things she'd expected to hear, that was the last of them.”Damn.” She finally said. “When?”

“Two hours ago. They just finished clearing the paperwork.” Tom said. “Jimmy's making arrangements. He wanted me to call you, let you know they'll process her out tomorrow morning.” He cleared his throat. “In case you wanted to show up.”

Hard to fathom. Hard to accept. The last time she'd even seen her mother had been two years back. Quick visit home, on the way out to the west coast. “Yeah. Thanks Jake.” She said, softly. “I”ll see if I can get out there.”

“Right. I'll tell him. Bye.” The comms cut off, and she closed the channel out.

“Jess?”

The room suddenly sounded too loud around her. Jess turned her head to find Dev watching her with a concerned expression on her face. “Yeah, sorry.” She muttered. “Got some bad news.”

“What's up?” Jason had come back over, and was leaning on the console. “You okay? Trace said that came from the Bay.”

“It did. Family stuff.” Jess nodded. “I have to go talk to Bain.” She stood up. “Dev, meet you back at our place.” She patted the bio alt on the shoulder. “You can show me your comp then.” She

ducked around Jason and headed for the door, leaving him and her partner gazing at each other in silent puzzlement.

Dev finally shook her head and put her scanner back in her pocket. “Excuse me.”

“Wonder what that was all about.” Jason said. “I haven't seen Jess get that pale since she lost a drinking match with me and barely made it back to her rig in time.”

Dev didn't even have any intention of wondering what that bit of strange language was all about. She felt that something bad had happened, and she was anxious to get back to her quarters, and wait for Jess to tell her about it.

Her quarters. Their quarters. Their place? Dev counted the hallways as she walked along, Something was going on.

**

Jess stood braced, with her hands clasped behind her back as she regarded the man behind the desk. “My brother just made the call.”

Bain pursed his lips. “You put me in something of a quandary, Drake. Experience tells me that putting yourself out there as a target at this time is a mistake.”

“Probably true.” Jess admitted. “But I missed my father's. Family doesn't mean that much to us, but you only have one set of parents.”

“That is a fact.” Bain sighed. “I know you have your rights to ask this, you know. It just concerns me. Have you considered this might be a trap?”

“Yes.” Jess said, in a quiet voice. “That did occur to me on the walk over here.”

Bain nodded. “It just seems too much of a coincidence. But sometimes things are.” He leaned forward and rested his hands on the desk. “You will not take transport. You will go in a carrier, with an escort.” He said. “The escort will stand off armed until the processing's done, then I expect you straight back here”

Jess nodded. “Agreed.”

Bain nodded back. “Take care, Drake. We need you.”

“I will.” She turned and left, heading right out of Bain's inner office and making her way out to the main hall. Her mind was still tight focused, and it took a full minute of walking before her surroundings started to take on color and the sounds around her filtered into her consciousness.

Another minute or two and she found herself outside the airlock, and then cycling through it, not bothering to check the weather before she triggered the external door and then was outside.

It was windy, but not raining. Jess let the stiff breeze blow her hair back as she leaned against the damp wall, her eyes staring almost unseeingly across the ruffled dark sea.

She wasn't really sure how to feel. Now that the shock was wearing off, she kept hearing Bain's voice in her head, warning of traps and she had to wonder if that had, in fact, been why her mother had died.

The other side was as unfeeling as they were. Killing a family member to draw her out? Trivial. She'd done it herself, to them. But it made her angry anyway and she was caught between hoping it wasn't true to save her the guilt and hoping it was to bring on the vengeance.

So she'd go and see. Put herself out there, on the ledge, and see what happened.

Jess exhaled. She hadn't been close to her mother, not for a very very long time. Not since she'd been taken, and their last conversation, after her father had died, hadn't been either cordial or friendly. So did she care, if this random, somewhat selfish old woman had died?

Jess let her hands rest on the wall, and had to admit she really didn't care. The only reason she was going to the processing was to make a presence for the family and if it was a trap, then she'd take the opportunity to turn it around on them. She had to concentrate hard to even remember what her face had looked like.

She stared out at the sea. And if not a trap, then she'd be out there, with a carrier, and Dev. That opened up all sorts of possibilities, once they lost their escort.

Jess smiled faintly. Or maybe talked them into joining her.

**

Dev found herself pacing. She was walking up and down in her quarters, her ears cocked for the sounds of Jess's return next door as anxious and stressed out as she could remember being for quite some time.

She couldn't even sit down and do a sim.

It was a very strange and very unsettling feeling. She really wished she could ask Doctor Dan about it, about why she felt so strange about someone else's problem and why it was causing her a deep sense of anxiety that wasn't at all excellent.

With a sigh, she detoured to her workspace and forced herself to take a seat and pick up her comp. She set it into the dock and synced it, bringing up on the bigger screen above her desk and studying the results. She was halfway through it when the inner door opened and she looked quickly up to find Jess leaning there against the sill. "Jess!"

She stood up, but Jess waved her back and came over to join her, perching on the edge of her workspace and reaching over to ruffle her hair as she sat back down.

"Jason was right. I do hang all over you." Jess commented mildly. "Does that freak you out?"

Dev studied her. "No." She said, after a pause. "Not at all."

Jess brushed her fingers across Dev's cheekbone. "Good." She pronounced. "We're going out tomorrow." She changed the subject abruptly. "We're going to my family's home."

"We are?"

The agent nodded. "There was an accident, and my mother died in it." She explained. "Tomorrow morning, they'll process her body out into the sea, and we'll be there to watch that."

"Oh." Dev studied her partner's face, but she didn't seem to be very upset about the news.. "I'm sorry about that, Jess."

Jess sighed. "Yeah, me too." She said. "I was never close to her, but a mother's a mother, you know how it is." She paused, watching Dev's expression alter a little. "Oh, wait no, I guess you don't."

"No. I can't even imagine that." The bio alt said. She tried to think about what it would feel like to hear someone had died that you were close to, and all she could think about was the proctor she'd seen once, getting that news. Maybe it felt a little like she had felt, hearing about what could be Doctor Dan's fate.

That had felt very sad. But Jess didn't seem to feel sad at all about it, so it was strange. "We'll go see that, and come back?" She looked up into Jess's eyes, and slowly, the right one winked at her.

"Yep." Jess said. "And we get an escort, to make sure nothing happens to us." She got off the desk and sat down in the chair across from Dev. "I was going to ask Jason, but he'd be better off staying here. You like that Doug guy?"

Dev considered that thoughtfully. "He seems functional." She said. "I only spoke to him a little. "

"Be good to take out a set of newbies." Jess leaned back and laced her fingers behind her head. "Pretty tame run, get to see how he flies a bus. Good opportunity."

There really didn't seem anything to say to that, so Dev kept silent.

"So it's good. You'll get to see where I came from." Jess went on. "We'll leave at dawn, if the weather cooperates. Bring our formals with us." She studied the ceiling. "Interested in chow? After that I can show you the caverns down below."

"Yes." Her partner agreed. "I would like both things very much."

Jess stood up and stretched, and jerked her head towards the door. "Let's go." She waited for Dev to join her and then casually draped an arm over her shoulders, leaving it there even when they exited into the central corridor and headed towards the mess.

People noticed, and Dev noticed them noticing. She wondered if there was something incorrect about it, seeing the natural borns eyebrows lifting but Jess ignored them and just steered her into the dining hall before she released her.

Dev picked up a tray and studied her choices, tapping in a selection and waiting for it to be dispensed. She could hear the hum of conversation behind her, and as she turned around to find a table, she noticed everyone's eyes moving away to find something else to look at.

Hm.

“Over here.” Jess nudged her towards one of the tables on the upper level, settling her tray next to Dev's and sliding into the seat next to her. “Notice anything?” She asked in a near whisper.

“Everyone's looking at you.” Dev answered promptly. “Did you do something?”

“Not yet.” Her partner smiled briefly. “Everyone knows Bain's been talking to me. He sent a note out to the senior agents, so they know about my job offer, but nothings official.”

Dev studied the faces near them without looking directly. “There seems to be some discomfort.” She observed.

“I bet.” Jess dug up a forkful of stringy seaweed and munched it. Then she glanced up briefly. “Call your buddy Doug and his partner over here.”

Her what? Dev lifted her eyes and caught the attention of the new tech, making a little gesture with her hand to the empty seats at their table.

Visibly pleased, Doug bumped his partner with his elbow and they made their way over and sat down. “Hey, rocket star. Thanks for the invite.”

“Doug.” April gave him a look. She was a serious looking woman a little taller than Dev, with curly light brown hair and somber hazel eyes. Next to Doug, who was tall and muscular she seemed slight, but the body beneath the jumpsuit had that elastic strength developed in field school and tucked along her hip was a blade with a carved, old style hilt that was worn and visibly well used.

“Its a compliment!” The tech protested. “You weren't in that bus when she turned it upside down were you!”

Jess chuckled. “I've been there.” She commiserated. “When she says sit down, she means it.”

April relaxed. “I saw that from the simulation room.” She said, glancing at Dev. “It was pretty amazing.”

“Thank you.” Dev replied, turning her focus on her tray. “I'm sorry if I caused any discomfort to anyone. I was just trying to help the other carrier.”

Jess used the distraction to study the surrounding tables. The mixture of attitudes made her smile, and she picked up her cup of kack and took a swallow of it. “You get that carrier of yours running?” She asked Doug, abruptly.

“Um. Almost.” Doug admitted. “Have to replace most of it. Dev saw.”

Dev nodded, her mouth full of fish.

“Finish it in time, you can go out with us tomorrow.” Jess caught the intense, eager gleam in Aprils eyes. “Nothing exotic, I just need an escort team on a trip home. Up for it?

“We will be.” April said, forestalling Doug's response. “It'll be an honor.”

Jess smiled and lifted her cup in her direction. “Hope that's all it'll be.”

**

Dev could feel and hear the ocean as they made their way down a long, slippery rock staircase in the very bowels of the citadel. The air was full of salty moisture and she licked her lips as she followed Jess closely on the steps, lit by the odd phosphorescent block set deep in the stone.

“Long way down, huh?” Jess commented.

“In the creche, the upper levels were where the natural born lived.” Dev responded. “The very lower levels were where the space workers stayed, and it was like this a little, when you had to climb down through the core to there.”

“Humans are the same everywhere.” Jess's voice sounded wry. “Even in the outlands where shelter's a dug hole there's status and fights over it.” She reached the bottom level and turned to the right, where a large metal door had been fitted into the stone.

“Yes, that's true.” Dev agreed. “Everyone wants to have more or better stuff or a better assignment than anyone else. Even we do.”

“Even?” Jess worked the manual lock and put her shoulder to the door, shoving it open. That revealed a long, narrow tunnel, and without hesitation, she headed into it. “C'mon.”

It was dark and mysterious. Dev resisted the urge to reach out and take hold of Jess's jumpsuit as she followed her through the tunnel. She could hear a rumbling, wild sound ahead of them and a moment later, they were out of the tunnel and into a huge, huge cavern.

Jess stepped to one side and she could see past her.

“Wow.” Dev stopped in surprise.

Jess leaned against the wall and regarded the space before them. The wall of the citadel came down to the water, over the edge of the sea that roared and surged through it, sending a volume of water through a tunnel underneath their feet. “It's one of a dozen of them.” She commented. “Flow dumps through turbines behind that wall there.” She pointed to their right. “Then goes back out a raceway over there.”

Dev stood on her tip toes to see the outflow on the far side of a thick ridge of stone smashing against the low wall before it escaped back to the sea. “This is amazing.”

“It is.” Jess agreed. “Too bad we didn't think of this before we sucked half the planet dry of fossil fuels... but then, there are a lot less of us around now to need it.” She went to the edge and pointed down. “That's where we swim, there where it breaks off? And those long waves there are great to surf.”

Dev edged up next to her and peered at the surging whirlpools created by the in rushing water. Then she looked at Jess. “Are you serious?”

Solemnly, Jess nodded. “See that stairwell there?” She pointed at the side of the wall, where roughly cut steps led down to a long, open rock surface that was continually washed over by water. “We go down there, and dive in. It's past the intake for the water, so you don't get sucked in, but it's a great ride, and you end up on that little beach there.”

Dev could hardly imagine it.

“See? We chain our boards to the wall there. Let's go down.” Jess headed for the steps. “Getting in the water feels great.”

Knowing more than a moment of doubt about that, Dev nevertheless followed her partner down the steps, her entire body vibrating form the force of the water's motion. They reached the bottom platform and she stayed near the wall as the water surged up around her boots, glad of their thick and water proof construction.

Then they moved around and were in a surprising dip in the wall, a three quarter round space that oddly cut off the roar as Jess pulled her closer against the long vaguely oval objects she'd pointed at. “Oh.”

“Oh.” Jess folded her arms across her chest. “This is one place you can really talk in private.” She said.

“Why is it quiet here?” Dev turned around in a circle.

“Quirk of acoustics.” Her partner said. “So. Listen. Let's talk about tomorrow.” She leaned against one of the boards. “And then I'll show you how to surf.”

Dev eyed the boards, and hoped the tomorrow discussion was a long one. “Tomorrow for our trip to your home?”

“That's one part. But after that's done, we're not coming back here.” Jess told her. “We're going to get lost up over the white, and come down on the other side. I think I know where they're holding the team.” She said, in a calm tone. “Once we leave Drake's Bay, we'll be renegade.”

“I see.” Dev responded. “That sounds incorrect.”

“It is.” Jess looked out over the water. “I just have to decide what to do about our escort.”

“Do about them?”

Jess turned and met her eyes. “They either have to agree to join us, or I'll have to take them down.”

Take them down. Dev felt a little chilled. The serious woman, and her fellow tech, who had eagerly jumped at the chance of coming along, on their first mission and Jess was talking about making them dead. “Jess, are you sure this is a correct thing to do?” She asked, after a pause. “Because I'm not sure Doctor Dan would think it was.”

Jess studied her for a long moment. “You don't?”'

“No.” Dev answered honestly. “I don't think he would want us to get into this trouble, and hurt our colleagues, to provide him with assistance. I think it would make him sad.”

Jess looked intrigued rather than upset. “He doesn't want to be rescued? He would rather be tortured to death? Really?” She asked. “Because that's what'll happen to him, Dev. I've seen it. They'll string him up and take power poles to his entire body until his brain fries.”

Dev thought very hard about that, but sad and hard as it was, she thought she knew the truth of it “I remember once we were in class, and we were doing a lab. One of the people in class did something wrong and the lab broke apart and the stuff it in went flying.”

Jess waited without speaking.

“Doctor Dan stepped in front of it, so it hit him, and not us.” Dev said. “It hurt him a lot, but he just stood there and let it hurt him.”

“Ah.”

“The director came and he yelled at Doctor Dan, because he said we were replaceable.” The bio alt folded her arms. “But Doctor Dan said he didn't care.”

“Huh.” Jess pondered that. “You may be right. He may not agree.” She said. “But I'm going to go rescue his ass anyway. Offer still stands, Dev.. I'll leave you and maybe those kids at Drake's Bay. Go myself.” She put a hand on her partner's shoulder. “Could be one way.”

After a pause, Dev exhaled. “Whether or not Doctor Dan thinks this is good or bad, I want to go with you. “ She said. “Because... “ She paused for a long time. “Because I think it's the right thing to do.” She looked up at Jess. “It's what I want to do.”

Jess smiled. Then she leaned closer and kissed Dev on the lips. “Thanks.” She said. “That made the one way thing a lot less likely, because you're a lot better driver than I am and I need you.” She eased back a little. “So now that we're over all this serious, self sacrificing bullshit, let's surf.”

There was really no question in her mind that she would have rather go practice that sex thing than try surfing. However, Dev nodded anyway. “It's going to be cold, isn't it?” She regarded the water mournfully.

“Very.” Jess unchained her board and set it to one side, then pulled a thick jumpsuit from the rack and started to unfasten her own. “But I promise I'll warm you up later.”

Ah. Well at least there was that to look forward to. Dev regarded the suit she'd been handed, and resolved to at least try to enjoy it.

**

It was cold. Dev held on to the rocks as the water rushed around her, almost overwhelming her with the smell of salt and the rich scent of the water itself.

She was in a shallow curve of the rock, somewhat protected from the roughness of the surf, but it was still more than enough to have tossed her around if she wasn't holding on.

Very different than the pool. She shook the wet hair from her eyes and watched as Jess got onto her board, and paddled across the surface of the water, heading for the outer wall. When she got there, she turned and as the next surging wave came in she got up onto the board and stood up, as the water picked her and it up and rolled towards the little shore.

Wow. Dev watched in fascination as her partner balanced gracefully, her body relaxed as the wave rushed along. She could feel the pulse of the sea herself, it's surge alternately sucking at her and shoving her against the rocks she had tight hold of. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced.

Jess waited for the board to reach the little beach she'd launched from and hopped off, grabbing the hand hold and hauling the oblong item with her. “See?” She turned and called out, spreading her arms. “Easy!”

Dev released her hold and waited for the next surge to shove her beach-ward, practicing her newly learned swimming skills as she made her way towards her partner.

It wasn't easy. The pull of the water made progress tricky, but she kept at it as Jess stood there leaning against her board, watching her. Eventually it was shallow enough for her to stand, and she slogged out of the water onto the beach, trying not to shiver too much as the cool air hit her.

“Doing okay?” Jess asked, as she joined her. “Not like the pool, huh?”

“No.” Dev agreed, rubbing her arms through the heavy stretchy fabric covering them. “But it's interesting.”

“Okay so grab that board.” Jess pointed at the second one. “And just follow me.”

Stolidly, the bio alt obeyed, lifting the oblong object, a little surprised at how light it was. “Oh.” She hefted it. “I thought it would weigh more.”

“Hollow.” Jess headed for the surf. “This beach used to be three times the size.” She lamented. “Then the water rose. Made for better waves, but all the erosion's knocking part of that wall down.”

Dev waded into the water after her, towing the board. “Didn't that man at the North base say something about the water level dropping? Was this the beach he meant?”

“Sure is.” Jess paused as they got into water deep enough to start pulling her off her feet. “Okay, so now.. lay down on the board and just start paddling with your hands. Watch me.”

Usually, watching Jess was a pleasure. In this case, however, Dev had her hands full just keeping herself upright and it was actually something of a relief when she managed to get on top of the board and the water stopped pulling at her. She lay down on her stomach on it, and copied her partner as best as she was able.

The water kept coming over the edge of the board and hitting her in the face. Dev sneezed and shook her wet hair out of her eyes, arching her back a little to keep her head up.

They neared the outer wall, and she got a glimpse of the outside, a roil of whitecaps that flashed before her eyes before the surge came in and the view was blocked.

“Okay, now watch.” Jess yelled, as they turned around. She pressed her self up and got her feet under her, standing up on the board as the wave started to gather speed. “Stand up and just go with it!”

That seemed to be very easy for her to say. Dev was struggling just to hold on to her board, but gamely, she pushed up and nearly fell off, before she managed to get her feet under her in a weird sort of crouch.

“Stand up!” Jess turned her head and called back “Or you'll end up tipping over!”

Uncertainly, Dev released her grip and felt the board slide around as the water came up under her. She remained in a crouch though, holding her arms out for balance as she tried to adjust to the erratic motion. “Okay.” She took a breath. “I think I can..”

A cross wave smacked into her, and the next thing she knew she was flying off the board and into the water, plunging under the surface as the shifting forces pulled her under.

It was dark, and frightening. She struggled to get herself moving in the right direction, not entirely sure what that direction was. She felt a smack on the back of her head and waved her arms around to find the source of the attack, then was pulled in a circle as she fell into a whirl of surf.

She fought to not breathe, feeling a burn in her chest as she kicked with her legs, trying to get to the surface she didn't know the exact location of. The desire to suck in air was overwhelming, and just as she started to give into it, she felt something grab her and yank her upward.

Her head broke the surface and she gasped, feeling Jess's iron grip on her upper arm. “Ugh!”

“Easy!” Jess had a good hold on her now. “I forgot you don't god damned float. Even with this thing on.” She stroked sideways through the water, pulling them both towards the shore. “Sorry about that.”

Dev saved her breath for fighting the water, doing the best she could to aid the effort as they both ended up being shoved ashore by the surf, covered in sand.

“Buh.” Jess sat up, her long legs sprawled on the beach as the continuous waves washed over them. “That was kinda stupid.”

Dev coughed, spitting out a mouthful of sand. She rolled over and pushed herself up to a seated position. “That was interesting.” She pronounced. “I am not sure I would be good at it.” She glanced behind them at the churning surf.
“I do like this place though. And I liked the little bit over there to swim in.”

Jess chuckled wryly. “Did they program you for optimism, Dev?” She examined a scrape on the back of her hand. “Yeah, I come down here and swim a lot. It reminds me of the bay near where I grew up, I guess.” She hiked her knees up and circled them with both arms. “Not as rough though.”

Dev leaned back against the stone wall that bordered the small beach. Here, out of the wind, the cold wasn't so bad, and she could imagine her partner here in the dim light of the phosphorescent blocks reliving earlier memories here in the water she seemed to be very much attracted to.

Which she wanted Dev to share, apparently. “I would like to try this again.” Dev said, catching Jess's eyes as they lifted to her face in some surprise. “I will try to float better next time.”

Jess glanced around, then back at her. “You sure?”

“Yes” Dev felt the whole thing was worth it, seeing the sudden, big grin on her partner's face. “Should we go find the flat things?”

Jess stood up and held her hand out. “Let's go.” She said. “Don't know when we'll get another chance with all thats going on.”

Dev let herself be hauled up to her feet, and sloshed back into the water, spitting a little bit of extra sand and what she suspected was some small animal out of her mouth, determined to collect yet another thing that would mark her as unique.

Just in case.

**

The shower itself felt amazing. Dev stood quietly under the hot water, feeling her body slowly thaw. But even more amazing was Jess's presence behind her in it, scrubbing her skin with the clean smelling soap. “I think I swallowed some seaweed.”

She hoped it was seaweed. She tried not to think about the vaguely wiggling sensation it had provided her, going down. It was a little unsettling to think about that whole swallowing live animals thing.

“Happens.” Jess was humming softly under her breath, as she worked. “Glad you got something out of it, Devvie. Ya did good, those last two runs.”

Dev supposed she had, somehow remaining standing long enough to get to the shore, in a flail of waving arms and wavering legs that nevertheless still stayed upright. “I liked it.”

“Did you? Or are ya just humoring me?” Jess brought her arms around and soaped the front of Dev's body, making her completely forget about what she'd just been asked. “Hm?”

It felt so amazing. “I”m sorry. What?” Dev finally asked. “Did you ask me something?”

Jess chuckled, and kept up her soaping.

After a moment, Dev turned around in the circle of her arms and started reciprocating. “I like this also.” She commented as Jess ducked her head down and they kissed.

“Yeah me too.” Jess slid her hands up to cradle the back of Dev's head, feeling the gently exploring touch across her body make her breathing shorten. “Let's dry off and continue this in a more comfortable spot.” She added, but found herself not budging, as Dev traced a curious path down the centerline of her torso

Her skin felt sensitized, and the shower pounding against it only made it worse. She had to force herself to shut the water off and reach for the towel, all the while touching and nibbling Dev, the surroundings starting to fade out.

Somehow, they made it over to the bed. Jess was glad to feel the cool, soft surface under her and started to return Dev's attentions in earnest.

Hard to remember, really, that Dev had so little experience. Jess felt a thigh slide between hers, and was glad they were in the citadel, where security was someone else's problem for a while. She said that, stifling a sound as Dev's curious touch fastened on a nipple.

And then Dev went suddenly still. “Jess.” She said, on an irregular breath. “I found something in the carrier bay.”

Jess felt her chest heaving. “What?”

“I brought it.. to the big place to show you. Before.”

Jess opened her eyes to find Dev's pale ones looking back at her. She could see the flush on her partner's face, and she was on the razor's edge of just telling her to forget about it.

That it could wait for later.

But training, deep as bone, paused that. “You have damned inconvenient memory, NM-Dev-1.” She rolled over and scrubbed her face. “Oh boy.”

“Sorry.” Dev cleared her throat. “The whole thing with the water made me forget. I remembered when you said that about security.” She got up out of the bed and walked over to the door between their quarters. “Let me get it and show you.”

Jess rolled flat onto her back and glared at the ceiling.

A moment later Dev came back with her portable comp, climbing back into bed with it, still completely naked. She focused on the screen, reaching up with one hand to push the still damp hair out of her eyes. “I was doing a reading on the new people's carrier, then I was in the damaged one, and look.” She held the comp up so Jess could see it. “This was present in both of them.”

Jess rolled onto her side and looked at the screen. “What is that?”

“It's the recall beacon.” Dev said. “Except it's polarity's reversed. It's sending out a signal on that sine wave. Not receiving one.”

Jess slowly straightened up, lifting her body up on one elbow. She reached for the comp and pulled it closer, the readings standing out with a surreal clarity in the dimness of the room. “You said this was in April and Doug's bus, and the one Syd was driving?”

“Yes.”

“What the hell?” Jess's brow creased. “That old bus they're driving wasn't... “ She paused. “Check the comp. When was it last used?”

Dev got up and retrieved her under jumpsuit, slipping it on before she sat down behind Jess's workstation and pulled a pad over to her.

It was a shame, of course, that the sex practice had to be interrupted. They had been well on their way to feeling excellent, she thought, but after all, they did have their job to do. She typed in the request and waited. Of course, she was hoping the question could be answered quickly.

“If they went out like that, they'd be a target a walrus could have hit with a hairball.” Jess was studying the portable unit. “Did you check ours?”

“Yes.” Dev answered. “That unit was last in service six standard seven day weeks ago.” She said. “Assigned to Mr. Bock, and someone called Callie.”

Jess got up and walked over, coming around the back of the chair and leaned on the desk with one hand. “Is that so?” She mused. “Now where were you going, Stephen? Pull the nav on that.” She triggered comms. “Mech ops, Drake.”

A crackle. “Mech, this is Clint.” The tech supervisor sounded wary. “What can I do for you, Jess?”

“Dev found a glitch on April's bus, in the beacon. You hear about it?”

Clint sighed. “Yeah, that new tech was bugging me for a new one. I told him to get out the soldering iron. Why?”

“Run a scan on every carrier in the bay for that glitch, Clint.” Jess said, in a quiet, and serious tone. “Now.”

He was briefly silent. “Ack.” He answered shortly.

“Let me know what you find.”

“Ack.” He triggered off.

Jess exhaled. “Sure hope he doesn't find anything.” She said. “Got nav back?”

“It was unregistered, according to this.” Dev responded. “Is this all incorrect?”

“Two teams went out this afternoon.” Jess said. “If they had this same alteration, they're flying wide open.” She exhaled. “Glad you remembered this.”

Dev felt bad. “I should have thought of it earlier.” She admitted. “I got distracted.”

Jess kissed her on the top of her head. “Another sign of your humanity, Devvie. C'mon.” She reached over and unzipped the zipper on her under suit. “Let's finish what we started.”

Ignoring your duty wasn't good. Dev could feel that intensity starting again and she stood, letting Jess peel the suit off her. But she wanted this and Doctor Dan had been right about that too.

She hoped he wouldn't be too disappointed if he ended up finding out.

**

Dev settled into her pilot's seat, hitching it forward and bringing up the boards that would activate the carrier's systems. She was dressed in her flight suit, her formal one stashed in one of the cabinets at her left hand side. The carrier hatch was propped open, waiting for it's second occupant and all around her things were in motion as the busy bay carried on.

It was early. Dawn was just cracking outside, and above her, the hatch was already open revealing a dull gray sky that was thankfully still rain free.

Over to the right she could see bio alts scurrying around April and Doug's carrier, their freshly painted names clear and sharp against the machine's mottled skin. As she watched, she saw Doug enter, and knew he'd be shortly performing the same checks as she was, having worked all night to get his systems ready for flight.

She'd helped, after she and Jess had gotten a late meal in the mess. With all the swimming and everything else though, she'd only been able to help him for so long before she was tired enough to wish Jess would come and retrieve her and as though that had been some kind of magic her partner had.

Grim, with Clint at her heels, the tech manager yelling orders to all the bio alts to bring in fleet wide beacons to his station.

But Doug had gotten far enough with her help that she thought he might finish, and she had only felt a little guilty about leaving with Jess and crawling into bed with her to get some sleep.

So now she felt good, having gotten sufficient rest, and she ran through the preflight checks with confidence.

Everyone seemed a bit somber. No one made jokes with Jess in the mess during breakfast, and one or two of the other agents had come up to offer her condolences or wish them a safe flight.

She heard footsteps, and glanced behind her as Jess entered the carrier, putting a gear bag with her formals into the rear cabinet. “Hello.”

“Hey Devvie.” Jess closed the cabinet and then sealed the hatch, coming forward to Dev's position with a small pad. “Here's the coordinates. Go ahead and plot it, then file the flight plan with ops.”

Dev accepted the pad and set it down, calling up the nav system to program it. The system accepted the coordinates and drew her a wiremap, outlining a long concave route to the south and west. She reached over and settled her ear cups on her head. “BR27006 to central operations for comms check.”

“Stand by BR27006” Centops answered.

Dev used the time to connect the carrier's systems to her suit inputs and run the pre start sequence on the engines. She observed the response of the systems carefully, plugging in her portable comp and comparing results there. The beacon subsystem had been looked at last night, but theirs, unlike some but not all of the others, hadn't been altered.

Jess sat down in her gunner's position and started activating her controls. “Give me some juice.”

Dev balanced the batteries and shunted power to weapons, seeing the aux weapons boards come live near her station.

“BR27006, go ahead for comms check.” Ops came online. “Standing by for flight plan.”

Dev sent the nav plot over. “Comms check midband and sideband alpha.” She said. “Requesting steady comms throughout the flight plan.”

“Confirmed.” Central ops replied. “Comms check cleared, flight plan accepted. Stand by for clearance.”

“Open a side band to Aprils rig.” Jess said, as she settled the restraints around her and snugged them tight. “Send her the coordinates from your output.”

“Yes.” Dev complied, requesting the contact from the other carrier. “Jess, carrier supply is asking if we need any supplemental”

“Tell them no.” Jess said. “Tell them short trip, no need for anything special.”

Dev nodded and pressed an ear cup more firmly to her head. “Standing by.” She muttered softly.

Jess arranged her boards and settled back, letting her hands rest on her thighs. Now that they were on the verge of flight, she had time to think about what they were doing and it made her grimace a little. Home was always a little uncomfortable, and a processing, where all activity was pretty much put on hold and a range of emotion present from boredom to true grief could be truly uncomfortable.

But it did get her out of the citadel, on a legitimate a flight as she could have invented. And as far as she was letting on, this was just a routine family obligation, with nothing in her planning that might indicate anything else to anyone who happened to be checking on her.

She suspected there were a few, including Bain.

“Jess, we have clearance.” Dev spoke up. “We also have a connection to the other carrier.”

All regulation. All normal. All as expected. “Great. Go ahead and lift. Tell April and Doug to meet us topside.” Jess ran another set of checks on her boards, and then set then into quiescence. The guns came off-line returned energy to the batt pool and she felt the air around her compress as Dev sealed the skin.

“Releasing umbilicals.” Dev announced softly, as the power shift went from external to internal, and she spooled up the landing jets. “Launching.”

Jess felt the motion, and she settled her head against the padded rest of her chair, watching on the screens as the carrier lifted and turned, sliding sideways and then moving up through the open hatch into free air.

As she expected, the carrier rotated in a complete circle, then it moved off to one side as they waited for their escort to follow. “Give me comp and comms wouldja, Dev?” She saw the indicators some in almost instantly on her console and set her ear cup in place. “Thanks.”

She keyed up the bio scan and set to work, humming slightly under her breath.

Dev set a scan in motion and looked around at the thick clouds overhead. They were dark and dense, but the wind had dropped and there wasn't much motion to them. She shifted the carrier back a little to clear air, and watched as the other carrier rose up from the bay.

“BR27006, copy.” Doug's voice echoed softly in her ear. “Copy good. Stand by to transit.” She glanced in the mirror. “Jess?”

“Huh?” Her partner looked up. “We ready? Yes? Let's go.”

“Proceed on nav coordinates.” Dev told Doug, as she swung them around and boosted the engines into forward, then increased speed. “ETA one hour.”

Jess nodded. “Yup. No long distance butt aching this time.” She triggered a transmit and then relaxed, taking advantage of the transit regardless of how short to clear her mind of both thoughts and stress. “Going home.”

**

Dev adjusted a setting, glancing up at the nav comp as it updated their position. They were running along the edge of a long string of islands and shallows, and she hadn't seen much sign of any life along the way.

The dull gray daylight was outlining the green surf, and in the distance, she could see a taller height rising out of the sea, long arms on either side descending down in a rough semicircle. “Is that where we're going?” She pointed at it.

“Yup.” Jess was leaning on the console near her, drinking from a container. “That's it. That big half round area is Drake's Bay.”

It was too far to really see any detail, but it looked big. “Are there a lot of people there?” Dev asked.

“Not like Quebec, but there's people there.” Jess said, in a thoughtful tone. “Aside from my extended family, and the people who work the processing center down the coast there, there's little haulers, and scavengers, lots of small caves and tuck unders you can survive in.”

“I see.”

“Most people work at the processors, but supplement that with after-hours work in the Bay.” Jess went on. “My grandfather wanted to make the place self sufficient – be able to pay full time but he never made it. My dad never even tried. But they can feed themselves. Don't really need to work for the processor but they're so scared they'd lose the place if they stopped.”

Dev wasn't sure she understood all that. But they were coming within scan range of the half round area, and she started to pick up signals. “We're being scanned.”

“I bet.” Jess kept sipping from her mug. “Drake's Bay is not exactly like any other place we've been so far, Dev.” She watched the coastline slip by. “Contact Doug and tell them to stay behind us, and keep cool.”

Dev made the call, and repeated the instructions, hoping the last part made sense to their escorts. Then she saw a incoming signal and keyed to it. “Repeat, calling station?”

Jess smiled faintly.

“Incoming vessel approaching Drake's Bay. Identify yourself and your originating location or stand off. This will be your only warning.”

Dev looked at her partner in question.

“Go ahead and identify us.”

“This is BR27006, Interforce flight outbound from Base 10.” Dev obediently supplied, then blinked as she felt a second, much more powerful scan sweep through them, making her skin tingle, and the chips in her hand itch. “Is that correct?” She asked Jess.

Jess half shrugged. “Is it approved? No. But I sent over our bio scans so with any luck that'll clear us and we won't have to engage in any more who the hell are you bullshit.”

“So they know who we are?”

“They know who we are.” Jess confirmed.

“Interforce BR27006, come ahead. You are expected.” The comms sputtered. “Advise your following vessel to stay to your inbound pattern. Access bay twelve is available.”

“Tell them thank you.” Jess extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles. “Then go around that far wall there, midway up the slope you'll see the landing bays. Twelve's the second from the top.”

Dev complied, sending the signal to Doug to stay on their tail. As they approached the tall, half circle wall of stone she could see that it sloped up away from the water and rose above it, but it had no flat wall like the citadel did. It was more like a cone, and it reminded her a little of the market island that had blown up.

The half circle bay at it's foot was protected by the arching walls that came down from either side, and the water in the enclosed part was a lighter shade of green and blue – Dev thought she could see through it and see some rocks and thing beneath the surface.

There were docks tucked into the inside of the curve and there were boats there tied to them, and though the surf was choppy it was far less rough than further out. On the edge of the water was a beach like the one in the citadel, only this one was much larger, and wider.

Dev glanced up at Jess, seeing a thoughtful and somewhat sad look on her face. She was about to ask a question, then decided to hold it for later. She returned her attention to the rock wall, angling their course so they would come around the edge.

On the far side of the curved wall she saw the landing area. There were ledges and openings scattered over the bare walls, and zig zagging from them were steps carved into the stone, leading down to one large opening at ground level.

Dev found the second from the top and angled towards it, as two smaller craft dove into an opening two levels lower. She approached the entrance and slowed her forward speed, dropping down to make sure she cleared the ceiling and passing inside.

The interior of the cavern surprised her. It was more regular in shape than she expected, and the inner walls were flat, and straight not like the walls of the carrier bay back at the citadel. She saw large open spaces towards one side, and noticed there were people on the ground with bright colored sticks pointing at them.

“Over there, Dev.” Jess indicated the flat area they were pointing at. “Just put her down, then we can change into our formals.”

“All right.” Dev gently eased the carrier down. She could see a landing crew waiting for her, none of their faces in any way familiar. “They know what to do with this vessel?”

“They know what to do with a lot of things.” Jess answered enigmatically. “But yeah, you can let them hook up once you land. They won't do anything but put power up for us.”

“Okay.” Dev extended the landing skids and set the craft on the floor of the cavern, shutting down the engines as the tech team approached them and with casual skill, connected a set of umbilicals to their ports. She observed the settings, then she switched over the power and watched for a moment as the leads evened out.

“Dev?”

Dev unfastened her restraints and got out of her chair. “Yes?”

Jess opened the back cabinet and started unzipping her flight suit. “There aren't any bio alts here.” She said. “But they'll probably have heard of you.”

Dev studied her, as she opened up the small cabinet up near her station. “Will it cause discomfort?” She asked. “Would you prefer if I stayed here?”

Jess slid into her formals, fastening the shoulder catch on the sleeveless under suit. “You might prefer it.” She remarked wryly. “In general, my family's just against the whole idea of bio alts. They'd rather build a bigger population base of natural borns – they think making what they view as servants is dumb and immoral.”

“I see.”

“On the other hand, you're a tech. “ Jess slid into her jacket and pulled the sleeves straight. “And one thing they do respect is Interforce. Probably give the whole lot of them indigestion for a year.”

“I see.” Dev repeated, making sure her insignia were in place, and fastened correctly.

“So, no I'd rather you not stay here. But try to ignore any jackassery you hear. Okay? I can't really start beating the crap out of my family for insulting you.” She finished dressing and ducked her head to look at a reflective piece of metal, running her fingers through her hair.

“Of course not.” Dev said. “They can say anything they want, Jess. I”m trained for that.”

Jess rested her wrists on Dev's shoulders. “I know. But I'm not.” She leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the lips. “And we Drakes have some odd ideas of honor. So hopefully they'll give you the respect a tech and my partner deserves.” She patted her cheek. “Let's go.”

Jess triggered the hatch open and the ramp extended, letting in a gust of sea air mixed with stone and silicon oil. She led the way down, glancing to her left where Doug and April were standing, braced, waiting for her. Bain had said to have them stand off, but Jess knew better.

Have a carrier, armed, hovering over the homestead? Not even she could pull that off – she wasn't even carrying a single weapon on her. Having the two newbies with her would have to be enough.

She motioned them to follow and started towards the inner halls, slowing when she saw her brother Jimmy's tall form fill the doorway. “Hey Jimmy.”

He held a hand up in greeting. “‘Lo, Jess.” He stepped out of the doorway and cleared space. “Sorry this had to be a homecoming occasion.” He glanced at her companions. “Welcome to Drake's Bay.” He addressed them. “Ah..”

“Sorry to hear the news.” Jess said. “This is April Anston, and her partner Doug Sars.” She half turned. “And this is my partner, Dev.”

“Your new partner?” Jimmy asked.

“Brand new, and already notorious.” Jess kept her gaze steady and her eyes flatly expressionless in warning.

Jimmy kept his eyes on Dev for an instant, then he nodded. “Follow me.” He turned and ducked back through the door, holding it open for them as they followed and then letting it close as he continued on.

So far so good, Dev thought. She walked along a pace behind Jess, looking around with interest. The corridors here, unlike the ones in Quebec, or the market, were fully lit and cut square, not irregular. It was more like the citadel than any other place she'd seen yet, and the floors too were even stone set in a pattern she found quite attractive.

As they continued inward, there were doors set on either side and a final turn led them to a wide open internal cavern where she almost stopped involuntarily to gawk.

The platform they were on had stairs that climbed up to higher levels, and stairwells that arched down to lower ones, but they were all of stone, and carved beautifully in shapes that had nothing to do with function. There was natural light there, too, and Dev tipped her head back to look up at the top of the chamber which at first glance seemed open to the sky.

Then she realized it wasn't, that there was some clear surface between the open air and the cavern, but it let the gray light of day in to bathe the stone spirals that led up and down through a

vast space of perhaps fifteen levels, each stairway peeling off to an arched corridor that led off deeper in to the mountain.

“Wow.” April murmured, next to her. 'This is something.”

“It's very attractive.” Dev murmured back. “I've never seen anything like it, even in vid.”

“Me either.” The younger agent shook her head. “You, Doug?”

“No way.” The unusually subdued tech muttered.

Jess and her brother were headed down the steps and they hastily followed, down several levels and then through another hall, that led to a beautiful archway into a big chamber beyond. Dev looked up as they went through, seeing a pretty design carved in the stone above it, a sort of diamond or triangle shaped outline with a creature in the middle, odd and strange, with it's fish like tail, and wings.

She put a reminder in her head to ask Jess later what it was supposed to be. Right now, her attention was captured by the space they were entering, a big room with stone floors and a beautiful arched ceiling where there were a number of people waiting.

There was a table there, with trays on it, and glasses. The people in the room were all dressed well, and some were drinking from glasses, standing in small groups talking. Jimmy put a hand on Jess's shoulder and then left them, going across the room to talk to three men who were in simple gray jumpsuits with colored bands on their shoulders.

People noticed their entrance, Dev realized. A lot of them were watching them, though most looked curious rather than in discomfort and as they milled around they exposed a pit with a heating element in it, round and stone cut, that had carved plaques above it going around in a curve.

“So, what do you think?” Jess was whispering in her ear.

“This place is amazing.” Dev whispered back.

Her partner smiled briefly, standing with her hands behind her back. “Yeah, it's not bad for an old rock pile.” She said, in an nonchalant tone. “Couple of families of stone masons and steel wrights have lived here as part of the extended homesteads for a few generations. We use barter for life staples, works out pretty good for both sides.”

Jimmy moved to the center of the room and cleared his throat. “Okay folks, thanks for being here. Processing is set to start soon as we get to the viewing station. This way” He indicated a door in the back of the chamber. “Wake lunch'll be in the dining chamber when it's over.”

Jess indicated them to hold off going until most of the room had emptied, then she led their little group into the back hall. She knew a number of the others there, but she hadn't seen most since she'd been very small and she didn't really expect any of them to come up and talk to her. Service family or not, it was true once you were taken, you became part of something else and she'd stopped being a part of Drake's Bay's life a long time ago.

Didn't really bother her. Right?

She walked along the halls she'd last really trod as a child and as they turned a corner and the corridor started downward, she felt a gust of the rich salt air she remembered so well.

“So you made it.”

Jess turned to find her brother Jake walking next to her. “I made it.”

Jake nodded. “Glad you did. Even if you and the old woman didn't get along.”

Jess sighed. “I don't think it was that. I think she just wanted things to be different and I couldn't change that. I think she always figured I could have said no to this at some point.”

“Crazy woman.” Jake shook his head. “Lucky it was only one of us.”

“Yeah.” Jess slowed as they reached the lock to the outer platform, which was set in the open position. She followed the last of the guests out the lock and then they were facing the bay. After

a brief pause, Jess circled the crowd and eased over to one side of the platform, moving through the other guests until she was up against the wall.

She put her hands on the top of it, and waited, drawing in a breath of the air coming off the bay. Jake came up to stand next to her, and she was aware of Dev's presence at her elbow, the bio alt keeping very quiet, and sticking very close.

It was a very impersonal process, really. Jess regarded the outflow station three levels below. There was no place to put organic garbage, no use for it's components in the holding, so they did what made sense – grind it up and expel it into the sea where it became a meal for the creatures living in it.

Human bodies were just large pieces of organic garbage, once life had left them. They got the same treatment as any of the kitchen refuse and now, though not in the beginning, it was common and accepted. Her mother would have a memorial plaque set in the wall of the family chamber, and her name added to the remembrance ceremonies held once a year but nowadays the thought of keeping a body around just to remember someone would horrify anyone alive.

It was, what it was.

“Stand by.” Jimmy said, quietly, though his voice echoed softly in the viewing station. “Processing underway.”

A soft rumble, the sound of a hatch, and a rush of darkish matter into the blue green water. The fish saw it, and a moment later there was a frenzy, a roil of fins and silvery bodies thrashing the water, and that, though, would cause the hold on taking fish in the bay for two days.

There was something still, of that corporal reverence. But then life would go on, and they would continue to live in the way they had for generations now the only way they'd been able to manage.

“So.” Jake shifted. “That's done.”

“Bye mom.” Jess agreed. “Sorry we never got a chance to be human to each other, there at the end.”

“Sorry you never got to see me spawn.” Jake agreed, giving his sister a sideways glance. “Finally got an allotment. Sagra's pregnant.”

Jess smiled briefly. “Congratulations.”

The crowd was breaking up and going back inside, already talking of other things. Jimmy came over to them, folding his arms across his chest and glancing briefly out to sea. “Glad you could make it out, Jess.” He said. “Lets go have lunch. Trade some stories. Tayler wants to see his aunt. I think we've all had a lot of changes lately.”

His eyes flicked to Dev, who returned his look with bland politeness.

'Sure.” Jess said. “We'd love to. “ She spoke for her three companions, who were really in no place to argue about it. “You can give me all the details on what happened to mom.”

“And you can tell us all about those gold bars and the new recruits.” Jimmy countered. “After you?”

“After you.”

**

Jess rested her wrists on the big, old table, salvaged from who knew what how many generations back in Drake history. It was wood, which was rare enough, but it had patterned inlay and a decayed, stately elegance that was now very rare. It had been the dining table she remembered from her childhood, big enough for a dozen or more to eat around it and close to the big kitchen with it's baking pit and cook tops.

Here it was private lunch, bowls of food passed around the table and her brothers families along with two old aunts and an ancient uncle seated around sharing it.

Jimmy and Jake, both of them still tall and lanky, Jimmy with his blond curls and innocent blue eyes, and Jake with her dark hair but gray eyes like their father had. There was a family

resemblance to her, most of the Drakes had those angular lines and the height but they both had a defensive, almost hunch shouldered air she didn't share with them.

Little Tayler was there, sitting next to her on her left hand side, with Dev on her right hand, busy showing her a petrified starfish found apparently just that morning on the reef. He had a tangle of dark brown curls and a snub nose and no idea what was about to happen to him.

He would probably miss the same things she had.

She felt unsettled, as she usually did here. Aware at some level of a sense of faded familiarity yet aware that people watched her constantly, perhaps waiting for her to lose it and get crazy on someone.

Strange love hate relationship, with both the idea of, and the reality of Interforce. 'That's a nice starfish, Tayler." Jess told her nephew gravely. "Find it at the point?"

"Yes." Tayler put a finger between the arms of the petrified thing and moved it in a circle. "I like it."

"Me too." Jess reached over to help him turn the item, remembering sitting at this table, younger than he was now, doing more or less the same thing.

Tayler looked past her at Dev, and gave the bio alt a shy smile. "Hello."

Dev smiled back. "Hello."

"You like my starfis?"

Jess was glad of the distraction, and she was content to watch the kid engage with her pilot, who being closer to his size, apparently was a fascination.

"I do." Dev said. "I have a vid of a bear. Would you like to see it?"

Tayler's eyes lit up. "A bear? A real bear? Daddy! Daddy! She saw a bear!"

Everyone looked up and over at the excited child, then Jimmy eyed Dev warily. "She did, huh?" He looked over at Jess. "You all up in the white? Hadn't heard that."

Dev got up and came around to where Tayler was bouncing in his chair, pulling her comp out and calling up the vid. "The bear was really amazing. We saw baby ones too."

"We were up in the white." Jess said. "Just got back from it. I saw great uncle Jacob, matter of fact."

"That old coot?" Jake spoke up. "Haven't seen his fishy ass in years. He still remember you?"

"Oh wow!" Tayler was glued to the comp screen, as Dev ran through the vid she had of the bears, ending with the three animals watching them as they escaped into the cavern, the baby's tiny faces and cupped ears outlined against the ice. "That's cool!"

"He remembered me." Jess said. "They're doing all right. Should trade more on this side of the fence though."

"They pay more." Jake commented shortly. "Got plenty of hard cred over there."

Everyone looked a little uncomfortable, watching Jess closely. She was aware of that, but shrugged. "I know. I sold them a hold full of one of his boat's catch. Made more than I take a year." She chewed a mouthful of leaf seaweed and mushrooms, along with a forkful of the whole fish fillet on her plate. "There's a reason market island's over on that side. That's where the cred is."

"Maybe not now for a while." Jake said, glancing at her. "Heard they had a big loss half month back or so. Whole research processing center gone."

"Yeah?" Jess looked mildly at him.

"Trading boat came through yesterday, early." Jimmy said. "Telling a story of some crazy ass lone gun shooting out half the damn side of Gibraltar."

It got quiet. Everyone focused on Jess, who stolidly kept chewing. She eventually swallowed, and then looked at Dev, who was kneeling next to her. "You think I'm crazy ass?"

Dev regarded her solemnly. “I don't think I'm programmed to comment about your ass.”

April stifled a laugh.

Jess looked back across the table. “My first mission with my new partner.” She answered, briefly. “Let's just say it was a payback for turning Josh.”

“So you got em there, little Jessy?” Uncle Matt spoke up. “Kicked em where it hurt? Good on ya.” He nodded to himself, munching on his fish. “More of em dead, the better.”

Jess smiled, and Mari, Jimmy's wife, changed the subject. There was a lot of that around family dinner tables, when you were part of an in service clan. Uncle Matt could be excused though, because he'd lost everything to the other side, a wife, three kids, and a homestead along with his left arm and a foot.

Matter of fact she was glad to have taken a piece out of them for him. “So where was the old woman coming back from?”

“Council meeting.” Jimmy said, briefly. “They had a vote up for the east flats. A bunch of lower caverners petitioned to open a station there. Vote went for them. I'm not sure it's worth it though.”

“Not enough shells?” Jess queried.

“They're trying for independent status.” Her brother replied. “There's no facility out there.”

“Uh huh. So she was headed back here after that.. just after the vote? No stops?” Jess asked. “Any comp from the flyer?”

'Nothing left of it.” Jake said. “She probably tied one on before she left. You know what she was like.” He studied Jess. “Hey, well maybe you didn't. She went for the bottle last couple years.”

“So they figure she splatted from that? They'll take her benefits.” Jess said. “Didn't she have shares in this place?”

Everyone now looked very uncomfortable. Dev had gone back to her seat, and Tayler was playing with his food, ignoring what was going on around the table. “C'mon, people. I don't have a stake in it.” Jess said. “I”m just asking.”

“Right now they're calling it a weather related accident.” Jimmy said, stiffly. “Her benefits come back to the family pool, she hadn't made a formal arrangement with anyone else.”

“She was never part of this family.” Auntie Grace spoke up. “Only made the arrangement with your father to get her hands on a piece of this place.”

April and Doug looked vaguely embarrassed, but Jess lifted a hand in their direction. “Sorry. Shoulda warned you.” She said. “My family's as assholish as I usually am.”

Doug cleared his throat. “My dad's a senior councilor out on Rainier Island. I know the drill.” He said. “He's had women after him for years, after my mother passed.” He glanced at April. “Not your gig, I know.”

“No.” April said. “Not with a bunch of traveling nomads. No land, no fighting over it.” She had a low, intense voice. “But I know all about asshole families, thanks.”

“Anyway.” Jimmy pushed his dish aside a little. “So yeah, it ended up good for us. She'd have taken a 30 percent share out, and I don't know what she'd have brought back in here.” He lifted his gaze and met Jess's. “But now, either way, it's not an issue.”

Jess nodded.

“Can I talk to you a minute in private, Jess?” Jimmy said. “We don't get much chance.”

Jess stood and moved around her chair, putting a hand on Dev's shoulder and pressing it before she joined her brother at the back door to the dining hall. They passed through and down a corridor, then into a smaller room lined with shelves. One section of the back wall of the chamber had a clear block in it, and past that you could see the bay.

“So.” Jess took a seat in one of the chairs, and put her elbows on the arms. “What's up?”

He went over and perched on the workspace at the back of the room. “Before I call you out as bullshit, I'd like to know why the hell you just put out that crap about you having no stake in this?”

It wasn't often Jess found herself completely dumbfounded, but in this case, she was. “Huh?” She managed to get out, her brows knitting over a creased forehead. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“The shares.” He glared at her. “Your shares.”

Jess looked around as if trying to find some other person he could be referring to. “Are you stupid?” She asked. “I have no shares. Remember? I had to sign away my homestead rights when I graduated field school. I have no more stake in this place than I have a horn growing out of my head.”

He stared at her. “You don't know.” He said, after a long pause. “He never told you.”

“Told me what?” Jess spread her hands out. “What are you talking about?”

Slowly, he straightened and got up, walking behind the workspace and sitting down behind it. “You really don't know.” He repeated, in a half exasperated, half wondering tone. “Son of a bitch.” He let his hands fall to the chair arms. “Well here see it for yourself.” He reached into one of the workspace pockets and drew out a pad, keying something up and handing it across the desk at her. “We all thought you knew.”

Jess got up and grabbed the pad. “I don't know shit about... “ She paused, as her eyes scanned over the screen and she absorbed it's contents. “What in the hell did he do here?” She slowly sat down again. “He can't have processed this. I'm not eligible. He knew that.”

“He didn't give a shit.” Jimmy said. “He told us we were a bunch of losers, and the old woman was a thief. He coded all his shares out of the pool and locked the to your civ profile.”

Jess studied the readout, running through it a few times. “Well.” She tossed the pad back on the workspace. “I'll never transition to that profile so it makes no difference anyway. I'll never survive to fully retire. He was just being an asshole.”

“He survived.”

“I'm not him.” Jess said, in a clipped tone. “I”m crazier than he was, and we both know it.”

Jimmy exhaled, and slumped a little in the chair. “Seeing that thing with you I believe it. He'd never go for that.” He looked up to see the icy look directed at him. 'They looking to make sure you don't survive?”

“She got me these gold bars.” Jess touched her throat. “That thing's for real.”

He watched her face closely. “ Really?”

“Really. And you call her a thing to her face and I'll break both your arms.” Jess replied, in a mild tone. “Now that I've relieved your avaricious ass and you don't have to worry about me tossing you and your useless brother and these suck ons that live here out, we done?”

Jimmy had the grace to at least look embarrassed. “Sorry, Jess.” He said. “I really thought you knew.”

“And I was just laughing at you?” Jess snapped back. “Fuck you.”

He exhaled. “The old woman thought you knew. That's why she was so damned pissed off at you these last years. She wangled it all so she could get controlling shares, and he screwed her.” He said. “She finally gave up – no way to get around his lock.”

“She wanted controlling shares of this place?” Jess felt her anger sidetracked.

“We all do.” Jimmy said, straightforwardly. “This place gets directed by committee right now. Who we trade with, what we trade, who gets to stretch out, who gets to take the boats... pain in the ass. One person has all the shares, they make the rules.”

Jess thought about that, then laughed. “Our father knew what the hell he was doing. Tie up those shares in me and no one wins.”

“Unless you sign them over.”

“Fuck you.” Jess got up. “One, I can't unless I”m a civ, and two, I'd rather ram my head through that door.” She headed for the aforementioned portal.

“Jess.” Jimmy stood up. “Before you storm out and slam the door behind you can I ask you a question?”

Jess turned, and waited.

“When you finished field school, and were going into service.. you ever think about turning it down, and coming home?”

Jess tilted her head a little, and studied him. Then she came back across the room and stood on the other side of the desk, leaning forward and resting her knuckles on the surface. “You don't get that choice, Jimmy.” She said, in a very quiet voice.

“But they told us...”

“You get to the end of field, and the grad ceremony.” Jess overrode him. “And then, late that night, they take you, one at a time, the commander does, to Eagles' Point and he tells you the bitter truth of what you are. And you can either accept that, and go into service... or he kills you.”

Her brother stared at her in silence.

“You put Tayler on that transport, he's never coming home.” Jess said, after a long pause. “Now that's something daddy really should have told YOU.” She straightened and walked quietly to the door, opening it and passing through and letting it shut behind her with a gentle click.

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They were back in the carrier, the hatch shutting with a thump as they cleared the opening. “That's that.” Jess went to her station and sat down. “Let's get things buttoned down and get out of here.”

Dev sat down in her pilot's chair. “Jess?”

“Hm?” Her partner looked up.

“There's a lot of discomfort here.”

Jess sighed and sat back. “Yeah.” She admitted. “It's pretty fucked up. Reminds me again why I don't come here a lot.” She let her hands drop to her thighs. “So now what do we do?” She looked at Dev. “Ditch our escorts and head east?” She asked. “Ready to go destroy our careers?”

“If you mean, we're going to go help Doctor Dan I agree with that.” Dev said. “But I hope we don't cause our team mates discomfort. They seem agreeable people.”

Jess chuckled softly. “Ah, maybe we'll just go back to base.” She sighed. “I don't really have a plan, and they're all gunning for me. Not really much chance of our getting in there.”

Dev was ready to accept that decision too. The entire day had been very unsettling, and the only moment she'd liked was showing the vid of the bear to the little boy. Everything else had been tense, and uncomfortable and she was really glad they were leaving now.

Doug and April were too, they'd said as much as they were walking back to the shuttle bay. Dev thought about it and decided she would really like to go back to the base, and relax and not get into trouble. “I like that idea more.” She said. “Maybe we can practice..”

“Sex?” Jess grinned at her.

“I was going to say surfing, but that would be good too.” Dev smiled back.

“Yeah, all right.” Jess decided. “Get this pony on the road. Let's go home.”

Dev swiveled her chair around and started up her systems. Outside the window, she could see Doug doing the same, and though she couldn't help thinking of Doctor Dan, and what he was doing, she also couldn't deny she was glad they were going back to the citadel.

She thought maybe Jess was glad too. “I do think your place here is very nice.”

Jess chuckled briefly. “Yeah, it's probably the oldest, and the most developed homestead in the east. They've got a few that old on the west coast – Jason's Rainier Island place is one of them – but Drake's Bay's a good place to live.” She leaned back and waited as Dev booted the bus. “It's the biggest trading center in the area. Got nice big turbines down below, generates a surplus of power they sell to the battery plants, and is pretty much self sufficient. “

“I see.”

Jess folded her arms over her chest and sighed. “Stupid family.”

Dev wisely refrained from comment, settling her ear cups in place and activating her restraints. The chair gimbaled forward and she started to make adjustments, reaching over to disconnect the docking umbilical and switching to internal power. She'd now heard Doug and April discuss their families, seen Jess's, and remembered hearing Jason gripe about his. She was starting to ponder the possibility that being a bio alt, and having no family, wasn't entirely an awful thing.

They eased from the shuttle dock and formed up over the bay, as Dev triggered the nav that would take them on a course north and east. “Jess? We just got a weather warning.” She shunted the met alert back to her partner's station.

“Lemme see.. oh here it is.” Jess keyed up the report and studied it. “That's a big one coming over the citadel.” She remarked. “We'll just go a little slow and come in behind it.” She dismissed the met and leaned back. “Tell the kids to follow us.”

Dev glanced in the mirror. Then she opened the sideband channel and hailed the other carrier, as she gave the engines power and they moved offshore and away from Drake's Bay.

Jess twiddled her thumbs idly and listened to her pilot chat with Doug, already thinking ahead to what her options were next. Should she have taken the chance to go rogue? Should she... Jess turned her head as her comp caught sight of something and started tracking it. “Dev?”

“Yes?”

“Give my board power.” Jess moved her seat a bit closer and put the target on the big board, the comp resolving it into not one but two images. “We've got something coming at us.”

Dev relayed the message to Doug, then she took control from the autonav and turned the carrier in an arc, to face the west where the images were heading from. She started a long range scan, checking the status of the shields and shunting power to them.

“Tac 2, tac 1.” Doug's voice burred in her ear. “We see target. Engage standby.”

“Acknowledge.” Dev responded. “Wait for ident.”

Jess felt her adrenaline kick in. She snugged her restraints and kicked on the guns, the targeting boards coming live on either side of her as the head's up display appeared, and centered on the two incoming spots. They had no patrols west, so likely they were not friendly.

“Profiling in process.” Dev reported quietly. “Long range reports energy outline indicates high rate weapons.”

“Ah.” Jess got her hands on the gun triggers and flipped the switch that put all the scan input to her leads. “Dev, if they make a run at us, take us up and over and do your thing.”

“Yes.” Dev already had full power spooled up to the engines, and her hands were curled around the throttles. “Scan reporting they are reacting to our presence, course has changed due north.”

“Chase em.” Jess wiggled her fingers in muted delight. “Go get em, Devvie!” She felt the whump as the engines kicked in and she was smacked against the back of her chair, the restraints curling around her as they took on G force in a high rate turn, and then went full speed to the north.

“Scan return showing TK300 series heavy cruisers.” Dev reported. “Weapons systems are powering up according to comp.” She pointed the nose of the carrier at them and sent Doug a quick status update.

“Ohhh... real bad guys.” Jess shook her head. “What in the hell are they doing out here? How did the get past... “ She let the thought trail off. “Dev, send a squirt to Base 10. Just a status, what we found out here.”

“In work.” Dev reached over to key in the long range comms. “Standby to transmit.”

Jess calculated several trajectory solutions, and put the long scan on tight resolution. After a moment, it came in and she could see a rough picture of the two fleeing craft.

TK”s all right. She could see the distinctive profile, and she checked the range, then programmed two plasma bombs and ejected them. “Time to intercept?”

“Five minutes.” Dev reported crisply. “We have plus 10 on their speed.”

“That because of your tinkering?” Jess smiled. “I know these carriers are not supposed to be able to catch those suckers.”

“We did some adjustments.” Dev admitted. “I think we are causing them discomfort they are going into an evasive pattern.” She shifted and watched the comp, then adjusted the trajectory and sent more power to the engines. “Four minutes.”

Jess watched them eject a backscatter, which drew off her bombs, and they ignited behind the craft. “Overshoot them and then do a 180 Dev, come at them head on.”

“They will fire from their front cannons.” Dev commented. “I think we should come to zenith, then from the left.”

In the silence that followed, Dev looked in the mirror and met Jess's eyes. Slowly, a grin formed on Jess's face, and she lifted one hand off the guns and touched her forehead. “You're the driver.”

“Was that incorrect?

“We'll find out in four minutes.”

“Three.”

**

Dev could see the outflow from the enemy craft's engines with her own eyes now and she made a picture in her head of what she wanted to do once they caught them, flexing her fingers around the throttles and leaning forward a little.

“One minute.” She warned Jess, who was reading her guns, the soft whine of the energy spool up audible to her outside the ear cups.

“Got it.” Jess said. “Tac 1, Tac 2, keep to aft, match.”

“Ack.” Doug's voice came back, sounding tolerably steady.

“Welcome to Interforce.” Jess added, suppressing a grin as she tuned her aim. “Dev, tell our friends to haul up and surrender or we'll blast them.”

Obediently, Dev switched comms to broadband all hail and repeated the threat. Then she closed the channel and prepared to maneuver. She could see the two sets of engines flaring bright at full power ahead of her, but the new mods they'd applied to the carriers left her with reserve even though she was catching them.

Excellent.

“No answer.” She told Jess, somewhat unnecessarily.

“Hehehe.” Jess chuckled audibly. “Take us in, Devvie.”

“Hold on.” Dev kicked the side jets and put the carrier on it's horizontal axis, boosting up and over the trailing carrier in a rush of speed and then dumping over to it's port side as it swerved.

“Hehehe.” Jess repeated, releasing her triggers and sending a barrage from the lower guns across the side of the vessel. She watched the scan intently as Dev came around and seeing a sudden flare of energy across the boards. “Holy shit Dev get us a.. woa!”

Dev saw the same thing, and instinctively hit the back jets and hauled up, sending them cloud-ward and then upside down putting the heavily shielded bottom of the carrier towards the enemy just as the energy surge exploded towards them and swamped comp and scan, blowing them sideways through the air.

Engines cut out as a wash of energy flowed over and through them, safety systems blaring with sudden vibrant screams.

It was hard to keep control. The carrier tumbled through the air and started to drop, before she got her inputs sorted out and got the engines back online. "What happened?"

"Damn thing blew up." Jess sounded rattled. "I couldn't have blown their shields that fast. Should have just tickled them." She looked at the screens. "Can you get comp back? Where's Tac 2?"

Dev kept them high, but boosted the back jets to pitch them forward giving them a view. "Chasing the other one." She reported, "They're shooting." She ran the repair programming and started recycling the boards. "Stand by for comp and scan."

"Get after them. Anything left of that tank?"

"No." Dev shook her head. She brought the engines up to full power and started after the fleeing second craft, just as Doug dove at it, and April let loose a set of plasma bombs aimed at the front of it while the enemy vessel returned fire, sending a blast of fire along the port side of the Interforce carrier.

Scan came back, and a moment later, comp as well, screens coming alive with alerts and warnings. She spared a glance for them, then concentrated on catching the other craft, feeling the energy release as Jess fired the forward guns.

The beams stitched a line across the top of the enemy as they dove towards it, then once again scan screamed a warning. "Plasma flare!" Dev yelled, as she yanked them sideways and then in an arc.

"Tac 2 evade!" Jess hit the comms and then held onto her console, as the carrier rolled in the air and boosted skyward. "What in the hell?!!!!"

This time they were far enough away to weather the wave unharmed, and Dev finished her roll out and got them back on heading, looking intently through the energy wash and blinking to clear the brightness from her eyes. "Tac 2, Tac1." She triggered comms. "I don't' see them."

Jess dropped weapons scan and picked up standard to her console, running sweep. "C'mon, you raw little kids. Don't croak your first run on me."

Comp crackled hard. "Tac 1, Tac 2." Doug's voice sounded breathless. "Nadir."

Dev dipped the nose of the carrier and headed down, dropping altitude rapidly as a layer of thick clouds rippled around them and then cleared, giving a view of ruffled waves and shoreline beneath them.

"There they are." Jess said. "Near the escarpment."

"I see them." Dev moderated her drop, and leveled, coming even with the other carrier.

"Open sideband local." Jess said. "What the hell was that? No way either of those strikes should have skunked them."

Dev opened the channel, and sent the encodes, waiting for the sideband shortwave to come up and let them talk to each other in long speech. "BR27006, BR36024, copy."

The line opened. "BR27006, we copy." April's voice sounded relieved. "We lost power after the target blew up. Just got it back before splashing."

"Copy that, 36024." Jess responded. "Your comp catch the explosion? I'd like to compare it to ours. Didn't have a standard outflow."

"What the hell were they doing this far in?" April asked. "Is that normal? They told us in field engagements were in the mid zone."

Jess was momentarily silent. "Good question." She responded. "First time I've seen them this far in." She admitted. "Dev, did we get a squirt back from Base 10?"

Dev checked the comms board, running through the logs. "No." She said, after a pause. "No response from them at all." She re keyed the request, and engaged long scan. "We received comp

from Doug." She shunted the data to Jess's boards. "Everything else seems clean – no additional targets."

"Yeah." Jess murmured. "Let's get back on course." She engaged comms. "April, you good to move on?"

"Took a few dents, but yes." April responded. "We're picking up some debris on the surface there. Recon?" She inquired. "Didn't think there would be much left but we're seeing some large pieces."

Jess stared unseeing at her console for a long moment. Then she lifted her head. "Yeah, Dev, take us down to the shore." She keyed comms. "Acknowledge – let's take a look at what's left. I don't like what I'm seeing on these recordings."

The two carriers dropped down, angling for the beach and landing above the high tide line side by side. Dev ran the shut down process, and unhooked her restraints. She stood up and removed the carrier links from her flight suit and turned, watching Jess as she got up from the gunner's chair. "This seems incorrect."

Jess seated her weapons, and triggered the hatch. "It is, Dev. I just don't know why or how it is." She walked down the ramp, as the wind blew in a gust of salt tinged air.

Dev followed her, stepping down off the carrier step onto the somewhat soft surface they'd landed on. It shifted under her boots, and she could see debris in it, pieces of stone or rocks and some glints of color. It crunched a little, under her. She stopped as Jess stopped, and they waited as April and Doug joined them.

"That was crazy." Doug said. "That thing blew itself up."

"That's not necessarily what happened. "April disagreed.

"Something happened." Jess continued down the beach until she reached the first piece of debris. She circled it warily, and Dev pulled out her portable comp and started a scan on it. "Look at those edges." Jess knelt next to one and studied it. "This was blown out."

April joined her. "From the inside?"

"It has a high emission of positive electrons." Dev said, after a pause. "There is residual in the atmosphere also." She added. "It appears something released a lot of energy."

"Engines?" April speculated.

"Not this type." Jess had gotten up and went around to look at Dev's screen. "Your driver might be right. Sure looks like an internal explosion to me." She went over to the next piece of debris, which was hardly larger than her two hands put together. It had a bit of steel skin attached, which was curled and burned like it had been plastic.

"Are you saying they blew themselves up?" Her fellow field agent queried, in a surprised voice. "They never mentioned that in school."

"Never mentioned it in the field either, since I've never seen them do it before." Jess frowned. "They're not martyrs, any more than we are." She nudged the piece with her boot. "Unless they had something on board they just weren't willing for us to see."

"And they brought it all the way over here? That doesn't make much sense." Doug spoke up.

"It would if it were something they were going to use against us." Jess stood up. "I can't think of any other reason they'd want to prevent us from capturing them aside from sheer embarrassment. We should send a squirt with this back to Base 10, and get moving."

Dev put her comp away and glanced down at the ground, her brows jerking a bit with surprise as the bits of rock resolved unexpectedly into familiar shapes. She looked up to see the two agents examining another bit of metal, and decided she had time to inspect the items on the ground.

She picked one up and looked at it confirming her initial impression of what they were.

"You like shells?" Doug came over and joined her. "My mother collects em, and makes jewelery out of them."

Dev regarded the oval item on her palm. "Really?"

“Uh huh.” He nodded. “She polishes them up and makes carvings in them, and sometimes if she can find some of that colored glass bits that wash up on shore she insets them. It's nice.”

“Hm.” Dev peered into the small opening, checking for animals inside. The shell appeared to be empty, however, and she decided she liked the dark brown and orange coloring of it.

“Let's go people.” Jess was heading back to the carrier, and April was winding up taking an image of the debris. “Let's get back in touch with base. Something doesn't feel right.”

Dev stuck the item in one of the pockets and trotted after her partner, triggering the hatch as she entered the carrier. She went over to her station and sat down, putting restraints in place before she triggered comms. “Should I send a message?”

“Yeah.” Jess was busy at her own console. “At least get a status through to them, squirt them the vid of the blow up.”

Dev got her comms set settled and took the engine systems off standby. She saw a flashing light and paused, reaching over to accept it. “Jess, there's an alert here.”

She barely heard the release of the restraints before Jess was hanging over her shoulder, and she keyed up the automated alert for her partner to see. “I think it's weather.”

Jess studied it. “Met over the base. Damn it. Maybe that's why they didn't answer too much damn EMF.” She absorbed the message. “That's a huge storm cell.” She said. “Look how far it extends.” Her finger touched the screen. “They must be getting the shit kicked out of them.”

Dev tried to make a picture of that in her head, then quickly stopped. “Should I keep trying to send a message? I'm not getting any response.”

“Keep trying. Get us up in the air before we find something else around here that doesn't belong.” Jess sat down in her station. “I'm going to send a warning back to Drake's Bay.”

Dev gently engaged the landing jets and moved off the sand, sending a blast of it out everywhere from beneath the carrier as they rose up off the ground. She heard Jess behind her speaking softly into her comms and paused to watch Doug lift before she put the message system in automatic loop and engaged the main engines.

There were a lot of unusual things happening. She had the feeling that things were moving very fast, and that Jess wasn't really sure what direction she wanted to go in.

It was unsettling, and it made her uncomfortable.

“Okay, later.” Jess closed comms, then opened them again. “April?”

“Here.” April's voice came back on the inter-ship intercom. “We have a met warning.”

“Us too.” Jess said. “We'll come in from the north, top side of that met's moving faster. Keep your eyes open for more of the bad guys.”

“Ack.”

“I have the squirt on loop.” Dev said. “So far, no response.”

Even with the met, that started a ball of worry in Jess's gut. This close, they should have gotten at the very least, a reject of the message no matter how bad the storm was. She unlocked her restraints and got up, moving over to the lockers and opening them up. “Just in case.”

Dev glanced in the mirror. “What is a case?”

Jess managed a brief smile, as she got out of her standard jumpsuit and into her heavier gear. The light armor settled into place as she sealed the openings, tightening the fit around her body. “I'm putting this on in case it's all gone to crap at base and I need to drop and start shooting people in the halls.”

Dev digested this. “I see.”

“Been kind of a crappy day so far. I”m betting that's not changing in the short term.” Jess slid her small arms in place, adding a set of throwing daggers in the small of her back. “Any response to the squirt? What's the time in?”

“No, and twenty minutes.” Dev inched the throttles forward, and ran a check on the power systems. They were racing fast for both the edge of the storm system and the base, she could already feel the buffeting from the wind against the outside of the carrier in minute shifts of the controls against her hands.

She could feel the nervous energy building inside her and she heard Jess take her seat again, the sound of a heavier body thumping against the padded surface, and the soft whine as Jess activated the restraints that would hold her in place.

From the corner of her eye she saw all the targeting systems come online and for a very brief moment she thought about the people that must have been in the two enemy craft that had been destroyed.

Had they gotten ready, been doing the same sort of tasks she and Jess were doing right now?

'Tac 1, Tac 2.” April's voice filtered over the comm. “Review of comp shows they got a message off, and it was answered, about sixty to one twenty prior to the first one exploding.”

Jess nodded slowly. “Tac 2, ack.” She answered. “I think this kid's gonna be good.” She commented to Dev. “Sharp. Check the timestamps – see if that message went out before or after we threatened em.”

“After.” Dev responded at once. “Was that the person April you were referring to?”

“Yeah.” Her partner said. “Always a crap shoot with women in the corps. Either you're an asshole like me or an asshole like Sandy usually.”

“If the definition of asshole is what you seem to mean it is, I don't think you are one.” Dev adjusted setting, and increased torque to the engines to counteract the increasing wind. “That other agent seemed a lot more unpleasant.”

Jess chuckled. “You only say that because you like me.” She set the scan on long range and directed it at the base. “Ask anyone else at Base 10, even Jason, and they'll tell you different. I treat them all like crap.”

“You treat me very nicely.” Dev protested.

“Yeah, well. “ Jess reran the scan her muscles starting to twitch when it refused to return anything to her. “You're different.”

Dev sighed. “That is true. Ten minutes. No response to the squirt.”

“Nothing from scan either.” Jess drummed her fingertips on the console. “Know what the most different thing about you is?”

Dev knew perfectly well what the most different thing about her was. “Yes.” She said. “I'm a biological alternative and I was born from an egg in space.” She dutifully responded. “But I don't know why that either makes you treat me nicely or makes me not think you're unpleasant.”

“Ah.” Jess tweaked the scan a little, filtering out the spiking frequencies she knew were from the storm. “Actually, what makes you different for me ain't that.” She peered closely at the screen. “It's the fact you're the first person I let myself fall in love with.”

Dev's eyes went to the mirror, staring at the dark head bent over the console. “What?”

“Yeah, you can look that up later. I think we've got some real problems here.” Jess keyed comms. “April, we're getting a lot of disruption from base. You get that?”

“Ack.” The other agent came back immediately.

“We may need to drop.”

“Kitted up.”

Jess gazed fondly at the comms, very glad her instincts had read true on her pick of escorts. “Follow us down. There's an emergency dock midway on the backside that's keyed to my bus. Manual in.”

“Ack.”

Jess cut off the comms. “Sending you up the coordinates, Devvie. Not big enough to land, just do a pass and drop me.” She studied the comms. “Somethings disrupting base systems to the point they're non functional. Don't think they can even open the bay.”

She looked up after a moment of silence, to find Dev watching her in the mirror, those pale, gentle eyes completely intent. “You okay?”

“Yes.” Dev responded mildly. “If the disruption is causing so many problems won't it also affect the carrier?”

“Yes. That's why we're coming in on the backside of the ridge. It'll clear the storm front first.” Jess got up and went to the drop chute, turning and backing into the pack and locking the frame in place. She reached over and grabbed her blaster rifle and seated it, then she swung the comp pad next to the rig in place so she could see their progress. “Drop down so we come in low, Dev.”

The bio alt exhaled, then focused on the fast moving wasteland beneath her. She cut their altitude by half, and now the ground – a vast plain of rocky gravel and deep gorges – was clearly visible. Ahead of them, she could see the line of storms, black thickness shot through with almost continuous lightning strikes.

The clouds were low enough to cover the escarpment that contained the citadel, not a bit of the structure was visible and she could now hear low booming cracks rippling across the ground. There was still no response to their comms hails, and just as Dev wondered how the citadel was reacting to that, the threat scan blared alive. “Jess!”

“I see it” Jess unhooked herself from the drop rig and leaped into her gunner's seat, slamming the straps in place and bringing the guns live. “How in the hell are they flying in that!”

A line of enemy craft were coming over the ridge right through the storm clouds and heading their way, already firing. Just as abruptly a small, thinner craft came arching up from the base itself, streaking towards them at top speed.

Dev evaded the incoming bolts and steeled herself to fly into the barrage, tightening her grips on the throttles and picking a line between the diving enemy and the streaking flight coming from the base.

That, at least, was blaring an ident the carrier recognized.

“Drake!” The comms crackled alive, weird and skewed sounding though they were. “Get out of here!”

Jess let loose a full release of her guns towards the enemy. “Sir!” She yelled back, recognizing Bain's voice. “We'll cover you!”

“No!” Bain said. “They've got something that shields them from energy. Get out of here. Go find it! Or we're all dead! I'll draw them off! That's what killed North!”

“I can feel interruption in our systems.” Dev warned. “I don't think we can get closer until the storm leaves.”

Jess took a breath, as the carrier spun in mid air and arched up through the enemy with the guns on automatic repeat, sending them off in different directions. “Ack.” She finally said “Dev, get us out of here. Go up and get over the clouds and head.. “ She paused. “Go polar. Due north.”

Dev reacted at once, pulling the carrier up hard into a hard arc, turning sharply to one side as a barrage of fire came at them. She got them leveled and threw in the afterburners, blinking a little as the rear scan blanked out white as Jess kept up a continual fire.

Blasts came back at them, impacting the rear shields and shoving the carrier violently to one side as she felt the rippling boom of them clearing the speed of sound and then they were up through the first cloud layer and she was fighting to arc them over before they ran out of air to fly in.

The enemy came roaring up after them, but only two of them and after a moment they spun off, heading back down and leaving the two carriers to streak on together alone.

After a moment of silence, Jess exhaled. “Guess they wanted him more than us.” She felt her hands start to shake as battle tension relaxed. “Shit.”

Dev kept all power on, driving the engines to full speed and more. “Did they damage our place?” She asked softly.

“Probably isn't much to go back to, yeah.” Jess responded. “They probably just did to Base 10 what I did to Gibraltar. They had no way of fighting back. I could see it on scan, no power anywhere. The generating mains were off line.”

Dev thought about all the people there. About Jason, and Brent, and Clint, and all the bio alts down in their compound. Were they all damaged?

Dead?

“But who knows.” Jess finally added. “We've got work to do ahead of us.” She glanced at comp. “Those guys behind us?”

“Yes.”

“All right, lets move. “

**

They were clear of the storm and Dev had them on auto nav, while they sat quietly together sharing some rations. Long range scan was set to detect anyone approaching, only the carrier flying port side aft of them considered friendly.

Jess had been very quiet since they'd left the base's airspace. Now she was sitting on one of the arming benches, elbows resting on her knees as she stolidly munched her way through a fish roll. “We need to get somewhere we can set up a plan, and get our bearings.”

Dev swallowed. “Will we go to one of the caves?” She asked.

'Sort of.” Jess said. “There's an old met and science station near the Pole. We used to keep it stocked. It was North's responsibility so who the hell knows if they did. We'll try that first.” She finished one roll and started a second. “Now I know why those other two carriers blasted themselves. Probably were told to.”

“To keep us from capturing them and finding out what their new thing is?”

Jess nodded. “Didn't expect us to be out there.” She bit a mouthful off. “Freak chance we were. You and I would have probably been there, in rad, or... something.”

Dev thought about that. Then she studied her partner's face. “You seem in discomfort.” She put her hand on Jess's arm. “Are you angry? Did we do something incorrect?”

“Nah.” A faint smile appeared on Jess's face, then faded. “I just get the feeling.. like I have been... that there's some big plan going on we don't have any clue about. I hate that.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway. When we get up to the old station, I'll see if the powerhouse is still running and if it is, we can alert the rest of the force. Our shipcoms won't do squat. Not enough transmit unless we bounced it off a base, and the two closest are now dead as doornail.”

Dev felt a lot of discomfort about that, the bases not responding. “I hope they just turned everything off.” She said. “There were some nice people at our place.”

Jess sighed. “Yeah.” She admitted. “My promotion sure didn't last long, huh? I'll probably end up low on the totem in some outpost if we make it through this.”

Her bio alt partner considered this, as she finished her fish roll and chewed a dried mushroom cake. “Will I get to go with you?” She asked, in a very quiet tone.

“If I have anything to say about it. Maybe that's my dark cloud's silver lining. I don't have to worry about being promoted out and losing you.”

Dev felt warm and good hearing that. She thought about what Jess had said before, about the love thing and she wondered if that was connected to this. What did that mean? She'd said she'd fallen in love. Was that like falling down? “I hope so. I want to stay with you. I don't want to be with anyone else.”

“Not even April or Jason? They're both okay.”

“No.” Dev said, definitively. “I don't think Jason likes me and you're much more attractive than April.”

Jess looked up, and smiled. “You think so, really?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks. I don't usually hear things like that.” Jess admitted. “Especially not from someone I want to hear it from.” She put the remains of her box into the trash compact and remained seated, lacing her fingers together. “Did I freak you out with that falling in love comment before?”

Dev put her trash away and edged a little closer. “No. I don't really understand what that means.” She said, apologetically. “I think it's a good thing. Right?”

“Is it good or bad? I don’t know either.” Jess said. “I think from a job perspective it's not good. You get trained not to think about that, not to get involved in that way with people because it makes you really vulnerable. You know?”

“Um.”

“No, I guess you don't.” Jess sighed. “Doesn’t really matter anyway.”

“It doesn't?”

“They tell you not to do it, warn you about it, but forget to mention you can't do a damn thing about it when it happens.” Jess leaned against her and rested her head against Dev's. “They do their best to suck the souls out of us, Devvie, and then something like this happens, and you realize how much of it is bogus.”

Dev's brows knit a little. “Jess, is this good or bad?”

“What do you think it is?”

“I have no idea.” The bio alt answered honestly.

Jess scratched the bridge of her nose and shrugged lightly. “I like it.” She concluded. “I look at you and it makes me feel good. I really like feeling good. Don't you?”

Dev considered solemnly, then nodded. “Of course.”

“So there we are.” Jess said. “It's good, Dev. Even if it ends up bad for us, it's still good. You get that?”

Now, Dev smiled “I do get that.”

“Good.” Jess just sat there for a bit, leaning against Dev's warm body, letting her mind slip a little. She felt Dev rest her head against her shoulder and something in her just let go, appreciating this human contact in a new and surprising way.

Dev circled her arm with her own and gently rubbed the skin on Jess's forearm in an absent sort of way, her eyes focusing on one of the panels next to them.

Jess focused on the sensation, warm and friendly and tending to make her heart skip a little. She wished it could just continue on, and that they weren't in trouble, weren't running from some new terror, were tucked away in their quarters or in a cave, or...

Or anywhere.

She could feel the thrum of the engines through the frame she was sitting on, images of the recent past shuttling through her internal eye. She took a breath, and a second, and let the past go, consciously shifting her focus to the present, and the near future.

“We have to find out how the bad guys are flying through EMF.” She remarked, after a few minutes. “Otherwise, they can attack us at random, and we can't fight back.”

“Yes.”

“So we need to either capture one of their rigs, or get into the developmental science center.” Jess mused. “If we get one of their trucks, you think you can dissect it?

“Yes.” Dev answered, with surprising confidence. “I have programming on that.”

Jess turned her head and looked closely at her partner. “You do?”

Dev nodded. “On the type of system we saw earlier, and some older models, and also, a bigger one they use for transporting a lot of people.” She said. “I can fly them, or take them apart, whatever it is you need.”

Jess blinked. She looked around the carrier, and then back at Dev. “We don't know how to do that. How did they get the programming for it to give you?” She asked. “We've captured a few, but they program them to short themselves out if one of us boards – just like we do.”

Dev shrugged slightly, looking a touch sheepish. “We don't know, most of the time, where the programming comes from.” She admitted. “But I know the big blocks of it. I've done sims for the other side's stuff.”

“Wow.” Her partner murmured. “I bet your buddy knows where that came from.”

“Doctor Dan?”

Jess nodded. “So you know, there's definitely a reason we need to get him back.”

“Didn't we have a reason before?”

“You and I had a reason.” Jess turned her sharp gaze on Dev. “He's your friend. He was my father's partner. But that wasn't enough for Bain. He wasn't going to make a deal for him, not only because we don't make deals, but because there wasn't anything compelling for him to do it for.”

Dev considered that. “I thought they were friends.” She said, with a touch of sadness in her voice.

Jess shook her head. “I don't think so. I think... I think they respected each other. But finding this out, finding out how that kind of information got processed – he'd want that.”

The bio alt got up and went to her station, settling in her chair and starting a report running on their status. She checked the course they were on, and also the comms for any messages, finding it all quiet, and blank and aware of Jess's eyes watching her. “Does that matter about why we would go help him?”

Jess went back to her seat and dropped into it, folding her hands over her stomach and looking up at the ceiling. “Not to you.” She said. “But I”m a selfish bastard, Dev. I want to go help him, but I want there to be something for me in it too.” She replied with stark honesty. “I break the rules and go after him and end up being locked up or thrown out, it ruins my day, and yours too.”

“I see.”

“Do I sound like an indecisive ass? I feel like one. I tell you I'm gonna go rescue him, damn the consequences and then I back out and go pansy on you until I don't have a choice. I'm such a jerk.” Jess sighed. “I feel like my head's in ten different places.”

Dev turned around in her chair. “I'm sorry you're in such discomfort.” She said. “I'm sure we'll figure out to make everything come out right.”

The comms set buzzed gently, distracting them. Jess reached over and closed the connection for the intercom. “Yeah?”

“Um.” Doug's voice sounded hesitant. “We're picking something up on scan. Looks like one of ours, but not answering squirt.”

Dev turned and lit up the comp board, setting up a long range scan and starting it.

“So you sent out an automatic ident?” Jess asked.

“Yes.”

“Its at the very edge of the band.” Dev reported. “Outline does show as this type of vehicle.”

“Probably Stephen and his team.” Jess said. “We're just passing the edge of North's territory.” She studied her own screen. “Now why isn't he responding to comms, and where are the other two buses?” She coded in her own ident to comms. “BR27006 to incoming, acknowledge.”

There was no response. Jess frowned, and changed frequencies, moving to a reserved high encrypt one. She repeated the message and waited.

Still nothing.

“BR27006 to incoming, acknowledge or stand by for enemy action.” Jess enunciated the words carefully and loudly. “Dev, give me power please, then slow down and hold steady.'

Obediently Dev shunted power to the weapons, and felt the soft rumble as the guns came online and the protective covers slid back, exposing them to the wind outside. She cut their forward momentum and turned, hearing the guns move as she did

“Stand by” The incoming craft said, briefly. “Hold for shortwave.”

Jess kept the hatches open, swinging her aim around and plotting a targeting choice on the craft moving towards them. “Tell our friends to just stay behind us.”

Dev keyed the intercom. “Doug?”

“Here.”

“Jess says to keep behind this vehicle.”

“I'm keeping way behind the direction she's pointing those guns at.” The rookie tech told her. “No worries.”

“Excellent.” Dev studied the clouds they were between, the thick surface off to the left flickering with lightning below. Scan was detecting the disruption from the flashes, but they were far enough away not to be affected. “Do you think those people are correct?”

“They're either correct, or about to try and shove their guns up my ass.” Jess remarked. “Hard to say which one it is at this point in the general miasma of craptasticness today's been.”

Dev turned around and looked at her, then she swiveled back and took a better grip on her throttles. The incoming carrier was now visible, and she felt her heartbeat speed up when it appeared to not be slowing down. “Hm.”

Jess audibly released the safety shields on her triggers and leaned back, bracing her boots against the console. She'd played chicken before, but rarely in such an uncertain situation. She took a breath and let it out, then focused on her target, looking past the screens and past the front window as the carrier came into range.

Her fingers tightened.

“Incoming request on shortwave sideband six, Jess.” Dev said, calmly. “BR27004 channel setup acknowledge.”

The comms crackled, and Jess let her hands relax, but not completely.

“Jess?” Stephen's voice came over the intercom. “That you?”

“It's me.” Jess answered. “You want to travel with us before the storm backs up and kicks our asses?” She asked. “You know what happened?”

“I know what happened to North.” Stephen's voice sounded grim.

“It might have just happened to Base 10” Jess told him, in a quiet tone. “Just got out of the area in time.”

Silence. “Oh shit.” Stephen said. “That's why I can't get a squirt through. I thought it was just met.”

“We're going to the pole station. Have to get a plan going. Bain said they've got something that lets then fight in met.. I think it's something that makes met worse.” Jess said.

“Bain got out? Figures.”

Jess shrugged, even if he couldn't see it.

“No sense going to North. Every thing inside's burned to a crisp and it stinks from dead bodies.” Stephen said. “Pole sounds good. Any clues what the new tech is?”

Jess started to answer, then she paused, and keyed the mute. “You got any ideas?” She asked Dev. “What could fry all that stuff?”

Dev was watching her in the mirror, as she piloted the carrier on their original course, at a very slow speed. “It might be useful to see what it did. I can see if it matches any programming.”

Jess nodded. “Stephen – let's take a quick tour of North. See what we're up against.”

“If you want. Hope you haven't had lunch.” Stephen answered. “Follow me. Got the two buses with me sitting on top of the next ridge waiting.”

His carrier pulled ahead, and curved to the left, and Dev changed course to follow him.

“Let's see where this takes us.” Jess capped her triggers and pushed the targeting system back off it's axis. “And get the whose the boss knock down drag out over with.”

Dev glanced behind her, brows contracted.

“You'll see. Want to make a few cred? Bet on me.” Jess leaned back and closed her eyes, content to let the crosscurrents carry them for now.

Bet on her. Dev increased power to the engines and pulled the comp pad over, typing in the statement and waiting for it to regurgitate it's meaning.

**

Seeing North base was shocking. Jess had come up next to her and they were both looking out the front wraparound windows.

“Holy shit.” Jess exhaled. The pinnacle and mountainside that they'd been to only a week prior was now shattered and blackened, the stone cracked away and a third of the rock wall collapsed down the side of the slope and littering the valley at the bottom.

Where they'd entered the bay there was only a smoking hole, gray mist still emitting from it.

“I”m getting a complete null on scan.” Dev said, in subdued tone.

“I bet.” Jess was leaning against her chair. “See if you can get the bus in near the entrance to the bay. Shine some light in there.” She held on as the carrier dipped and dropped in altitude, the powerful front lights coming on and splashing against the smoke dulled granite.

It was creepy. Dev approached carefully, slowing their speed to almost nothing as she drifted in front of the bay, and the interior became visible. “Oh.” The bio alt murmured, seeing the destruction inside. “That is not good.”

Jess let out a long breath. “No. Get closer.”

Dev did, easing the carrier into the gaping opening. Inside she could see carriers in complete wreckage, and lumps on the floor completely black that she suspected were people. “Its like everything touched a live wire.” She commented. “I saw that happen up in the creche once.” She added. “They were moving the leads from the solar arrays and one of the batteries.. no one really knew what happened but it was like that. All black.”

“Yeah.” Jess agreed, reaching over to key comms. “Stephen, it like this everywhere?”

“Yeah.” He responded shortly. “Worse inside. Central ops looked like a bomb went off in it.”

Jess stared at the interior of the cavern in near disbelief. “Dev, go ahead and land. I want to get a look firsthand at this.”

Dev inched the carrier in and then rotated a half turn, putting the edge of the craft over the ledge. “I don't want to go further. There's a lot of debris. Can you get out now?”

Jess fastened the catches on her suit and seated her weapons, then she triggered the hatch. It popped open and she stopped in her tracks, blasted by a gust of stench that took her breath away. “Ugh.” She glanced back at Dev, whose face was scrunched in an expression of distaste. “Sorry.” She stepped onto the ledge and keyed the hatch shut, hearing the air handlers cycle behind her.

Jess had seen a lot in her time. She'd seen dead people of all types, many made that way by her own hand, but the charred, crisped black remains she was carefully stepping over were horrible even to her hardened senses. A flash of this cavern not a week ago when they visited appeared in her mind's eye, busy and full of techs and bio alts, all going about their business as they had for years.

Now there wasn't a sound around her save the faint rattling of bits of rock falling out of the walls. Jess turned on her light and moved further inside, coming up next to what was left of a big

transport, probably the largest craft assigned to North. It was charred like everything else was, the walls blown out and panels melted into nothing but hard lumpy slag.

There had been a tech inside working. His burned body was half in and half out of the service bay, testing probe still clenched inside his fist.

No warning. Jess picked up a piece of the burned panel and examined it, flashing her light on the tracings inside. It meant little to her, but she kept as she walked on, intending on showing it to Dev.

Everywhere she looked was horror. As she stood in the center of the cavern and slowly turned, she noticed a faint pattern on the floor – lines that angled out from a more or less central point not far from where she was standing. Jess moved over and set her boots over the point, looking to her right and left, and seeing the destruction flaring out on all sides.

Something had blown up from where she was standing, and caused the damage. She could imagine the stark terror of the few who'd gotten out, direly wounded, leaving all their colleagues and friends behind.

Interesting perspective, since they were so often the ones bringing the terror not facing it.

Jess turned around and started heading back to the carrier, waiting patiently at the edge of the cavern for her. She'd already gotten used to the stench, and as she moved closer to the opening she spotted something against the inner wall. Curious, she diverted her steps and walked in front of the humming carrier, patting it's nose as she moved past and played her light along the inside rock surface.

Nothing very remarkable, just a tool box. Jess stood next to it and studied it. Just a plain metal casing with drawers and cabinets, slightly dented and dinged with use.

But altogether strange in it's whole, un-scorched plain-ness the only item in the cavern that has escaped the blast.

Jess studied it for a long moment. Then she took hold of the handle of it and started back around the carrier, dragging it behind her. As she got to the hatch it opened, and she boosted the case inside, then climbed after it. “Lets go Dev. Faster we get under cover, the better.”

**

It was full dark by the time they got to the old station. It was quiet, they hadn't seen anything on scan for hours, and Dev had dipped below the lower cloud layer and flown with nothing but gray over her, and white below for quite some time.

Jess had spent the time examining the box she'd dragged on board, sitting cross legged on the floor next to it as she patiently took it apart piece by piece.

“Jess?” Dev called quietly. “We're almost there.”

Jess hoisted herself to her feet and came up to the pilots station, still holding an adjustment tool in her hand. “Yeah, we are.” She said. “Look at that place. Nothing but ice.”

“Really?” Dev studied the wire map, showing a low, craggy outline. “It's built from ice?”

“Built from ice.” Her partner confirmed. “Back in the old days, they built it after the end times, cause they figured nothing was going to end up habitable and it was a last chance bunker for the governmental big shots that are now long gone.” She said. “Interforce took it over after that all ended, and for a while it was a training center. Then they moved the school out to Denali where at least they had elevations to work with.”

“I see.” Dev murmured. The wiremap showed almost nothing but the outline, scan reported only ice. “There' s not anything operating there.”

“No, we shut it down.” Jess said. “Remains to be seen if we can start it back up again.” She put her hand on the back of Dev's chair. “If not, we can land the carriers in a circle and make a rough camp, but I'd rather be able to charge bats. They sunk a heat sump a mile deep up here.”

Dev started a slow descent. A glance at the comp showed her a chilling temperature outside, and the darkness they flew through was complete save the faint glow from their engines. She wished

she'd brought her lined suit with her, and after that, she realized it was possible it no longer existed.

That her whole space no longer existed, including the one thing she'd brought, her book. She felt very sad thinking of that. “Where do you want to land?”

“Good question.” Jess enlarged the wiremap with a swipe of her fingers. “Try here.” She pointed at a flat area on the left of the structure. “Once you get to this point, turn the lights on.”

Dev trimmed the engines and started up the landing jets, coasting over the blurry white surface to the spot Jess had indicated, slowing to hover as she turned on the bright lower lights.

Instantly, the area blared into reflective relief, a relatively level ice field covered in a layer of fresh snow. It was large, and very desolate looking, and Dev selected a spot near the wall of the structure to land on, delicately letting the extended skids settle and leaving the landing jets activated until she was sure the surface was going to bear the carrier's weight. There was one slight lurch, then the craft seemed stable, and after a pause, she shut things down save the exterior lights.

Around them, the other carriers were landing, and in a moment the area was lit up brightly with five sets of lamps as they settled around in a rough circle.

“Glad I forgot to take these out of here” Jess had the equipment case open, and she pulled out their heavy parkas and ice boots.

“Yes.” Dev agreed wholeheartedly as she exchanged her flight boots for the heavier ones and stood up to shrug into the thick jacket. She dropped the portable comp into one pocket, and her diagnostic scanner in the other, and fastened up the catches as Jess moved towards the hatch.

She weaponed up and slapped the latch, waiting for the door to open and the ramp to extend.

A solid, cold, startling blast of air came in, and Dev immediately got her hood up and the flap over her mouth as she drew in a breath and felt the inside of her nose freezing.

“Brr.” Jess went down the ramp, bringing up her own hood. “Hope like hell we can boot this place.”

Dev got her gloves on and followed her partner, blinking as she felt the chill against her eyeballs. She paused to extend the spikes on her boots then advanced over the ice, moving towards the center of the open lit space to join the rest of the agent teams.

As they closed in, she recognized Stephen Bock, and then the other two teams – one the newcomers Mike Arias and his partner, and the other an older pair she wasn't sure she remembered the names of. Doug and April came up on their right hand side, having landed just behind them.

“Jess.” Bock nodded at her.

“Hello Stephen.” Jess had her hands in her pockets, her breath a steady stream of fog. “First things first, we should see if we can commission this place. Let the techs get their hands on the gear.” She finished talking, then paused, waiting for a response.

There was a little silence. Then Bock exhaled. “Sounds good to me. Let's go.” He nodded at the two pairs with him. “Place hasn't been used in years. No telling what we'll find.”

Jess started towards the structure, and Dev fell in at her heels. The rest of the group followed, and they climbed a small hillock of ice towards a rounded arch packed with snow.

“I'll get that.” Mike pulled out his small blaster and steadied it, moving a step past Jess and firing carefully at the doorway, melting the ice in the center of the opening. The pale blue light of the weapon disappeared in a fog of vaporized crystals and after a few minutes the doorway was exposed.

Jess moved forward. “Thanks, Mike.” She examined the door and touched the panel, but it was dead and didn't produce even the faintest twitch of a response.

“Dead?” Stephen edged in next to her. “You ever been here?”

“No.” Jess took a step back. “My father was.” She gestured him to get out of the way. “So let me see how much we're going to have to destroy before we get in here. Dev?”

“Yes.” Dev wormed her way over.

“Take the rest of the wrenchers and go over that lump there, that's where the plant is. See what you can do with it.”

“Yes.” Dev backed out and started across the ice. “Please follow me.” She told addressed the other techs. “We have a task.”

“Right behind you.” Doug tugged his hood a little tighter. “Holy crap it's cold here.”

Mike's partner Chester was right behind him, along with the older tech, a man named Oscar. They all climbed over the snow drift and down into the next hollow, which seemed to be a semi projected alcove.

The snow came up to Dev's thighs, and she plowed through it gamely, moving across the bowl towards the wall of the enclosure. “I am not sure using a blaster on this is correct.” She said as they came to the power plant, encased in a solid wall of snow and ice.

“Maybe on the outside layer.” Chester offered.

“Get too close and it'll break it's bits.” Oscar was standing with his arms crossed, observing the surface. He removed his light from his belt and shone it on the wall, shaking his head a little. “Anyone got an ice ax?”

The techs all looked at each other. Then Dev cleared her throat. “I think we might. We took an ice kit on our last mission and I think it's still in there.” She turned and started back and after a moment, Doug plowed after her.

Chester pulled out his hand blaster and set it on it's lowest setting “I'll see how much I can trim off.”

“I'll start here.” Oscar moved to the other end. “This is all so fucked up the most normal thing I seen is that bio alt tech today.” He shook his head. “Now we get to try and shelter inside an ice ball.”

“Not having a great first month of service myself.” Chester carefully started working down the edge of the structure. “Maybe I should have stuck to oyster harvesting back on Rainier Island.”

**

Dev keyed the hatch open and ducked inside, glad to be out of the cold wind for a moment. She waited for Doug to follow her and then palmed the door closed. “It seems we're in for a lot of difficulty.”

“You can say that again.” Doug pushed his hood back. “I figured three of us trying to melt that ice back there would mean at least one of us losing a finger.”

That made Dev chuckle a little as she opened the big equipment locker and dug out the ice axes she and Jess had used in the white. She handed one back to Doug and took the second for herself. “Jess said in the worst condition we could move the carriers together and make a shelter that way.”

“Well.” Doug hefted the ax. “At least no one's likely to go looking for us up here. Last thing I'd wanna see is some death ray from the other side coming hunting for me. That base was ugly.”

“Yes.” Dev tightened her hood again. “It makes me feel a lot of discomfort to think about our place looking like that.”

Doug was briefly silent. “Yeah me too.” He said. “I hadn't been there long but it was okay, you know?”

“Yes” Dev turned and headed for the door. “I feel the same way.”

Doug followed her out and they started across the bowl, where snow was starting to drift in flurries outlined in the work lights from the carriers. “You do?” He asked. “Not to be a jerk or anything, but I never met any bio's that cared about much before.”

Dev thought about that as she walked, the ice crunching under her boots. “Well.” She blinked against the cold. “They teach you not to show a lot. It makes natural borns feel discomfort. But we do.” She paused. “I do. Jess told me it's all right to say that.”

“Huh.” Doug tugged his hood a little closer. “ On the other hand you're the first one I've ever talked to for more than like ten seconds.” He admitted. 'I’s kinda weird.”

“Well.” Dev climbed over the ice hill. “It's strange for me too.”

They reached the wall and both Chester and Oscar moved aside to make room for them. Dev took hold of her ax and studied the surface, selecting a spot where Chester had been burning a groove and starting to chop at it. With all four of them together it cut the chill down and soon she was completely absorbed in the effort to expose the power inverters.

She hoped Jess was having good success as well.

**

“Okay, that's open.” Jess clipped the light to her hood and pulled her gloves off, grimacing as she eased the entry panel from it's pocket and turned it over. “We get in there and they get the juice flowing, maybe we can figure out what the hell we're going to do.”

“Thought you had that figured out already” Stephen was patiently chipping the ice from the door edge with a screwdriver.

Jess chuckled dryly.

April and Mike were clearing ice from the front of the structure and Oscar's partner Carlos was in his carrier, keeping a scan running to make sure they didn't get surprised.

All under Jess's direction, which Bock hadn't made a move to countermand yet. Jess wondered briefly why, then decided to just take her good fortune where she found it.

She shook her head and returned her attention to the panel, which now under the warmth of her hand had revealed the tracing of it's circuitry.

Very old. Jess breathed gently on it, studying the etched pathways. “Okay.” She said. “Stephen, give me your insignia.”

“Huh?”

“Give me your insignia.” Jess repeated, slowly. “The thing on your collar.”

“I know what my damned insignia is.” He unfastened the throat flap on his coat and fished beneath it. “What the hell do you need it for?”

'You never really took any of the tech ops classes, did you.” Jess took the insignia from him and bent her head over the tracings. “Or have you just forgotten it all already?”

“Don't be an asshole, Jess.”

“I'm not, for a change.” She delicately touched the edge of one insignia post to one trace, and licked her lips, half closing her eyes as she touched the second to another.

Nothing.

“Saw the squirt from Bain when he bumped you.” Bock spoke up unexpectedly. “Kind of burned my ass.”

“Wasn't my choice.” Jess tried another combination, with an equal lack of success. “And it didn't do me a damn bit of good seeing as they torched 10.” She studied the board. “Matter of fact I didn't even officially accept.”

“False modesty?”

Jess sighed. “Now who's being an asshole?” She tried a third trace, and paused, then selected another at random and touched it.

Her hand twitched, as a residual jolt went through the card, and she almost screwed it up. But it held long enough for a low, anticlimactic groaning click to sound in the door next to her, though it didn't move. “Pry it.”

Bock got the edge of the screwdriver into the gap he'd been chopping and put pressure against it, leaning his muscular body against the end of the driver as Jess let the circuit card rest against it's holder and turned to help him. She picked up a bit of metal they'd pried loose and went to a knee, jamming it into the ridge and shoving hard against it.

With both of them prying, the door moved an inch, reluctantly.

“Hey that's progress.” Bock grunted “Nice.”

“Larcenous youth.” Jess reseated her makeshift pry bar and leaned on it again. “I used to break into storage silos at school.”

He snorted, then wryly chuckled. “Figures.”

The door opened a bit more, and then they could get a grip on the edge of it with cold stiffened fingers. “Mike. April. C'mere.” Jess called to the two rookies, who joined them at once. “Grab this thing and pull.”

Four sets of hands gripped the door and hauled backwards, metal grudgingly giving way to powerful bodies as the door screeched open and thumped against the ice.

“Least we'll get out of the wind.” Steven sighed. “Lead on, Jesslyn.”

Jess obligingly drew her blaster and set her light to high, then cautiously stepped inside.

Wasn't really much to see. The facility was a series of long, corrugated metal boxes set end to end to make corridors all covered by tons of ice and snow. Containers, Jess remembered they were called, which had once held stores of whatever stacked on a cargo ship or carried on trains.

They were rusty and the air smelled rancid, but she kept moving on with the other three behind her. They came to a cross corridor, the square blackness extending to either direction. Far off, they could hear faint bangs and scrapes, echoing softly in the darkness.

“Hope that's the tinkers.” April said.

“Me too.” Carlos muttered. “This place is complete ancient bad news.”

Jess moved on past the side corridors and continued down the main one. Another five minutes walking and they entered a big, dark area that seemed to be six or so of the containers all welded together. There were consoles on shelves welded to the walls, but nothing was live. Not even the faintest hint of power was evident in the center.

“I guess this is ops.” Stephen remarked, turning around in a circle. “Or something.”

“Main control room for the facility.” Jess said “I remember seeing the plans for this place somewhere.”

“Not going to be useful to us without power.” Mike remarked. “Could we power this place off the carriers?”

Jess went over to one of the consoles and touched it. The shelf was clean and the control surfaces looked in reasonable condition. “My tech can probably power it off three salmon and a glow worm but we draw all the power from the carriers we don't have power we need to go get that weapon.”

“At least it's warmer in here.” April said. “Can I ask? Does anyone really know what happened to our base?”

Jess undid her jacket and folded her arms over her chest. “You saw the same thing I did.”

“Which was?” Stephen asked. “Since I didn't see any of it?? He looked at April in question.

The new agent cleared her throat. “We were coming back from Drake's Bay.”

Bock swung around to face Jess. “ You giving guided tours now?”

“My mother died.” Jess answered flatly. “I attended her processing.” She added. “Bain mandated I take an escort.”

He lifted a hand. “Sorry.” He said, gruffly. “Didn't know.”

April studied him with a dour expression. “ We noticed that standard status messages weren't getting acknowledged, and then we encountered two enemy targets heading east.”

“Two? What kind?” Stephen asked.

“TK300's.” Jess commented briefly.

Bock folded his arms over his chest. “Just flying in our airspace??” His tone was incredulous.

“We chased them, and when we were on top of them, they blew themselves up.” April stated. “At least.” She conceded. “That's what we think happened.”

“That makes no sense.” Bock frowned.

“Not to us either.” Jess said. “I got a hit on their sideboard and next thing I knew scan was showing a blowup. We just got clear in time.”

'They were hiding something.” Arias suggested. “Maybe this new weapon?”

“Maybe.” April walked over to one of the consoles and studied it, directing her light on it's surface. “But if that was the case, why did they attack the citadel in force? Didn't they fear the same thing from them?”

“Storm was over them.” Jess was standing, just staring off into the shadows. “They were flying free in and out of it. Must be tied in to whatever this new thing is.”

“You sure of that?”

Jess felt the raw prickle of temper rise at the skepticism in Bock's voice. “I'm sure I saw at least six TK300's flying through a storm front coming across the range. “ She said. “We could feel the EMF disruption. Dev was adjusting for it.”

“Oh, the wonder child.” Bock snorted a little.

“We felt it too.” April spoke up quietly. “And with all due respect, Mr. Bock, given the crap we've been through today no one needs to be slighted here.”

Jess had turned and felt her back arch under her jacket, but relaxed a bit at the words. She gave April a brief grin, and then turned back to the console. Hopefully Stephen would stop being an ass and rubbing her temper the wrong way.

They were in the field, after all, and all kinds of things happened out here.

Bock gave April a sour look, but refrained from commenting. He walked over and joined Jess at the wall. “Well if that's how it is..” He said, in an undertone. “You collecting supplicants already?”

Jess turned her head and looked him full in the eye. “Why not?” She answered softly. “She's apparently a hell of a lot smarter than you are.” She knew he heard the slight rasp in her voice, and he took a step back away from her, his hands coming out of his pockets and lifting up between them.

“Don't get crazy on me, Jess.” He told her. “It's not the time or place.”

“Take your own advice and shut the fuck up then.”

Footsteps behind them made them both turn, as a light entered followed by a short, slight figure in arctic gear. “Hello.” Dev removed the cover over her mouth. “We have revealed enough of the structure to determine it's functionality.”

“And?” Jess moved closer to her partner, watching the grave, pale eyes focus on her. “D'ja fix it already”

Dev produced a brief grin. “It will require a power boost. I have instructed Doug to bring his carrier over so we can use it to restart the batteries.” She said. “However, I do not know if resuming the heat exchange will allow all of this equipment to function. It has stage six degradation.”

“That's pretty bad.” Mike commented. “My grad sim was to recommission one of these old stations. Never did get it all the way right.”

Dev nodded. “It's not optimal. I would like to suggest that you vacate this facility while power is applied. I do not know what result it will have on these systems.”

“So you think it's going to blow everything up?” Jess only just kept from reaching up to push the pale hair out of her partner's eyes. Her hand and arm twitched, in fact, and she clenched her fingers into a fist to keep herself still, surprised at how much effort it took.

“I don't know, but I don't want to take a chance having you be in here.” Dev answered honestly and loud enough for everyone to hear her. “It would be better if you were outside.”

“Fair enough.” Jess agreed. “All right people, let's go out side and see what trouble we can cause.” She put her hand on Dev's shoulder and steered her back towards the entrance, clearly expecting the rest of them to follow.

April and Mike promptly did, turning their backs on Stephen who waited almost until they were no longer visible before he reluctantly started moving. “Fucking ridiculous.” He muttered, as he cleared the entrance and pulled his light from his pocket. “Absolutely fucking ridiculous.”

**

Jess used the back of the ice ax to tap down the stake clenched lightly in one gloved fist. There was now a roughly made tarp over the outer panel, protecting it from the snowfall that was slowly burying everything else.

Under the tarp Dev was kneeling with Oscar next to her, connecting up a set of power leads on the laboriously cleared external interfaces and behind them, parked precariously with it's forward skids on the ground and the rear ones up on the snow ridge was Doug and April's carrier.

Oscar picked up the leads and walked over to the front of the carrier, which was also providing a convenient shield for the wind and snow. Doug was already in front and opening an access hatch, running a scanner over the interior.

“Better hurry up before this thing freezes.” He told Oscar. “Holy crap it's cold.”

Stephen had retreated to the carrier he'd piloted alone, but Mike and April were standing next to Jess, their cold suits fastened all the way up and eye shields in place. Inside the suits it was bearable, despite the sixty below zero temperatures, but any exposed skin suffered immediately.

Dev stood up and stuffed her now gloved hands into her pockets, coming over to stand next to Jess. “The ingress is prepared.” She said, her voice muffled by her face cover. “Application of sixteen point five volts across the terminus will stimulate a response.”

Oscar got the leads connected then turned, giving them all a nod.

“Go on, Doctor Dev.” Jess bumped her with a hip. “Give the sign. Let's see what we're going to get out of this so we can either go inside and get warm, or get into our buses.”

Dev hopped in place a time or two then she trudged over to where Oscar and Doug were standing. “Go ahead.” She said. “Please make sure it's exactly sixteen point five.”

“Roger that.” Doug tuned his comp, and pressed a small relay inside the hatch, resulting in a slight whine and thump, as the leads went from leaden gray to purple, and power surged across them lighting the snow and then hitting the power panel of the facility.

“Cease.” Dev said.

The purple faded, and then for a moment it was all dark and gray again. The wind blew a gust of snow into their little alcove, dusting them all with a covering of ice.

Then with a crackling bang that made them all jump, the power panel came to life, and a second later, lights came on and outlined them all in the old fashioned green tinted glow.

That was followed by a series of bangs and thumps, and a moment later than that, a puff of discharged air came rolling out of the entrance behind them spraying dust and ice crystals almost to the back of the open space.

“Interesting.” Dev commented.

“Glad we weren't inside the damn thing.” Jess observed.”Wouldn't like a faceful of that crap.”

Oscar was studying a hand scanner. “Power readings coming up.” He said, briefly “Looks like things are trying to boot. Good job, Dev.” He glanced at Mike. “Want to see if your sim'd work?”

“Lets' all move inside.” Jess noted her partner's shivering. “Nice work, Devvie.” She casually draped her arm over Dev's shoulders, and started towards the now lit entrance.

Stephen met them as they reached it, hunching his shoulders in his parka as he entered the squared off portal after Jess and Dev. “One good thing. No one's around here for a thousand miles.” He commented, as they trooped down the hall. “If any of this comes up, we can get a high level long range scan going from here.”

“We can open a channel with home base too.” Jess said. “Let them know whats going on.”

Stephen eyed her. “Let everyone know how screwed up we are?”

“This isn't some blown mission, Stephen.” Jess felt her body relaxing as she felt the air moving in the hallways, already warmer than the outside. “Two bases are blanked. It's not like Bain doesn't know.”

They entered the central space and it already looked far more friendly. Panels were showing some kind of life, and there was an audible hum around them.

“Okay.” Mike pushed his hood down and moved to one of the panels. “Let me see if I remember any of this from class.”

Oscar sat down at one of the scan consoles, and the rest of them drifted around, getting a better look at what was, to them, ancient technology.

But there was power, and a very gradual warming of the air, and that was all to the good.

There was an awkward moment of silence, then Jess drew in a breath and straightened. “Okay.” She said. “Let's split up and see what we've got to work with here. Check for stores, and weapons. I doubt anythings going to be useful, but you never know. We're going to have to stay here long enough to put a plan together to insert.”

It was the tipping moment, and she knew it. Stephen could choose to challenge her at this point, or follow her lead. If he challenged her, she also had a choice – to step back, or fight. He'd gotten the note from Bain, and knew the old man's intentions.

But even if he hadn't, her intentions were to take command and if she had to fight him, there was no doubt in her mind she would.

“Sounds reasonable to me.” Bock said, somewhat anticlimactically. “I'll check the central stores.” He pointed at the back of the central space, opposite the door they came in, then headed towards it, shrugging his hood back.

Aw. Jess actually had to admit to a guilty sense of disappointment. April and Doug had started off without comment towards the front corridors, leaving her and Dev standing in the middle of the control center together.

Dev gave the room a speculative look, then she tipped her head back and looked up at her partner. “If the precipitation continues the carriers are going to be covered.” She commented. “I don’t think that would be optimal.”

“Me either. Lets go look.” Jess indicated the front entrance. “When this place was commissioned, those suckers didn't exist so they didn't build shelter for them.”

**

Outside, they found the snow slowing down, and the carriers only buried up to their skids. Jess studied them, then turned to her partner. “Doesn't look like that much of a problem yet.”

“No.” Dev agreed. “I really didn't think it was, I just wanted to talk to you and didn't want everyone else listening.”

Jess looked at her in surprised delight. “For real?”

“Yes.” Dev smiled a little.

“You going to tell me I'm good looking again?” Her partner asked hopefully.

“If you want me to, of course.” Dev said. “But what I wanted to say first is, that man Bock seems to me to be incorrect.”

“Ah.” Jess stuck her hands in her pockets. “What do you mean by incorrect?” She glanced across the now lit central opening, where the carriers were parked in their orderly circle. She could see the internal lights on in Carlos and Oscar's bus, where the older agent was keeping watch until they got the base systems working.

Dev thought about the question. “He does not wish you well.” She said, slowly. “I think he wants to cause you discomfort.”

“He's jealous.” Jess nodded. “He heard about Bain wanting to promote me. He wanted that job.”

“But that's not your fault.”

“No, of course it isn't, but he not man enough to be mad at Bain and I'm within reach.” Jess sighed. “I didn't care when he was promoted. Not sure why he cares that I am. He was going to get a directorship at North when he rebuilt it.”

“That's not really what I meant.” Dev frowned. “I think he wants to do bad things.” She said. “I get a bad feeling about him.” She clarified.

Jess crossed her arms and leaned her shoulder against the metal entranceway. “Bad things.. as in, you think he's on the wrong side?”

The bio alt looked disturbed. “I'm not really sure what I mean, but something... maybe it's programming? Tells me not to trust him.”

“Ah.” Jess straightened. “Okay that's different.” She considered, reaching a hand out to capture an errant snowflake. She cupped it in her hand and showed it to Dev. “Every one of them's unique.”

“Like you.” Her partner said.

“Like you.” Jess smiled in response, then sobered. “Stephen was the one who told me about your project.” She said. “He kept nudging me. I wondered... but then I forgot about that after we met.”

Dev watched her with alert eyes.

“We kind of got distracted by you... the whole issue of trust and our techs and the leak kind of got pushed under the rug.” Jess mused. “I forgot about Stephen. He was all ready to escort me to the shuttle, too.”

“The day we got there?”

“Yup.”

Dev caught a snowflake herself and examined it. “I don't think the man Bain trusted him.”

“I don't know about.. “ Jess paused, as a memory surfaced. “Huh. When we met on the shuttle...” She remembered the moment, Bain seemingly sure if they left Stephen alone long enough he'd go and tell... go and tell what? To who? Bricker? Or someone else? “Maybe.” She murmured.

“At the first lunch thing we had, he seemed okay.” Dev said. “But now, he's saying incorrect things about me.” She observed. “Remember he spoke sternly to the agent Sandy?”

Oh. Crap. Jess gazed intently at her partner. “You're right.”

“I don’t understand why it's different now. I didn't change.”

“No, you didn't. But.” Jess tapped her on the nose. “That was before you showed your stuff. Maybe as long as he thought you were just an experiment... one he thought would fail... you were okay, but now he's scared of what you can do.”

“But why would he be? He's already in charge.”

And that was true. Jess shook her head. “I don't know. But anyway, lets go back in side so your nose stops turning blue and see what we can find stashed away in this place. Probably nothing but long frozen whale crap but you never know.” She put her hand on Dev's back. “I'll keep your idea in mind though. He's being a prick, no doubt about it.”

Dev exhaled in some relief, glad she'd told her thoughts to her partner. The uneasiness she'd felt around Bock had seemed quite strange to her and she now felt much better having expressed the oddness to Jess. “What's a prick?”

Jess chuckled. “It's slang for a male sexual organ.” She steered Dev down the right hand side corridor as they headed back down towards the control center.

“I see.” Dev commented. “Why would you say he was acting like a male sexual organ? They showed us vid of that as part of the sex class. He wasn't going up and down.” She said. “At least, not that I could tell.”

Jess closed her eyes and stifled a laugh.

Dev wasn't really sure what was funny. She shrugged and studied the walls instead, spotting a door in one of them. “Is that a storage space?”

“Yeah. Stand back.” Jess didn't bother with the archaic locking system. She drew her blaster and shot the hatch with casual accuracy, leaning back and kicking the door open with one booted foot. A puff of dusty air emerged into the hallway, and she waited for it to clear before she poked her head inside and shone her light around. “Nothing.”

They continued down the hallway, discovering another corridor at the end that was set at right angles. Everything was lit with the weak, green glow and it made distinguishing things difficult. There were old signs on the walls, and Jess let her fingers trail over them as she walked, feeling the roughness of the corrugated metal walls.

The words on the signs were almost meaningless. Jess wasn't sure what most of the signs were for, save the ones that marked muster stations, and one that seemed to have something to do with weapons. “There's another door. Lets try it.” She studied the roll down hatch, then aimed and fired at what appeared to be a latch at the bottom center of it.

The door abruptly let loose and flew up, sending Jess hurtling backwards, her arms wrapping around Dev and hauling them both against the far wall.

With a boom, the door hit the roof, and a thick cloud of rusty dust invaded the hallway, bringing a taste of dry, rancid age on the back of the tongue.

“Pah.” Jess cautiously looked around, her back turned towards the door as she set her body between Dev and the opening.

“That was exciting.” Dev commented mildly, apparently content to stay where she was, wrapped up in Jess's arms. She really didn’t think the dust was dangerous, but she had no intention of protesting.

“Sorry.” Jess straightened up and released her, dusting off her jacket. “Wasn't sure what that was.” She cleared her throat and turned to study the now open, apparently inoffensive door. She walked back over to it and turned her light on, making show of inspecting it carefully.

Dev joined her, putting one arm around her and giving her a quick hug with it. “Thank you for ensuring my safety.” She said. 'What's in here?”

“Good question.” Jess edged inside. “Let's find out.” It was definitely a storage chamber of some kind, the inside walls were lined with locked cabinets, and plastic boxes were lined up on pallets up and down a narrow space with two aisles. “You check the containers, I'll open those cabinets.”

Dev willingly went to the first one, studying it intently. On the top there was a piece of plas, but the characters on it had long faded off. The container was closed by a hasp and a lock, and she drew out her multiple tool and applied it to opening the device.

Programming was strong here As she lifted the lock and held the tool in her other hand, she felt the patterning driving her motions and she inserted a small, thin probe into the bottom of the cylinder, a picture coming strongly to her of what the inside looked like.

A moment later, and it was open. She removed the lock and opened up the container, shining her light inside.

“Did you just pick that lock?” Jess asked, from across the chamber.

Dev nodded. “Yes. There are some kind of frozen units in here.”

“Frozen units everywhere.” Jess joined her and looked inside. “Ah hah!” She hauled out one of the packages, knocking it against the edge of the container. “Rations.”

Dev picked one up and looked at it. “Quite old.”

“Probably completely useless.” Her partner agreed. “But we'll take some back. You never know.” She closed the container and went back to the cabinet. “C'mere and pick this one. I'm lousy at it. I'd rather use my gun.” She held the cabinet door still as Dev applied her skills to it. “And there's armament in there that could ruin both our days.”

“Yes.”

“Been a long enough day already.”

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Two hours later, they were gathered back in central ops. Cases had been dragged into make work tables, and two portable heaters had been located and were adding their warmth to the room. Oscar had gotten the comms systems online, and he was patiently reworking the radio bands to match the ones currently in use.

Parkas were strewn about the space, draped over boxes and hanging on console edges, the dark black and green of standard jumpsuits standing out against the glare of the phosphorescent light and the dusty gray of the consoles.

“We got power up to everything?” Jess entered from the corridor, an old style brown pack on her back that she unloaded onto one of the boxes.

“Yes.” Dev looked around from the control console she was seated under, her head halfway inside the metal structure. “There are a lot of ruined components.” She added mournfully. “It's not very optimal.”

“No, I would guess not.” Jess peered inside the pack. “Okay, so I dug up enough of these things to give everyone a feed if we can figure out how to heat some water.”

“There's a dispenser in that second chamber.” April spoke up. “I turned it on when I went through – it might have done something since then.” She came over and peered at the packs' contents. “What are those?”

“Rations. Old style.” Jess held one up. “Really old style. They used to dehydrate cooked stuff and zap it into these bags. You add boiling water to them and they become something.”

April looked skeptical. “Really?” She examined one. “All these years.. you sure they're not just dried seal barf??

“Not sure at all.” Jess readily confessed. “But all I've got in my bus is two days worth of fish rolls so if we can use some of this stuff it'll make life easier.”

“Yeah, us too.” April agreed. “Mike, did you take a bigger stock?”

Arias was paging through a personal pad on the desk, his jaw resting on his fist. “Got five days worth on board.” He said. “We were going to make a stop in Quebec.”

Jess paused with her hands on the pack and looked around. “Where'd Stephen go off to?” She asked April casually. “Thought he came back here.”

“He was just here.” The younger agent replied. “Said something about starting up the backup generators, maybe charging the carriers off it.”

“Ah.” Jess picked up the pack. “Well, that'll be useful.” She headed towards the bare, half lit convenience chamber in the section past the control center. “Might as well make myself useful too.” She added. “Want to give me a hand?”

“Sure.” April caught up to her as they reached the chamber. “You have any idea what the plans going to be yet?”

Jess put the pack down and examined the dispenser. It had dusty lights lit on the front and she pressed the hot water tab, jumping back when it started sputtering and spewing liquid everywhere. “First, we let the corps know what the story is.” She said. “Then, we find a hop point closer to the target.”

“In the white?” April removed one of the food packs and fitted the spigot to the small plas intake valve on it and carefully triggered it to fill. “So is your theory the new thing is dangerous when it's mixed with met?”

Jess filled a second pack, and set it aside to do whatever it was it was supposed to do. “That line turns red when it's ready, according to comp.”

“Uh huh.” April retrieved more rations.

“I think they've got the advantage when it's mixed with met, or those two wouldn’t have blown themselves up when we caught them. They were two on two, no reason not to turn and fight if they had the better weapon.” Jess agreed. “Not sure where the jump point needs to be yet – but probably.”

“Shorter route.” April mentioned.

“I found this too.” Jess pulled out a stack of cups and some packets. “I don’t know where these guys hid all this stuff, but that's freeze dried coffee.”

“Coffee?” April's eyes opened wider in surprise. “I had an elder who claimed he tasted that once. No one ever believed him.”

“Excuse me.”

They both turned to find Dev entering the space, the bio alt's face smudged with dust. “Hey Devvie.” Jess said. “Want to try some coffee with us?”

“Actually, some water would be good.” Dev demurred. “I heard there was a dispenser in here?” She wiped her hands off on a cloth clipped to her belt “This air is very dry. A little like the creche.”

Jess filled a cup with cold water for her, and handed it over. “Between snow and the desal, they always had plenty of water here. Just like we did at the base.” She said. “I found showers and sleeping quarters. Pretty basic but not bad.”

Dev's eyes had lit up at the mention of showers, but she silently sucked her water down.

“Must have been hell, living up here though.” April said, carefully opening one of the coffee packets into a cup and smelling it. “Oh, thats weird.” She applied some hot water too it, and set it down, observing it as it bubbled a little and emitted steam into the air.

Jess duplicated her motions and swirled the water around a little. “Kinda looks like mud.”

There were crates lined up against the walls. They took their cups and sat down on them. “It's late.” Jess said. “Soon as we get comms up we should get some downtime while comp updates from HQ.”

April nodded, taking a cautious sip from her cup. She mouthed the substance and then swallowed it, licking her lips thoughtfully. “That's not bad.”

“No, it's not.” Jess agreed. “Got a kick to it.” She half turned and offered Dev her cup. “Want a taste?”

Dev took it and swallowed a little, then handed the cup back. “They gave us something like that in the creche.” She said. “They said it was chicory or something. Some bark they'd replicated. It didn't last though, some fungus killed it.”

A soft rumble made them all jump a little, then Jess put her hand on the wall. “Generators.” She said. “Guess Stephen got them going.” She walked out into the hallway and stuck her head in the central ops area. “C'mon in and get some of this fantastic grub.”

Then she went back and sat down on the crate next to Dev. It was, by her internal clock, well after late watch and they'd been on the go since before dawn. She was tired, and there seemed to be really no end to the tasks ahead of them, and as of yet she had no solid plan.

She could, of course, turn the whole problem over to Stephen but she knew she wasn't going to do that.

The rest of the group entered, and everyone took possession of a food pack, using their multi tools to open them and studying the results.

“What is this?” Chester asked poking at it.

Dev looked at the partitioned tray under the stiff plastic. “Those are carrots.” She said, in a surprised tone. “I think.”

“Carrots?” April picked up a small, orange item. She put it in her mouth and chewed it. “Huh.”

Jess picked up a chunk of brown something and sniffed it, then bit into it. It was, to her surprise, some kind of solid with a rich, pungent taste. “That's meat.”

“Meat?” Dev tasted it cautiously. “Meat of what?” She stopped chewing. “Jess, this isn't bear, is it?”

Her partner chuckled wryly. “No.” She picked up the packet and read the almost faded to illegibility label on the bottom. “Pot roast. Well that's damn helpful.”

“I think this is beef.” Mike had been chewing his meal thoughtfully.

“Beef?”

“Cow meat.” The young agent said. “I had it once. They found a deep freeze where I lived when I was home on leave once. Unfroze some of it and cooked it. Tasted like this.”

“Huh” Jess ate another piece. “It's all right.” She said. “Different than fish, anyway.”

“Yeah, not bad.” April agreed. “This white stuff is okay too.”

Dev investigated the white stuff. “Those are potatoes.” She announced. “They grew some of them in the synth dirt but we never got to taste them.” She added. “All of them went to the senior admin food service.”

Jess poked hers. “Why?”

“I have no idea.” Her partner readily admitted. “I just remember the proctors being mad about it because they wanted some.”

“Huh.” April swallowed some of hers. “To each their own I guess.”

Chester entered, wiping his big hands off. “Got scan up.” He looked satisfied. “Syncing the crypto keys from my carrier now. Should be ready to go in about ten minutes.” He picked up a tray and sat down with it. “I told Carlos to head on in. Bet he could use some grub.”

Stephen came past the doorway then paused, and entered. “There you all are.” He said. “Got the gens up. Plenty of power to spare.” He entered and went over to the processor. “Found their weapons store too. May be something useful there.” He said. “Things are looking up, huh?”

Jess watched his back, seeing the tension in his posture. She recalled Dev's suspicions, and felt a prickle of her own chase up and down her spine. “Yeah, sure are.” She spoke into the almost uncomfortable silence. “We're right on track.”

Stephen turned and smiled briefly at them, taking a seat on a box, drumming his heels on the side of it.

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“Syncs taking longer than I thought.” Jess commented, studying the screen. “What do you figure, two more hours?”

“Yeah.” Mike agreed. “About that, and the charge up should be done by then too.” He glanced around. “What is it, near mid watch?”

“After.” Jess dusted her hands off. “Get some rest if you can, people. We got two hours before we can transmit. I want to make sure HQ knows what's going on before we go on the move.” She waited a minute after she finished talking but no one commented back, accepting the plan without question.

Good sign.

Carlos made a final entry, then stood. “I'm going to bunk in my rig.” He said briefly. “Just in case.” He ran his fingers through his dark, dense black hair. “I'll build a link to comms in here and relay.” He told Jess. “Everything looks pretty good though. Old, missing a lot of progs, but it'll compile.”

He stretched and twisted his body. “See you in two hours.”

“Aw, who's gonna see us up here?” Stephen protested. “It's white out for a hundred miles. Packs taking two inches per hour. No one can fly in that.”

Carlos studied him. “No one was supposed to be able to fly in charged met either.” He paused. “No offense.” He motioned his partner to join him and they left the control center together.

“Probably just want some private bunk time.” Stephen called after him, in a wry, meant to be overheard tone. “Well, I'm not. I found a nice hammock and I'm going to grab it.” He got up and sauntered out and down one of the back corridors.

Jess watched him until he disappeared, and then she spent a moment exchanging looks with the rest of the teams still in the center. The two younger agents gazed stolidly back at her, April folding her arms over her chest in a shift of body posture that told it's own tale.

The nomads were like that. Silent and suspicious most of the time, never trusting anyone's motives but their own. Jess knew them from her childhood, their groups appearing from time to time at Drake's Bay to trade.

Weren't much for authority, she remembered. Not from her people, not from their own, save the caravan leader, who fought for his position and held onto it with an iron fist. Certainly her father, who had been the Drake of Drake's Bay then hadn't impressed them except for the one time.

Jess smiled. The one time, when they'd started a fight in the trading office and she'd watched, with a child's fright the destruction until the door had opened, and her father had come in, and she'd seen that change for the first time.

Eyes gone flat, and hard, body arched, blaster held in his hand with a comfort level that had told it's own tale. They'd caught one sight of his posture and stopped, knowing instantly what they were facing. Hands went up, bodies backed away from him, and just like that peace was restored.

They were tough, and hard, but they knew authority when they saw it and retired or not, they knew this Drake of Drake's Bay would enforce his without any hesitation.

That turned Jess's thoughts back to her own situation. Nominally, Stephen was the ranking op. Bain had given him control over the rebuild of North, and hadn't removed him from his position at 10, and that position at least on paper, put him in charge since Bain hadn't filed an official change of rank for her yet.

Interesting, that he wasn't claiming that. Jess mulled that over. Maybe avoiding blame if it all went sour?

Yeah. She felt disappointed, expecting more from someone she'd considered a friend. “Hm” She grunted audibly. “I'm going to go stake out a bunk. Dev?”

Dev was busy at a console, and now she turned in the chair and faced her partner. “I would really enjoy going to find a bed with you.” She said, in a very serious tone. “But I'm working on a mod for this system, and it will be about another ten minutes or so.”

Jess was glad the lights were half assed, because she knew she was blushing. She hadn't expected the frankness of the answer, but she reckoned she probably should have. Dev was just like that. “Well thanks, Devvie.” She drawled. “Take your time. You're worth the wait.”

Dev accepted the compliment with a smile, and turned back to the console.

“We'll go grab some rest.” April cleared her throat and pointed at the forward corridor. “I guess what was, sometime, a ready room is up there. Mike?”

“Right behind ya.” Arias picked up his duty pack and slung it over one shoulder. “Be back in two.” He gave Jess a faint salute. “Have a good rest, boss.”

The two young agents and their partners made a show of parading out with their techs behind them, leaving Dev and Jess alone in the control room.

No doubt at all what they were thinking. No doubt at all that's why she was blushing even harder, to the point where it was making her a little lightheaded.

To cover that, she walked over and dropped into a chair next Dev, rubbing her face and clearing her throat. . “What'cha doing?” She asked. “Aside from talking dirty to me?”

Dev studied her face. “Was I doing that? I didn't mean to.” She frowned. “What part of that was incorrect?”

Jess blinked and felt the heat fade a little. “It wasn't... um.” She glanced around despite knowing they were alone. “It's okay. I don't care if they know.”

“Know what?”

Jess nearly bit her tongue. “Uh... well, I mean, you know. I don't mind they know we hooked up.”

“Hooked up?” Dev tilted her head. “What did we hook up to?”

It made Jess laugh, in an almost helpless way. “Aw hell what did I just get myself into.” She sighed, rubbing her face again. “I meant it's okay that they know we practice sex with each other.”

“Ah' Dev's expression cleared. “If that's so, then why are you in such discomfort?” She put a hand on Jess's knee. “I'm glad it's okay. I just don't want to get us in trouble in any way.”

Jess edged a little closer. “I'm not really in discomfort.” She said. “It just caught me off guard. We don't usually share personal stuff with each other in the field... at least most of us don't. Sandy never cared.”

'I see.”

They were both silent for a moment, then they looked at at the same time and into each other's eyes. Then Jess smiled and dropped her gaze. “So what are ya working on?” She asked again, in a quiet tone. “Looking for bears again?”

“No.” Dev acknowledged a surprising sense of confusion, and felt a heating on her skin that made her blink. “No, I was calibrating the scan.” She indicated a screen, with very old fashioned display graphics. “It was set to only thirty or forty degrees from azimuth. I imported wire maps from our carrier to give it three hundred sixty range.”

Jess leaned her elbow on the console and rested her chin on her hand. “You sound so damn sexy when you talk like that.”

Dev felt the heat increase. “W.. what?” She asked, softly.

Okay. Jess got up and ruffled her partner's hair. “Let me get out of here before I get us both in trouble.” She said. “C'mon back to that set of racks I found just behind the wall over there. I'll set up some padding.”

“Okay.” Dev agreed, confused but not displeased. “It won't be long. I just want to set up a long range scan. The amplifiers in this facility are quite powerful.”

Jess grinned at her. “Sexy.” She concluded, winking before she turned and left, and a compressed air silence fell on the control room.

Dev leaned her elbows on her knees and clasped her hands together, having little to do except watch the mapping schema on the screen while the blood slowly faded from the surface of her skin. It left her feeling a little weak, and a little chilled, a very strange sensation she really wasn't sure she enjoyed.

What had Jess meant? And, was it good or bad? Dev rubbed her fingers together. From her parting smile and wink, she supposed it was good, but it had made her certainly feel strange and it looked like it had affected Jess the same way.

She wondered if it had anything to do with that love thing, and if it did, did that mean she had gotten that same thing too?

With a sigh, she straightened up and turned her chair back around to the console. The program she'd just finished entering now seemed unimportant and boring, when her body was urging her to get up and go follow Jess to the space she'd found, wanting the door to be closed behind them so she could explore this whole sexy thing some more.

They only had two hours to rest, after all. She studied the readout, and then reached over to make an adjustment, finding it very hard to focus. But she drew in a breath and released it, wanting the scan in place before she abandoned her post. There were many things she felt around them that weren't optimal, and though Carlos was watching from the outside, the carriers had limited scan and they were stuck in a relatively unprotected space.

She wanted them to be safe. She felt very uneasy about things.

A soft noise made her look up, and she half turned to see Stephen Bock entering the space again. He went over to the comms set and leaned on the shelf, peering at it.

“Hello sir.” She greeted him quietly.

He jerked in reaction and swiveled, spotting her on the other side of the room. “Oh.” He said. “Thought you went to get some rest?”

“I will.” Dev acknowledged. “I am almost done with this routine. Then I will go.”

Bock watched her warily. “What are you doing to it?” He jerked his head in the direction of the console.

For a moment, she paused, studying his face. “Just importing the scan routines from the carrier.” She answered. “The ones here were very old.”

His shoulders relaxed. “Yeah, I'm sure they are, kid.” He said. “So, how are you liking working with Jess?”

That, at least, she could answer readily and did. “I like it very much.” She responded. “I find Agent Drake very competent and pleasant to work with.”

“Really?” He walked over towards her. “C'mon, kid. We all know Jess. She's no picnic.”

“What's a picnic?” Dev inquired in a mild tone. “I don't know what that is, so I can't comment on whether or not Agent Drake is or is not one of those.”

Bock stared at her. 'She screw you yet, kid?”

Dev regarded him quietly. “The only reference I have to screwing is attaching something with a metal fastener using a hand tool. So I would have to say no, she has not done that.” She paused. “Nor can I really imagine a situation where she would be required to. Bio alts are biological organisms, sir. We don't require screws or bolts or fasteners of any kind.”

Bock looked intently at her. Then he took a step back and laughed briefly. “Okay, whatever kid.” He turned and lifted his hand in a wave, disappearing back down the corridor he'd come from.

That, Dev considered, had been interesting but not in a good way. Her eyes flicked to the console, glad to see that the programming had run it's course, and the scan routine was starting up. She pulled the pad over and keyed the alerts to her portable scanner, then coded the console to lock, putting in her own ident and clearing the screen.

She got up and shook herself, turning to look carefully around the room before she finally and gladly quit it, heading around the corner and hauling up short before she crashed right into Jess. “Burfp.”

“Sh.” Jess touched her lips. “I was just being psychotically overprotective and making sure Stephen behaved.” She leaned forward and removed her fingers, then replaced them with a quick, gentle kiss. “I loved the screw and bolt comment. Nearly gave myself away laughing.”

Dev reasoned that she'd done something quite right, and returned the kiss, a very pleasant jolt of warmth in the never ending chill of the station. Then she felt Jess's arm encircle her, and they walked along the hallway only a few steps before Jess triggered a door and they ducked inside.

“You handled that pretty slick.” Jess complimented her, as she paused to survey her scrounging. “How dy'a like this?”

This turned out to be what looked like a watch station. Her pack and Jess's were on a metal table bolted to the wall, and there was a big, deep shelf built into the opposite wall that was covered in layers of some kind of springy material.

Dev studied it. “I think I would very much like to lay down on that.”

“Good, Me too.” Jess seemed pleased with her reaction. “Let's shower off, and get a power nap.”

The watch station turned out to have a wash down chamber. Jess knowledgeably started it up, and the small space was filled suddenly with the bright smell of water hitting steel and a blast of steam that tickled Dev's face.

She was glad to see the shower. While Jess retrieved both of their sanitary packs she unfastened the catches on her jumpsuit and started to take it off.

A moment later, and her fingers were being removed from the fabric and Jess's took their place. “Let me do that.”

It seemed strange to Dev, but she didn't object, feeling her body relax as the warmth of the steam heated the space they were in and the fabric was peeled back from her skin. “That man was not happy talking to me.”

“No.” Jess agreed. “I don't really know what got up his shorts either. When we talked about it I was the one who went ballistic over the idea. He was just talking Bricker's line. Wonder what made him turn like that.” She smiled as Dev undid the catches on the front of her jumpsuit, an adorably serious look on her face. “Or was he just putting feelers out to see if you were going to jank me.”

Dev looked up, one pale eyebrow hiking up a little.

“If you were going to play the game.” Jess explained. “Be political with him, and try to suck up.” She stepped out of her suit and steered Dev into the shower, carefully testing the temperature with one hand before pulling them both under.

“Jess.”

“Yeah?” She started to playfully scrub Dev with a handful of soft soap.

“I didn't understand one word of what you just said.” Dev said, mournfully. “This wasn't like the shell thing, was it?”

Jess laughed. “No.” She said. “He was testing you. To see if you'd say something bad about me.”

“Oh!” Dev got a handful of soap and spread it on Jess's bare chest. “Okay, I get that!” She was glad to put the conversation in perspective. “Did he really think I would say something bad about you? I would never do that.” She said. “I think he's very incorrect.”

“I think maybe he's a little jealous.” Jess cupped her face in both hands and ducked her head to brush her lips against Dev's. “He never got along with any of his partners. Never was that successful in the field.” She gently rinsed the soap out of Dev's hair. “He got the position more by sucking up to Bricker than skill and he knows it.”

That sounded sad to Dev. She didn't much like Bock, but she thought it was a bad thing to be so unhappy. “You were with him when we got to the citadel.”

“I was.” Jess rested her arms on Dev's shoulders. “He was walking me out. I thought .. “ She paused. “He told me he was doing it as a friend. That he'd miss me.” She gazed thoughtfully at Dev. “Now I wonder.”

This time it was Dev who stepped forward, finding the soap covered, powerful form in front of her becoming far more interesting than Stephen Bock. She touched Jess's skin, and felt the water hitting her rapidly sensitizing body. “He doesn't want me to succeed.” She did comment, before Jess pressed against her, and she lost track of why that had meaning.

“Forget him.” Jess bit down gently on the edge of her ear. “We've got two hours. Let's just lose our minds.”

Dev tried to make a picture of that in her head, and then erased it, after she got past the stuff inside her skull leaking out her ear, or possibly being sucked out of her ear by Jess's nibbling.

It felt very good. “Okay.” She stepped with Jess into the flow of the water, watching the liquid sheet off her partner's body, studying it in the off color light as Jess ruffled her hair and washed

the soap out. She reached out to run her fingers over the pale golden surface, tracing a long scar from her ribcage down to her hip.

It looked old, and faded, but prominent amidst the lighter, fainter tracings scattered over the surface. Aside from that Jess' skin was smooth, and soft, fitting tightly around the bone and muscle that was evident just underneath.

“Wanna know how I got that one?” Jess was observing this exploration with a mild and wry expression.

Dev leaned closer. “I”m sure you were doing something excellent.”

“I”m sure I fell down the side of a pier piling back home like a dork and ripped myself wide open on an old and rusty nail.” Jess gently nudged her out of the water and shut it down. “Drenched half of Drake's Bay in blood running back into the lower caves screaming my fool head off.”

“Really?” Dev removed one of the flat, compressed towels from her pack and opened it, drying her skin off.

“Yeah my first leave from school.” Jess sighed. “I told them I wrestled with a shark when I got back. Got cred points for that, at least.”

Dev smiled, imagining it. “I saw a picture of a shark.” She toweled her hair dry. “Have you seen one really.”

Jess smiled back, tossing her towel over the bolted shelf and plucking Dev's from her fingers and sending it to join hers. She moved to the padded platform and sprawled on it, extending her long legs out and crossing them at the ankles. 'I've seen one.” She confirmed, as Dev joined her. “I've swam with them.”

Dev considered that. “The one in the picture had very big teeth.”

Jess rolled onto her stomach and reached around to point at the back of one shoulder. “Look there.” She waited for Dev to hike herself up on an elbow and inspect the spot. “That's what their big teeth leave when they bite you.”

“Oh. Wow.” Dev looked at the triangular scar, deep and thick, and knotted. “That must have been very uncomfortable.”

Jess shrugged. “About as much as any of them.” She let herself back down. 'We were fighting over a four foot long grouper. I won.”

Dev's eyes went wide, in silence.

Her partner grinned. “Lesson for you, Devvie. Don't get between me and my dinner.”

“I will absolutely remember that.” Dev curled her arm around and put her head down on it. It was tolerably warm in the chamber but she was glad when Jess pulled the lightweight cover over them both from her service pack and then squirmed closer, bringing a welcome warmth as she settled against Dev.

Something was niggling at her conscience, some detail was pecking gently at the back of her head, but just when Dev went to focus on it, Jess's hand touched her hip and her body reacted, driving the niggling back out of her mind.

She felt her body react to the touch, a gentle pulse of desire filling her guts. Then Jess's lips brushed against her shoulder and she put aside all thoughts of sharks and scars. She pressed closer and started her own, gentle and hesitant nibble on the edge of Jess's ear, amid a waft of soap scent from her still damp hair.

A sound made them both go still. Jess's hand moved from Dev's hip to her shoulder, and she lifted her head, ears cocked. “Sh.”

Dev remained silent, and kept her hands still. The sound had been mechanical in nature, and she wondered if it was just something in the systems they had just recently restarted.

She felt .. Dev frowned. She decided she actually felt discomfort from the interruption. She wanted to continue their touching and the rest of it, no matter the fact that she knew they were in a non optimal place.

Doctor Dan had been absolutely right about that.

There were no more sounds, and after a minute more of silent listening, Jess half shrugged and leaned forward, kissing Dev on the lips and starting that feeling up all over again.

Probably just was a piece of machinery. Dev stroked the skin on the inside of Jess's leg, and and felt the muscle tense lightly under her touch. Her partner shifted a little and curled an arm around her and she moved closer, pressing her body against Jess's.

It felt very good.

She wished they had more than two hours.

**

There hadn't been time, really to sleep. But Dev felt good and her body seemed rested, or at least, contented as she lay in the circle of Jess's arms listening to her partner's soft breathing.

In twenty minutes or thereabouts, they would need to get up and go send the message, and after that, Jess would tell them what the plan was.

Dev felt sure there was a plan. Jess seemed relaxed before they'd retired, and she seemed relaxed now, her hands open and at ease and no hint of tension in the body pressed up against her own.

It was nice to just lay here quietly together. It made it possible for her to set aside the fact they were in a strange place, and in the middle of a lot of trouble. Dev idly observed Jess's arm, the burned marks faded in the dim light and that made her turn her head slightly to look at her own shoulder.

The mark had healed, mostly It was no longer an angry red, instead, it was taking on a darker hue that was lighter than Jess's, but seemed to look all right against her pale skin. It was still a bit sensitive, but it made Dev smile, knowing there was one almost just like it on her partner.

Made them part of each other, sort of. Dev drew in a breath and released it, setting her head down on the folded packing that made their pillow just as her portable comp let out a soft complaint.

Dev reached quickly out and grabbed it, stifling the noise as she drew it close to her and triggered the screen, waiting for it to clear and resolve.

She looked at the data, then her body tensed at what she was seeing and as she did, she felt Jess stir behind her, the agent's tall form arching against her as her head lifted up and she peered over Dev's shoulder.

“What's up, Devvie?” Jess blinked and cleared her vision, focusing on the screen now held closer where she could see it. For a moment, she just stopped breathing, as a prickle of alarm lifted the hairs along her spine and her muscles all tightened. “Oh shit.”

“That does not sound good.” Dev was already sitting up and moving out of the way as she felt Jess bolt upright, and a moment later the agent's naked body was flickering past her and heading for her jumpsuit. “It appears ships are heading in this direction.”

“Wrong kind of ships.” Jess was already fastening up her suit and reaching for her weapons. “We gotta get out of here. Someone ratted us.”

Oh, that was really not good. Dev got her jumpsuit on and slung her portable comp over her shoulder as she reached for her boots to tug them on. “Those are enemy targets?” She glanced again at the screen, which was just a wiremap at long range, and not that discernible to her.

“Oh yea.” Jess got all her weapons in place and moved for the door at a gathering run. “I can tell by the pattern. Not ours.” She drew her hand blaster and as she came out the door she slapped a dusty panel on the wall about a foot over her own head.

Instantly, a klaxon blared, and the lights changed to an odd shade of gray green. “Stay behind me, Dev.” Jess ordered. “Only people who knew we were here are here with us.”

Not good. “Suboptimal.” Dev said. “Do we need to get away from here?”

“Oh yeah.”

Dev started a program running as she moved quickly behind her partner, as they ran down the hall and around the corner into the control center, met a moment later by April and Chester coming from the other direction.

“What the hell?” April saw the gun in Jess's hand and drew her own, making a tight circle and shoving Chester back against the wall.

“Trouble coming.” Jess went to the comp and flipped it through it's screens. “Battalion inbound, ten targets, KR's.”

“Shit.” April, rookie or no, got it. “We have to get moving.” She grabbed her jacket as Mike Arias came into the center, taking one look at her and grabbing his own outer gear. “Need to get the buses running.”

Mike stepped forward one more step, April got her arm in her jacket, Chester rebounded from the wall he'd been bumped into and a breath later the room was full of blaster fire.

Full of yelling and motion and the sizzle of ions hitting metal.

One moment Dev was tapping on the screen, the next moment she was grabbed and held, a rough tension and violence that made her throat catch. She heard Jess yell, and then realized it was Stephen Bock holding her when his voice answered.

“Don't move, bitch. I know you don't want me to waste her.”

“I'll waste you regardless, Stephen.” Jess's voice sounded cold, and rough. “The rest of you – out of here! Move!”

“Stop!” Bock yelled over her. “Just give it up! It's over! You're done! Interforce is done! For craps sake die easy!”

“Fuck you, whore!”

This was not good. Dev grabbed the arm holding her and shoved outward, bowing her body as she turned and pushed herself backwards, taking him with her as they both crashed into the console.

It surprised him. She felt his grip shift and she twisted, slamming her elbow back with all the force she could, feeling a clamp come down on her neck that cut off her breathing.

She shoved backwards again, lifting him off his feet and throwing him against the wall, as she heard motion and a blood curdling howl whose very primal rage made her hair stand up on the back of her neck.

He yelled, and then coughed, and she felt a hot spray of something hit her as she ducked away from his suddenly released grasp and dove for the floor, tucking and rolling as she got behind another console and out of range.

“Go go go!” April yelled, and then a blast of icy cold air blew into the command center, as the klaxon suddenly got a lot louder. “They're almost here!”

Dev started out from her hiding spot only to find herself grabbed and surrounded again, this time by more familiar arms and the rough heave of Jess's breathing. “Jess!”

“Ok?”

Dev shook the hair out of her eyes and blinked them, focusing on her partner. “Yes.”

“Let's go.” Jess's voice was surprisingly hoarse. “They're gonna blow us ten miles out if they catch us here.” She turned and shoved her blaster into it's holster, reaching for and tossing Dev her jacket and stopping briefly over Bock's slumped body to yank something free from it. “Fucker.”

Dev got into her jacket as they kept moving, only then realizing she was covered in a thick, coppery smelling liquid she belatedly recognized as blood. It spattered her skin, but she didn't have time to worry about it, and got her parka fastened as she caught up to Jess' rapidly moving body. “He was incorrect?”

Jess let out a snorting laugh as she pulled her hood up. “Mother fucker.” She said, in a crisp tone. “He called them down on us. Figured to catch us sleeping and let them evaporate us.” She glanced behind her. “Only thing that saved our ass was that scan alert.”

They reached the door and plunged into a dark and icy night, full of fast falling snow that had build up around the door and covered the carriers midway.

“Definitely not excellent.” Dev could now see the other agents digging out the hatches on their rigs, save one that was dark, and black, and open. “What hap..” She paused, realizing it was Carlos and Oscar's.

The carrier next to theirs had a hatch propped open, but was empty. It had been Bocks, she remembered.

“Killed them.” Jess said. “Poor bastards. He was a year from being able to retire.” She plowed powerfully through the snow, shoving her body through the thick ice as though it was water. “Stupid mother fucker. Almost as stupid and clueless and jackass as me.”

“You?”

“Me.” Jess stomped over to the small rise Dev had landed the carrier on, jerking a halt as the snow evaporated under her feet and the cleared hatch opened. “Hah.” She turned and lifted her arm, rotating her fist in a circle and giving it a pump, before she jumped inside with Dev right behind her. “You do that?”

“The hatch? Yes.” Dev shed her coat and stowed it, getting to her pilots chair and settling into it quickly. She started the preflight checks as she sealed the hatch, comp already up and showing her rising energy levels in the other carriers. She kicked the heaters on for the engines and activated the batteries, a hum of power starting to surround her.

“Just get us up and out of her, and headed east.” Jess got herself strapped in and pulled comms over. “Sideband Six, open all.”

“On.”

“Here.”

“Follow us. We're going to the dark side and killing as many of them as we can.” Jess was shaking her head as she got her systems prepared. “Stupid son of a bitch.”

“Check.”

“Ack.”

The two responses were quiet, but confident, and Jess stopped kicking herself long enough to take a breath, and let it out, the residual dark energy and rage slowly fading out of her.

She felt the carrier come to life around her, and felt again the rush as she'd had that one chance, one slim moment to put her knife in Stephen's throat before he shot her.

Would have shot them all. Would have killed Dev. Jess felt her heart start to race again and she closed her eyes, erasing the memory of his scornfully triumphant face and his hands on her partner's body.

Engines came live. Jess felt the vibration. Triumphant until he felt the slim form in his clutches lift him up and toss him like a rag doll, giving Jess her chance.

She'd certainly taken it.

Fucker. “How could I have missed it?” She growled, under her breath. “I knew something was wrong with him, and I just.. “ She slammed a fist against her console. “Shit.”

“Jess - incoming”

“Lift.” Jess said. “They'll blast us.”

The carrier moved under her and she was thrown back in her seat, tightening her restraints as the carrier lurched and then turned on it's side. She strained against grav and got a screen pulled over. “Keep an eye on the kids.” She got her boots braced against her console. “Gimme power.”

Dev was busy trying to keep the carrier level as she came up and around the ice escarpment that had hidden the pole base. She couldn't see the enemy but the scan was sounding warnings in her ear cups, low anxious sounding tones mixed with the incoming chatter of the shortwave from the other two rigs.

It was snowing hard, and it was dark. She relied on the comp to tell her where she was in space, and leveled the carrier as she shunted power back to the weapons systems. Jess had said east, so she quickly laid in a track and transmitted that as comp to the other two, punching up the engines to full power.

The force sent her thumping back in her gimbaled chair and she got her hands curled around the throttles, shoving them forward as they rolled up to speed. She kept her eyes on the forward scan, watching for obstacles as she kept a low profile track, skimming over the ice in near total darkness.

“Stand by for bangs.” Jess got her targeting up and the scan immediately pinpointed the incoming enemy sweeping up and over the horizon though not yet in even visible to IR or UV.

There were a lot of them, though, and she reluctantly put off cursing at herself to focus on the task at hand, now aware that not only had they lost the chance to advise HQ about the attacks, they also couldn't tell them there were squads of bad guys roaming the land with impunity.

Life was just completely full of suck at the moment.

But there was no time for that. She set up targeting solutions and readied the rear guns, bumping the shields up and moving juice from the front systems she hoped she wouldn't need.

“Chester and Doug are in line with us.” Dev reported calmly. “Intercept in two minutes. They have an angle on us.”

“So I see.” Jess flexed her hands and settled them on the gun triggers, her fingers fitting into the metallic half gloves whose inside surface was full of controls.

Each finger controlled one of the main guns, the knuckles positioned to release ion torpedoes. Coordination had to be instinctive – at some level there was no real way to even learn how to do it. Just something you felt your way through. Jess exhaled and tightened her focus, the wiremap on the scan now showing a solid outline of their pursuers.

Ten of them.

Had Bock been right? Was it all over? Was she just prolonging the inevitable?

Jess watched her reflection in the screen, seeing the smile appear on her face. “Ready, Dev?” She wiggled her fingers. “Time to make the doughnuts.” She took her eyes off the screen long enough to glance up at the pilot's station, where she found Dev's pale eyes meeting hers in the reflective mirror.

The bio alt, though harried, had that expression that indicated she was puzzling out something out.

“Doughnuts are bits of cake they fried in oil back in the day.” Jess supplied. “You'd like them.”

Now a faint twinkle entered her pilot's eyes. “I do like them.” She agreed. “We would have them once a season, up in the creche. I just wasn't aware that was something we produced downside.” She informed her partner. “Intercept, one minute.”

“You've HAD doughnuts???” Jess tore her attention away and put it back on the targets, uncapping the triggers and getting ready to fire “You little lucky monkey. I've only heard of them.” She triggered comms. “Stand by for battle. Keep moving. Don't' let them take a bead on your or they'll fire at once and your shields are toast.”

“Ack.”

“Ack.”

The two other carriers shifted a little, moving away from hers to give them space to fire and she got herself ready, feeling the sudden change of motion as Dev wrenched them out of plane and

curled in a tight U, plunging down again towards the ice as she let off a barrage from the rear guns.

They cut between the leading two enemy and Dev rotated them along their axis, a move Jess was getting used to. She took advantage of it an held her fingers down on the center guns, firing in a circle as they dove down again.

“Holy crap.” The sideband erupted in a crackle. “Stay clear of them!”

Them meaning her and Dev, Jess realized, their aerobatics as dangerous to their allies as to the other side. She ducked instinctively as they took a broadside hit, hearing the thump against the hull as the shields reacted and then she was upside down again as Dev spun them.

It was disorienting – but she tightened her focus to the screen, her hands reacting automatically to what her eyes were seeing, firing incessantly as they swerved to miss a direct impact ahead of them.

Two enemy rigs peeled off to either side, firing their own midship guns at them point blank. Jess flinched, but then left her stomach on the floor as the carrier peeled straight up and then angled down and around to come up behind the two that had just been shooting at them.

She let off a blast from the forward guns, hastily transferring energy to them, watching it splash back at her as it impacted the left enemies rear shields.

There were clouds overhead and in a moment they were in and through them, as the KR's chased them firing all the while.
Blasts hit them on the side, and she heard alarms start to blare up in the front. “Whoops.”

“Please hold on.” Dev abruptly cut the power to the engines, and they fell down back through the clouds like a rock. Jess squinted and just started firing in all directions, hoping her blasts didn't hit their own people.

The enemy scattered out of their way, and arched off, and then Dev fired up the mains again, sending them rocketing to the left on their original course.

Jess checked scan and saw eight targets instead of ten, and spotted the distinctive maps of her colleagues coming up from the ice almost right at her. She let off a steady stream of torpedoes to the rear, and followed that up with a barrage that caught one of the chasers with shields fluctuating and had the satisfaction of seeing it blow apart in a blare of sudden light that outlined the stark ice below and lit the clouds above with orange.

The rest of them scattered, diving out of her way and arching off.

Three down. “Let's see if we can out run em now Dev.”

“Yes.” Dev was very busy up front. “Running our damage control now.”

“Check in.” Jess opened comms. “Damage?”

“Shields seventy five.” Doug responded. “Ack?”

“Ack.” Jess agreed. “Tac 3?”

“Standby.” Mike answered for his tech. “Running comp.”

“Full speed, on course.” Jess ordered. “Red line it. Let's leave em.”

“Ack, Tac 2.”

“Ack, Tac 3” Chester said. “We have full power to engines, but lost scan and some steering.”

Jess felt the shove as they came up to full power and moved back into line with their original course. She watched scan carefully, seeing the enemy pull themselves together and form up, but they were still gathering as the three of her force were speeding off, already losing sight of them on visual.

The wiremap formed and showed her their images, and she held her breath, then cursed as they started after them, spreading out in a search and destroy formation. “Dev, you're gonna need those tweaks.”

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “However, Chester's machine does not have the improvements.” She said. “He can't keep up with us.”

Ah. Well. Jess tossed that plan out and studied her options. “Okay.” She sent a set of coordinates up to her pilot. “Head there, and send that to the other two. Let's see if we can out fly them if we can't outrun them.”

Dev nodded, and tapped the configuration in, adjusting the throttles with a twitch of her fingers.

“Tac 2, Tac 3.” Jess cleared her throat. “Stay low, follow tight.”

“Tac 1, Tac 3.” Mikes voice came back. “Ack, but we can keep rear.”

Jess understood the message. At some level, she even admired it. “Stay low, follow close.” She repeated. “We'll turn and pick them off if we have to.”

“Ack.”

She looked up, not surprised to find Dev looking back at her in reflection. She could see the spattering of rust stains on her partner's skin, from Bock's blood but the gaze remained steady, and there was a little smile on her face. “Stupid cocksucker didn't hurt you did he?”

Dev's brows tensed, then relaxed. “The man Bock?”

“Yeah.”

“No.” Dev adjusted trim, and edged the speed up a little. “They will overtake us plus ten, or perhaps twelve.” She remarked. “I was just surprised he took hold of me.”

“He knew I'd... “ Jess paused to release a barrage of torpedoes to seed their path. “He figured I”d stop.”

Dev studied the wiremap intently, making a picture in her head of the next maneuver she wanted to try. “You would stop?” She asked, after a moments distraction. “Why?”

Jess held off answering for a minute, the roil of emotion the thoughts incurred surprising her. “I did stop.” She answered at last, in a subdued voice. “I didn't want you to get hurt.”

They were both silent for a few minutes, adjusting things, making changes. Jess sent another barrage out, Dev changed their course just slight. “Did that man do something incorrect?” Dev finally asked. “To cause this attack now?”

“They must have paid him off.” Jess obliquely answered the question. “He sold out to them... I don't know if he told them where we were, or they just found us and he didn't warn us, or what.” Some part of her, she discovered, really didn't want to believe Stephen had turned.

But... Jess watched the screen, seeing the wire-mapped enemy moving closer. Dev had been right about one thing – Bain hadn't trusted him.

Had he known?

Jess exhaled. “Glad we got the kids out with us.” She said. “Dev, we'll let them get close then break up. Have the other two go out to the right and left and try to get around in back of them, we'll go topside and do the same.”

Dev nodded briefly.

“Unless you've got a better idea.” Jess added. “Since your flying instincts are a hell of a lot sharper than mine.”

“Five minutes to intercept.” Dev responded. “The location you requested us to go to is about six to eight minutes away.”

“Story of my life.” Jess sighed.

“How accurate are the maps for that”? Dev asked, somewhat suddenly. “Of that place?” She had a scan up and was looking at it. “It appears irregular.”

“They're fjords.” Jess said. “Deep valleys with ocean at the bottom, or sometimes ice, or sometimes just gravel. They were made by glaciers a long, long time ago.” She paused. “Why?”

Dev studied the screen. “If these are accurate, I think we could try to lose them in there.” She announced “Or perhaps we can make them crash.”

Jess straightened up in her chair. “Crash?”

“Yes.” Her partner said. “That's why I asked about the accuracy.” She glanced behind her. “So we can avoid that.”

“Huh.”

“So are they accurate?”

Jess half shook her head. “No guarantees.”

After a moment of silence, Dev cleared her throat. “Want to try it?”

Did they have a choice? Jess felt her body settle. Did it matter? “Go for it.” She tightened her restraints again. “Fly your ass off, Devvie.”

“Well okay.” Dev glanced in the mirror. “But it will make it really hard to sit, won't it?”

Jess chuckled, and triggered comms, shaking her head as she composed her words for her erstwhile troops.

No point in worrying about it anyway.

**

The carrier shuddered as they were hit by a blast along the topside and Dev only kept from ducking as she felt the craft swerve in response.

Alarms were blaring all around her, and she glanced at the comp screen, seeing the shields on the port side almost nulled. “Jess, we are exposed on the left side up to the hatch.”

“Nifty” Jess was busy trying to avoid hitting the other friendly craft while targeting the six enemy that were swirling around them, taking shots at will. “How long to the coast?”

“Two minutes.” Dev could see the rapidly approaching outlines of solid structures, and once again hoped the scan was accurate.

Another blast shook them, and she felt the shift as one of the engines cut out. “Jess, we lost a pod.” She adjusted the trim but they lost speed, and after a second, she dove for the surface of the sea, rolling over and presenting the bottom of the carrier to the ongoing attack. “Hold on please.”

“Sure.” Jess was hanging in her restraints, holding off on firing until the carrier allowed her guns clearance again. She could feel the hits on the bottom, but that was where their heaviest shields were and they were only muffled booms, not the crackling pops the ones on the sides had been.

Her ears were throbbing from the blood rushing to her head and she held her breath a little, watching her screens intently. She could see the other two carriers criss crossing overhead and she realized after a second that they were drawing fire away from her and Dev.

Good kids. She felt them start to right and she got off a quick burst, tracking across the absolute darkness when she spotted a shadow against the clouds.

Lucky shot. She watched the enemy craft come apart in mid air as her unexpected hit impacted a weak spot and the parts went spiraling out, two of the other attackers swerving out of the way and bringing themselves into her line of fire.

She took advantage of that, of them being distracted by sending some blobs their way and then she had to stop when they went up side down again. “Hey, I got one. I was doing good.”

“Sorry.” Dev replied. “We're about to go into the .. what did you call them?”

“Fjords.”

“Yes. And I wanted to complete a repair cycle on the engine or we're not going to have enough maneuverability to get through them.”

Jess took the opportunity to remove one hand from her firing gloves and scratched her nose. “You really are cool under fire, you know that? I bet you're not even sweating.”

“Please stand by.” Dev watched her scan intently, then nodded in relief as they reached the edge of the land and the engine came back online. “The only time I have really experienced sweat is when practicing sex with you.” She remarked. “We are at the fjords.”

“Is that good or bad?” Jess felt them rotating and then she was right side up, and then they were pitching down and she had a sense of enclosure “Never mind, don't answer.... Tac 2, Tac 3, follow.”

“Ack.”

“Ack.” The responses came back at once.

“Stick to our tail.” Jess added. “Will be tight maneuver.”

“Ack.”

“Ack.”

And then they went to hell. Jess could feel the sudden and violent buffeting of the wind against the carrier as Dev slowed it, and plunged into the narrow space between the fjord cliffs. “Whoa.”

Dev kept her eyes glued to the scan, watching the wiremap outline of the space around her. The valley was very narrow, and she set the carrier in the very center of it, aware that in some spaces, the walls were only a wing length from her wing.

Comp showed both other carriers right behind her, and behind them, the staggered flood of enemy.

“Just lead em, Devvie.” Jess instructed. “Don't worry about whats on your tail.”

That was easy. Dev slid her chair forward and concentrated on her work. This was hard, and she felt her breathing quicken as she made slight adjustments, keeping the carrier even between the walls. She flinched a little as a blast hit the wall on her left hand side, blasting rock off and sending bits of it over to scatter on her front windscreen.

The walls were very stark, and very craggy, even in wiremap. In light they would be awesome. Dev pondered if she would get to see the light when another blast hit then on the top of the carrier, nearly sending the nose of it pitching down. She only barely kept it even, and saw the damage alerts start flashing.

“Not nice.” Jess patched in the vector and sent a blast back up and to the rear.

Dev adjusted a setting and let their altitude drop a little more, forcing their pursuers to enter the valley to chase them. The blasters only had a certain range, and she kept the angle going, studying the topography. To the right there was an even narrower crevice, and she ran a quick calculation.

“Bastards.” Jess was grumbling under her breath. “They're gonna tank us, Dev.” She said. “I don't' want them to tank us. I'm not done here yet.”

Tank. Tank. Dev frowned and keyed in a route, then squirted it to the two other carriers. She snugged her straps more tightly, then took a deep breath. “Please really hold on.”

Jess had just shot off a few blasts, now she turned and regarded her pilot. “What are you going to do?” She looked at the forward scan. “That's a dead end.. we going back up?”

“No.” Dev said. “There is a space there, to the side.”

Jess blinked. “Dev, we can't fit in there.”

“Not going straight, no.” Dev glanced in the mirror. “Do you wish me to stop?”

Jess looked at the scan, then at her pilot, then back at her scan. “Oh boy.” She released her guns and yanked her restraints tight.

“Tac 1, vector impassable.” The sideband erupted.

Jess slapped at the comms. “Just stick to her tail.” She ordered. “Be kickass, or be dead. Your choice.”

Dev took that as an agreement on her plan, and she settled herself, then she smoothly tipped the carrier onto it's side and turned, arcing out of the main channel and heading for the slit.

A curse trickled through the sideband, before it was cut off. Dev heard the sudden rattle of blaster fire around her and she felt a thumping impact on her topside wing, making the carrier swerve and shudder under her touch. She gripped the throttles harder, and bore down, adding speed to even out the path.

“Incoming!” Jess yelled.

Dev could almost sense the closeness of the attack, the wall before her abruptly lit up with plasma, showing her a real time view of the wiremap she was using as a guide.

Really small. Her heart started to thump a lot faster, and she bit her lip, almost closing her eyes as she reached the opening and the enemy reached her at the same time.

The explosion nearly did them in. Dev barely kept control of the carrier and she felt the skin scrape the rock, making a grating, keening sound that set her teeth on edge. The craft started tipping over, veering dangerously towards the rock walls and she hit the side jets with a rapid touch.

Then the enemy craft imploded over them and she was blinded by the flash, losing all sense of sight and flinching at the barrage of sound all around her.

Terrifying. “Jess!” Dev yelped. “I can't see.”

“Notgoodnotgoodnotgood” Jess released her restraints and climbed up onto her console, leaping across the open space and landing with her arms around Dev's chair and she got her hands on the controls just as they were about to smack into solid rock. “Yow!”

Dev was blinking furiously, trying to get her vision to clear.

Jess tilted the carrier back up on it's side and sprawled over the chair, the arm of it digging a dent in her ribcage making her short of breath. “Notfuneither.” She grunted, reaching around Dev to grasp the throttles. “You OK?”

White spots on black, the sound of imminent destruction all around her. Dev felt a moment of angry frustration, shaking her head and blinking furiously. She could feel the tension in her partner's body, and the strain in her breathing and knew things were seriously not good.

Jess was sweating. She didn't really have the skills Dev had in flying, and she could barely see the outline of the crevice they were in on the wiremap past the bio alt's shoulder. The action was happening to fast for to absorb and she could hear warnings and sirens all around them.

They were running out of sky, and the collision alert sounded, and Jess frantically tried to judge which way she had to turn when hands fitted over hers and moved the controls. A quick look showed her Dev's face, her eyes wet with tears, and her pale lashes moving as she blinked, but with a clarity there that made her take her own fingers off the throttles. “Got it?”

“Yes.” Dev nodded, dodging and twisting in between craggy outcroppings and then dropping suddenly and twisting the carrier in mid air to send it half falling and half under power, boosting the landing jets and ducking under a thick ledge of stone that scraped the top of the ship.

“Good.” Jess just hung on, getting her elbow down to lift her ribs up off the chair just as they took two g's and she wrapped her legs around the chair to keep from being thrown across the carrier. “Oof!”

“Sorry.” Dev spotted a wider space and headed for it, at last able to tip the carrier back onto it's axis as she shot out of the narrows and into a valley that opened up on either side of them. “Are you all right?”

“Peachy.” Jess got her feet under her and leaned against the console, flipping through comp. “Kids are still there.” She commented, triggering the comms. “Tac 2, Tac 3, stat?”

“Holy fuck!” A blast of static carried the words through the sideband.

“Stable.” April's voice came through in calm counterpoint. “Comp shows no targets.”

Dev ran the damage assessment programs. The carrier was running very rough, a heavy vibration rattling her bones as she worked to even out the power grid. “That was difficult.”

“No kidding.” Jess eased her way back over to her seat and dropped down into it. “My stomach's killing me.” She put her hand on it, flexing the fingers of her other hand. “What in the hell was that flash? Damn good thing I wasn't looking at it like you were.”

“I don't know.” Dev ran comp on the logs and studied them, glancing at the nav that plotted their course spreading out in a wide V shape before them. “There's a flat space ahead there. Should we stop?”

“Do we need to?”

Dev checked comp. “I would like to examine the outside of this vessel.” She admitted. “Many sensors are not reporting.”

Jess pulled over her own pad and scrolled through a set of readings with impatient fingers. “They really not back there/” She studied the report. “Or are they just hiding?” She pressed the comms. “Tac 2, squirt comp.”

“Ack.” Doug responded. “Got rear cam action.”

Jess waited for the transfer, then she injected the squirt into her comp. She ran the vid, mostly darkness overshot with blaring light, then quickly shielded her eyes as the blobs erupted into a hellish white over flash, briefly outlining the rock edge, blasting it to nothing but an implosion of vaporized powder.

Only the narrow slit they'd been flying through had protected them. Jess felt a chill go down her back, and she anxiously searched the comp to make sure none of the bastards were following them. “They tried to fry us.”

Dev glanced in the mirror. “Is that what that light was?”

“Must have been.” Jess said, after a pause. “Go on and pick a spot to put down, Dev. Let's make sure we can maneuver. I get the feeling we're gonna need to.”

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They found a gently sloping side valley and landed on it, the carrier's skids crunching and slipping a little on the loose rock, then coming to a halt.

Nestled between the high walls, they were protected from the wind and when they all stepped out into the faintly visible dawn light it was almost eerily quiet.

Overhead, dark clouds were moving, their edges shredded and packed with moisture. Far off in the distance they could hear thunder, but at the moment nothing was falling on them.

Jess was grateful for that. She turned on her hand light and studied the ground, leaning over to pick up a bit of the loose gravel and let it run through her fingers. It was sharp and hard, and had thick veins of color running through it. “So.”

Dev was busy slobbering over one of the engines, the cowling pulled back and her body half buried in side it. “There was intense disruption.” The bio alt said, in a muffled tone.

“No kidding.” Doug came over, his hands clasped around a burned out piece of hardware. “Fried my comp.”

April had just finished a walk around her carrier and came over to join her partner, her jacketed figure emerging from the shadows into the circle of Jess's light. “Was that their new weapon, really?” She looked grave. “Went right through our shields.”

“Looks like it.” Jess agreed. “We lucked out.” She handed over the rocks. “Metal content in that must have been high enough to have reflected the blast on them.”

“Two of them flew into the cliff.” Chester said, dusting his hands off. “The other two, yeah, my back cam got them getting backlash. Guess the aims a little off still.”

Mike joined them. He folded his arms over his chest and regarded their little group gravely. “Wasn't how I was looking to start my hitch out.” He said. “What do we do now?”

Everyone looked at Jess, save Dev, who was still head first down in her engine pod.

Jess turned and leaned back against the wall of her bus, putting her hands inside her pockets. The air was cold, not the killing chill of the pole, but still enough, and she felt her skin warm as she flexed her fingers. “What do we do now.” She repeated the question. “Well, we could just find some place and hide out until we hear from HQ.”

April frowned.

“Or.” Jess went on. “We could surrender.”

Mike joined in the general, though silent disapproval.

“But we'll probably be of more use to our oath if we find a way through these Norwegian fjords and sneak across into their coastal base, just east of Gibraltar.” Jess's voice was quiet and very serious. “Then we can get into the developmental sciences center and find this thing.”

Both rookie agents nodded in immediate agreement.

“And turn it on them, and make that center look like North.” Jess concluded. “Maybe if they realize it can bite them in the ass as much as us, they'll stop using it.”

“I like that idea.” April said. “I”m not hiding. That's not what I came here for.”

Jess smiled a little.

“Besides it won't do us any good.” Mike said. “We can't hide forever, and when we come out they'll be there waiting for us. What would be the point?”

“Glad you both think that way.” Jess said. “Because I'm not surrendering and I'll shoot anyone who tries.” She added. “Let's get ourselves patched up as best we can, and then Dev'll find us a way to navigate through these cliffs. They'll block scan, at any rate.”

The light was growing, and they could now see the steep, stark valley they were in. The stone walls rose on either side, folded in naked, sharp relief, their once green sides gray and featureless. “I've seen pictures of this place.” Mike said, after a moment. “It was pretty.”

Behind them a solid, ruffled surfaced black water spread out, covering the ground between the cliffs they were between and the next set of escarpments. It was deep water, Jess knew, and a little further north it was ice and snow, glaciers filling the spaces between the walls as they inched down towards the sea.

Glaciers had made the slope they were on, unremembered eons ago. Jess exhaled and leaned back. These slopes would have been covered in green trees before the change, rich and fragrant as they towered over the waters below. It would have been pretty, indeed.

Now there was only raw rock, and the same dark waters, and as the dawn light touched the walls and brought out the veined patterns that had likely saved their asses, Jess still found it so.

The slope they were parked on stretched out in a long finger, ending in another sheer cliff than then branched off to the east into the distance.

“I like the idea of us sticking it to them.” Mike spoke up suddenly. “It bothers me to think about my.. our classmates in the citadel, toasted.”

Jess nodded. “Bothers me too.”

April stuck her hands in her pockets. “Funny.” She said. “We were always told it wouldn't.” She studied Jess gravely. “You weren't supposed to worry about anyone else.”

Dev hopped out of the engine and sealed the cowling. She came back over to the group with a somewhat relieved expression. “I think that will be all right.” She said. “The repair sequence did enough.”

“No.” Jess answered April's comment softly, her eyes fixed on her partner. “You weren't. But that's not how life is.” She switched her gaze to the agent. “Even for us.” She let her arm rest on Dev's shoulders. “So. Here we are. We only have us to work with, so we should get working.”

The four rookies nodded. “I'll see what I can do to get this sorted out.” Doug held up the card. “I think I have a spare in the back box.” He turned and headed for his carrier. Chester joined him, and after a moment, April and Mike also turned and walked towards their respective crafts.

Jess let out a long breath. “This sucks, Dev.”

“Does it?” Her partner asked. “I am glad the carrier is not as damaged as I thought. That's good, isn't it?” She moved a little closer to Jess, glad that the bone chilling cold had moderated to just the damp temperature she had started to become used to in the citadel.

This cold didn't freeze her eyeballs, at least. That let her keep them open so she could watch Jess's face, now outlined in pale gray morning light. Her partner looked like she was in discomfort, and Dev wanted to make that not so, but she wasn't really sure how to.

“Yeah, that is good.” Jess said. “We're going to need these carriers.” She paused and chewed the inside of her lip. “We need to get in there, and get this done.”

Dev considered that for a minute. “I will continue mitigating the damage” She decided. “But this all seems very difficult, and dangerous.” She found Jess's hand inches from her face, and studied it briefly, then touched her cheek to it.

The fingers moved, brushing her face gently.

“Its dangerous and difficult and probably we're going to die doing it Dev.” Jess told her. “I'm sorry. Maybe I should have just kept going onto that shuttle when we met. You'd probably have ended up living longer.” She gave her partner a brief hug, then she released her and headed for the hatch. “Let me work up some kind of half assed plan.”

Dev let her go. She spent a moment with her hands in her pockets, then she turned and regarded the stark landscape they were in. It was desolate and empty, but as she watched a seagull floated over the edge of the escarpment and soared overhead, it's wings outstretched.

Almost effortless. Dev watched it in mild fascination as it circled slowly down. It was a totally different kind of flying than she did, and she wondered what it felt like, to just spread out your arms and let the wind take you.

After a moment she exhaled and turned back to the carrier. She did a walk around it, her boots sliding a little on the gravel and made a mental note to take care with the jets on the way back up. The ground was uneven as well, and she placed her steps carefully, walking up behind the craft and checking the dull surface of the skin.

It was marked with carbon, but as she continued around, she was gratified to see that there were no near burn throughs, and the structure itself was not compromised. She put her hand on it, feeling the chill of the metal against her skin, and let herself feel a little sad.

There was so much discomfort. Jess was unhappy and the other agents and techs were, and there seemed to be no end to the incorrectness they were involved in.

It made her sadder, remembering the interesting times she and Jess had back in the citadel, and on their missions. Even sadder than that when she remembered Doctor Dan, and how happy he'd been over her performance.

Now, everything she'd known might be lost.

Maybe everything she was, if she ended up dying. Dev felt very incorrect inside thinking about that. She felt very incorrect overall, and rather than stay outside looking at her carrier, she half walked half slid down the slope and trotted to the hatch, climbing up inside to see what she could do about it.

**

Jess left the hatch open and walked inside, dropping into her seat and for a minute, just sitting there staring at the screens. Part of her knew that she should start bringing up met and nav, and getting the plan started, and another part of her was just looking bleakly into fate not wanting to do a thing.

She had to wonder, given how her luck was running, if going a mile further was even smart or just heading into the inevitable.

She found herself wondering, for the first time, if what she was doing had a point. Was the battle for a purpose, or were they just so used to conflict it had just become an indelible part of their

psyche. Had Dev's question, about why they didn't just work together asked in all open innocence not had a point?

Did it even really matter anymore?

Jess exhaled, feeling a sense of exhaustion she'd thought she'd left behind with her injury. She honestly didn't feel like even moving, much less forcing herself to go be a leader of her little, battered force.

She heard footsteps, and looked up to see Dev climbing up the ramp and into the carrier. As she got inside she looked up and their eyes met and Jess had the uncanny feeling the bio alt knew everything that was going through her head. “Hey.” She murmured.

“Hello.” Dev came over and sat down on the floor next to her seat. “I think the outside's okay.”

Jess studied her, guiltily glad of the distraction. “You look bummed.”

Dev tilted her head back and regarded her. “I do? What does that look like?”

Jess remained silent for a minute. “Like you're sad.” She finally answered “Or.. what do you call it? In discomfort?”

“I am.” Dev agreed. “They teach us not to say things like sad, or mad though. It reminds natural borns that we're people.” She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. “So we say.. we're in discomfort. Or .. incorrect. But I really am sad. I feel bad about the big place, and what happened to the others, and about Doctor Dan.”

Jess reached over and touched her head, stroking her soft, straight hair in an almost hypnotic pattern.

“And because you're sad.” Dev continued. “I like it a lot more when you're happy. I don't want you to feel bad.”

“Is that because you're programmed that way?” Jess asked, in a mild tone.

“No.” Dev responded immediately. “It doesn't feel like programming. I just hurt.. “ She touched her chest. “When I see you feeling bad.”

“Do ya?”

“I do.” Dev scooted around a little so she was facing Jess. “Isn't it strange?”

Her partner smiled a little. “I don't think so. I feel bad when you're sad too.” Jess felt a certain sense of something altering inside her, that eased her breathing and made her shoulders shift a little and relax.

Dev studied her gravely. “Could it be part of that love thing?”

“In me?”

“In me.” The bio alt's face edged into a faint smile. “I looked it up in comp. I”m not really sure about all the contexts but I think it's possible that I love you.” She pronounced seriously.

Jess sat there blinking.

“Is that okay?” Dev put a hand on her knee. “You seem in distress. Was that incorrect of me to say?”

Jess felt her whole body flush, bringing a sense of warmth that made her slump back in her chair and gaze at her companion with slightly widened eyes. “I don't know. Was it?”

“I don't know either.” Dev chuckled a little. “But I don't feel bad when I say it.”

Jess smiled back at her “I don't feel bad when I hear it.” She plucked at Dev's sleeve. “C'mon up here.” She edged over and made space for the bio alt in the chair next to her, a squishy but very comforting situation. With a sigh, she put her arms around Dev and hugged her.

Dev hugged her back, putting her head down on Jess's shoulder despite the awkward position. “This feels good.”

“It does.” Jess willingly surrendered the gloom of her thoughts for the pleasure of the contact. With everything so bad, this bit of friendly affection almost bowled her over with it's potent appeal and though she knew nothing would change because of it, she wanted it anyway.

Wanted to hear Dev say that, about loving her. It made her crazy happy for no really understood reason since she'd never really wanted or thought about feeling that way. It wasn't really encouraged, in the corps. Too much baggage.

Too much death. “Dev, you're the one good thing in my life right now.” She uttered softly. “How did I let that happen?” She sounded melancholy even to herself. “I don't want all this to be happening. I wanted to have some good times with you.”

Dev wasn't at all sure what to say to that. This was all so outside her experience all she could really do was go along with it. Certainly, the words made her feel good inside. Jess seemed to be saying that she was important to her, and that she was valued and that was all good.

It did feel good, too, to hug Jess and be hugged by her, and Dev considered that this was different than the whole sex thing. That was good, and she liked it a lot, but this was something else. “I think I do really love you.” She said. “I can't imagine what else this could be.”

“Lucky me.” Jess exhaled softly. “At least I got to know what that felt like.”

Dev felt unhappy about that. “You think bad things will keep happening.” She said, not quite a question.

Jess swallowed an unexpected lump in her throat. “Dev, we're so screwed here. I don't know what the hell to do.” She admitted. “I know we have to go try and attack them but... shit. What's the point??”

Dev considered this question at it's face value. “Well.” She said. “The point would be that we could stop them from hurting more people, and rescue Doctor Dan.” She looked up at Jess's profile, half hidden in the hood of her parka. “Correct?”

Jess blinked at her again.

“Not correct?”

Her partner let her head rest against Dev's and closed her eyes. “I'm an idiot. Keep thinking for me, willya Dev?” She let the moment go on, absorbing the unexpected grace and the surprisingly pragmatic advice from her bio alt buddy. “I know we have to go and do it. I'm just... “

“Tired?” Dev suggested. “I am. We didn't get much rest.”

“Yeah.” Jess said, after a moment. “Tired, and pissed off, and kind of discouraged.” She felt Dev's hands fold around one of hers, and without thinking, she lifted her hand up and kissed the back of Dev's knuckles. It caused a flash of memory, confusing and vivid, and she remembered then seeing her father do that one time.

Was that inherited? Jess wasn't sure, but the gesture made her smile anyway. “We should move our asses and get this show on the road.” She said, reluctantly. “We're too close to where they last saw us. Don't want them showing up on top of us.”

Obediently, Dev untangled herself and stood up, moving around the console and heading for her station. She sat down and started calibrating her systems, still leaving her heavy jacket on.

Jess reluctantly pushed herself to her feet and went to the hatch, looking out over the landscape as she listened to the clanking and thumping of Doug fixing his sensors. The cold wind blew into her face, and she could smell rain on it, the torn clouds overhead heavy with moisture.

She scanned the towering walls of rock around them, figuring if she wanted to she could find some cave to hide out in, but aware too that this would only be delaying the inevitable. She didn't want to do that. “Doug.” She called out, waiting for the techs head to appear. “Time?”

“About ten minutes.” Doug said. “Just making the connections.”

Jess nodded, and stepped down from the carrier, hearing the rising hum of it's systems as Dev brought them online. She spotted April and Mike talking on the far side of Mike's carrier and motioned them over to join her in the middle of the triangle made by the three craft.

They did. Jess pushed her hood back and regarded them. “Those things going to hold together?” She motioned at the carriers.

“Yes.” April nodded. “They were really going after you. We only took a few hits.”

“We lost two backup systems, but Chester put a patch in.” Mike said, when she finished. “What's the plan?”

Jess crouched down and the others did too. She brushed aside the gravel and got down to dirt, using a piece of the rock to draw with. “I checked comp. We're here.” She sketched in a rough outline of the fjords, continuing around to fill in the land between them and the target. “This is approximately where their central command is.”

“Approximately?”

“They move it around.” Jess said. “We usually pinpoint it not by where it is, but how they protect it.”

“Ah.” Mike nodded. “Got it.” He touched one of the lines. “This lets out just north of the line where you think the might be.”

“Exactly. We stick to ground level, follow the land.” Jess said. “Try to stay out of scan, give us a chance to get close before we hit the deep water here.” She juggled the piece of rock in her hand. “We can't depend on met to hide us. We'll get our asses blown up.”

“New game.” April commented.

“New game.” The senior agent agreed. “But the advantage of a new game is, you get to make the ground rules.” She said. “So we pause here.” She marked the spot. “And we see what we can see. If this storm overhead sucks snow down we might be able to use that as cover.”

“So the strategic ops center is here, you think?” April put her fingertip in the dusty surface. “On the edge of the landmass, there?”

Jess nodded. “But I think that's where this new tech comes from.” She touched a different spot “Doesn't do us any good to go to the ops center and try to kill it there – this is where it comes from. There's a big, sprawling complex spread out over this area near the river delta. Hard to get at.”

“Flat, no target to dive at.” Mike murmured.

“No target. It's half underground... hell, it's mostly underground. Can't barely see it except for the sump towers. We've been trying to get in there for years.”

April rested her forearms on her knees. “So what makes you think we'll get in this time?” She asked. There was no sarcasm or challenge in her tone, just bare, raw interest.

“Because we have to.” Jess responded. “Before now we just wanted to.”

Both agents nodded in understanding, and smiled. Jess smiled back at them, understanding their understanding of the situation and bleakly glad she'd ended up with these two, who seemed to have that same animal spirit she knew in herself.

Agents were supposed to have it. But they'd been scraping the barrel for a while, taking in kids who were on the margins who took on the veneer and became killers, were trained to be, but didn't have it in the gut. She did. These two did. Jess grinned a little wider.

Maybe they'd make something of this fiasco after all. You never knew. “Okay, let's get buttoned up and rolling.” Jess stood and casually scraped out the marks with her boot. “When we get to the edge, we'll see what the situation is. Maybe we'll go right in, maybe we'll wait a bit and watch.”

“Sounds good.” April nodded in satisfaction. “Let me just say before we leave – I'm glad you put that knife in Bock's throat. My gut said he was compromised.” She gave Jess a direct look. “But I know you knew him a while.”

Jess's lips twitched. “Dev told me the same thing.” She confirmed. “She said something changed in him since we left the citadel, that he wasn't right.”

Mike's eyebrows lifted. “Pretty bold for a bio.”

“She's not a regular bio.” April said before Jess could say it. “I know you told us that, but you can see it. No bio I ever heard about would have ordered the techs around like at that base. That's outside.” She studied Jess's face. “That a scam? You can tell us. We're probably going to die together.”

Jess regarded them for a moment. She didn't feel any temper at the question, just curiosity and she spent a bit of time thinking about what she thought about Dev being a scam. “Are you saying maybe she's not a bio?”

April nodded. “Yeah. Something like that. Maybe they were just trying to sell Interforce on the idea. Put in a ringer.”

Was that possible? Jess wasn't sure if she felt excited or disappointed by the thought. “Dev thinks she's a bio.” She acknowledged. “I'm gonna guess only Kurok knows for sure. But what she told me, she went through the regular deal with them.”

“Could be lying.” Mike suggested.

Now that caused a temper flare, but Jess held it down. “I don't' think so.” She remarked mildly. “Some of the things she's said, some of the things she's done, wasn't a natural born acting as a bio. It's too.. “ She considered. “It's too layered.”

April nodded again.

“Besides, Kurok was one of us.” Jess said. “Ops tech.” She added. “Partner'ed with my dad. Very out there in terms of fate, eh?”

Both junior agents eyes widened. “Really?” Mike said. “How'd he get... he left Interforce and went up topside?”

“I think he more like created the bio station. Created the bios. That's why they grabbed him. They want him to do that for them.” Jess dusted her hands off. “So now you know. I want to get him back... not so much for our side, but for me, and for Dev.”

“Got it.” April said. “More going on then we knew.” She stuck her hands in her parka pockets. “School said there'd be days like that.”

Jess chuckled, remembering being given the same advice. “Been a while hearing that but yeah, there are days like that.” She turned and regarded the sky. “Here it comes.” She felt the first patter of icy drops against her skin. “Let's go.”

They parted, and returned to their vessels, Jess hopping up into hers and shutting the hatch as the thunder rumbled softly overhead. It wasn't a bad storm, not like the ones they'd been seeing, but any met now made her more than slightly nervous. “Hey Devvie.”

“Hello.” Dev was standing by her chair, holding a steaming cup. Now that the hatch was closed, she put the cup down and stripped off her jacket and stored it. “Are we ready to go?”

“In a few minutes. Doug's just buttoning up.” Jess went and got a cup for herself, feeling the warmth start to gather around her as the air handlers kicked in. “I think we've got the start of a plan.”

“Excellent.” Dev sounded confident. She picked up her cup and sat down in her chair, swiveling it around to face her partner. “I hope we can do good work and rescue Doctor Dan “ She said. “I have a lot of things I want to ask him.”

Jess chuckled. “I bet you do.” She went to her own console and dropped into her chair, lifting her cup and toasting Dev with it. “We're going to give our best shot at this, Dev. No guarantees, though.”

Dev nodded. “I know.” She said. “We can just do our best.”

They drank quietly together, with the occasional glance at the screen that showed Doug finishing up his work. Then Dev put her cup into it's holder and turned her seat around, fastening the restraints around her and swinging her chair closer to the controls.

A very natural motion, even after so short a time. Jess watched her work, part of her mind casting back to what Mike had asked. Dev's speech was, still, consistent with her origins, the turns of phrase coming naturally to her and completely unaffected.

It was layered. Jess felt her own trust ring true, and catching Dev watching her in the mirror, that little, cute grin on her face, made her almost believe it had nothing to do with how she felt for her.

Almost.

Jess tried to be honest with herself most times. She knew she didn't want to think any ill of Dev and she knew she had allowed a very soft spot for the bio alt to form in her heart but she also knew, or wanted to make herself believe that the reason she felt that way was because some innate instinct in her said it was okay.

She'd never felt that way about anyone before. She'd always kept everyone at an arms distance, understanding that people were people and they all had their own personal stories and motives.

But not Dev. She'd felt from the start that Dev was true, and she knew damn well that Dev trusted her wholly – and liked her.. no, apparently loved her with a full hearted honesty that in itself seemed unlike the rest of humanity that Jess had encountered.

Now, that could be true, or it could be the strength of her own desire to believe making it true, but Jess found herself not actually caring. To her it was true. She didn't want to believe otherwise.
“Hey Dev?”

“Yes?” Dev was doing the last of her pre flight checks.

“What's the first thing you remember?”

Dev considered for a moment. “You mean, of anything?” She asked. “I think it was of the play ring.” She went on without waiting for Jess to answer. “We were all in the ring and they had just fed us, and we were tumbling around in the sun.” A smile crossed her face. “I remember going near the plas and seeing downside through it.”

Definitely the memories of someone spacer born. That at least was true. Jess relaxed, and settled back in her comfy chair. “What was that like?” She asked, as she started getting her boards up. “I think the first thing I remember is going in the water. The sand and rocks and what it smelled like, and getting water up my nose.”

“I don't' remember thinking anything about it, really. I was very small.” Dev said. “Just a huge gray and white thing rolling under us. I didn't know what it was.” She settled into place. “Should I lift?”

“Sure.” Jess said. “Stay as close to the ground as you can, and follow the valley heading south.” She got her screens in place and set up scan, feeling the carrier shift underneath her as the landing jets kicked gently in. “Send the track you're going to use to the others.”

“Yes.” Dev squirted the track and brought the main engines online, glad the coming of daylight now let her see where she was going in something other than a stark black and green wiremap. She started down the valley, keeping low along the slope they'd been landed on.

It seemed quiet, but she slipped in her ear cups and turned on the external sensors, listening to the soft whistle of the wind and the shift of the gravel they were flying over.

Behind her she could hear Jess get up and start rattling around, but she focused her attention on her route. She was aware of the two other carriers swinging in behind her, and they flew along in single file between the towering walls.

It was nice, sort of. There was almost no wind, and only a mist of icy, freezing rain and after a few minutes she felt her body relaxing into the flight.

“Hungry?” Jess asked. “I'm going to break out some rations.”

“Yes.” Dev felt her stomach rumble. “That would be very nice, thank you.”

Jess removed two sets of rations from the store. “When we stop at the south escarpment, we should do a little fishing. This stuffs not going to last and we didn't have time to load on that beef stuff from the base.”

“I wasn't sure I liked that.” Dev admitted. “I have to look up what a cow is. I hope it's not as appealing as that bear.” She adjusted a settling. “I like the fish better.”

“Me too.” Jess agreed. “So we should catch some fish, and I'll make you my one specialty.” She brought over one of the plas trays with their utilitarian meal, two fish rolls a dried shrimp cake and shredded mushrooms with a dispenser of kack. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks Jess.” Dev reached out and touched her leg, giving her knee a squeeze. “I would love to try your special thing.”

Jess laughed, blushing, then cleared her throat. “Yeah and the fish isn't bad either.” She winked and then settled onto the low bench next to the console, resting her own meal on her knee as she put her cup down on the floor of the carrier.

Now what did that mean? The bio alt wondered. Was it something to do with sex? It seemed so, based on the blush that was still coloring Jess's distinctive cheekbones. Well, that was all right with her.

Dev put the cup in one of the holders and studied her partner from the corner of her eye. Jess could, she knew, have gone back and eaten comfortably at her own station, not sitting here on the narrow bench. But she seemed content to be where she was, her elbow only inches from Dev's hip. “I think it will take about three hours to get to the stopping point.” She said. “I don't want to go too fast since it's so narrow here.”

“Fine.” Jess munched her fish roll. “Tell you what I'll get some sack out time while we're underway, then I'll spell ya.” She extended her legs, and gently bumped the back of Dev's calf, leaning back and watching her pilot's profile. “Since we can't sack out together tonight.”

There was a faint flush of color on her pilot's cheeks, and a moment later, Dev glanced aside at her, a tiny little wry grin appearing on her lips, her pale brows scrunching down a little.

Really cute. She picked up a bit of shrimp cake and offered it to the bio alt, grinning back as Dev opened her mouth to accept it, feeling the tickle as her teeth bit gently on the edge of her fingertips.

No, she was sure. Jess gently traced the shape of Dev's lips. If she was sure about anything, she was sure about this. About the raw honesty in those eyes watching hers.

“That's really too bad.” Dev said. “It would be nice to be in an ice cave.”

Jess chuckled softly. “It would.”

They were on auto nav, but Dev was keeping one hand on the controls and an eye on the comp, because of the closeness of the walls. Shyly she broke off a piece of her fish roll and returned the offer, feeling her heart beat a little faster at the slow smile on Jess's face, and half closed eyes watching her.

Oh, that felt good.

Dev found herself feeling happy again, despite how terrible the last little while had been. The look and that smile were filling her heart and she could feel an almost ache in her chest from it.

She hoped she got to ask Doctor Dan about it, but she thought surely this was what love was, and no matter what happened to them she was very glad she'd gotten to experience it.

One more thing she'd gotten to do that the rest of the bio alts hadn't. She had such a collection now that she could almost imagine herself going back there just for the human pleasure of telling them all about it.

She turned her attention to the bit of mushroom dangling near her nose and stuck her tongue out to capture the shreds.

Somehow they would make it end right. She was sure of it.

**

The freezing rain had turned to snow by the time they got to the edge of the fjords and they could see the deep, dark waters beyond it, black under a mist of white, thick flurries.

It seemed eerily beautiful. Dev slowed their speed as they reached the edge of the u shaped valley they'd been traveling down and as she did, Jess came forward and put her hands on her shoulders. “We are here.” She glanced at her console. “These are the coordinates you gave.”

“So they are.” Jess agreed. “On the very edge of the horizon there.. “ She pointed in the distance. “That's the coast where the center is, but further east. I don't think they picked us up yet.”

Dev studied the scan intently. “No returns.” She agreed. “It does not see we have been detected.” She paused. “Yet. Are we going to land somewhere?” She asked. “If we clear that edge we will be in the open.”

“I know. Slow down. There.” The agent said, pointing to a shadow at the edge of the slope. “There's an overhang there, get under it if you can. There should be room for us.”

“You have been here before?” Dev inquired.

“Yes. Once.” Her partner replied shortly. “Wasn't one of my better memories.”

“I see.” Dev angled that way, dropping their already low altitude to skim over the snow covered gravel and shallow, iced over channels of water heading down into the sound. It seemed a very sparse and desolate place, there were no moving things anywhere to be seen and at the very edge of the ice she could see waves breaking in a mix of white froth and gray.

The ruffled white surface seemed to show a stiff wind, and as Dev wrapped her hands on the controls she could feel it against the carrier's skin, compensating with the side jets as she fought to bring the craft in line to the far wall.

The shelf Jess had spotted was actually bigger than it first appeared. It was a crack in the rock wall that had fallen away long ago, and once had probably been undercut by the powerful waves. Now, the water had receded a little, and the shelf was almost a cave, the ceiling high enough to admit the carriers so long as they were careful.

Dev was, slowing further and engaging the landing jets, floating just above the ground as she moved them forward with brief, gentle bursts from the side trims. It was a relief to be out of the snowfall and she moved to the back of the shelter and cleared space for the others.

The carrier bumped softly down on it's skids, and she killed the jets, stabilizing the flight systems and shutting down the mains. Ahead of them was the edge of the shelf, and past that, the sound. There were waves rumbling up and crashing below the entrance of the cave, releasing a light spray into the air.

The edge of the rocks was rimed with ice, and Dev opened up the sensors on the outside of the carrier, letting in the low booming of the waves, and the hiss of the surf. She released the controls and flexed her hands, letting out a faint sigh, glad to be out of the wind and down. “We are stable.”

“Tired?” Jess was still perched behind her, gazing out at the water over her head. “Been a long day, huh?”

“Yes, a bit.” Dev admitted. “So much happened today. It's hard to absorb it all.”

“Don't try.” Her partner advised her. “Think about what we're going to do next. We've got a lot coming up.”

“Yes, I know. I think what I will do next is get a drink.” Dev released the restraints and let them retract, then got up out of her pilots chair and stretched her body out. She felt stiff from sitting and it was good to move, even better when she walked around the edge of the console and Jess stepped in front of her and opened her arms.

The hug was nice, and she welcomed it. They hadn't actually gotten to have any rest during the trip – it had gone faster than Jess had anticipated and met and comp had come in that required her review.

So it felt wonderful to be gently rocking in Jess's arms, her back being kneaded as she savored the warmth surrounding her. “What are we going to do now?”

Jess patted her back and released her. “What are we going to do now.” She mused, going to the window and looking out. The snow was coming down harder, making a white curtain that almost obscured the view of the sound. Past the water, in the distance she could see the shape of the other side, and she pondered briefly about her plan's timing. “Pretty damn good question, Devvie.”

Go now? Go later. Going now would preserve as much surprise as she could muster in this little attack. No one in their right mind would fly at the face of the innovation center in broad daylight after being chased down by a squad of hit men.

On the other hand.. Jess listened to Dev getting her hot drink at the station. On the other hand no one in their right mind would fly at the face of the innovation center in broad daylight, because they would be on full optical scan even if she managed to find a route in that would avoid digital. Probably get her ass blown out of the sky maybe even with the new weapon, her and Dev merely a scattering of ions freezing on the way down.

Not very appealing.

If she went under darkness, she'd give them a chance to prepare for an attack, after they got word of the failure of their attack on the pole base. She wasn't sure she wanted to do that, but she also wasn't sure she wanted to fly into their faces either.

Sucked to be her some days.

“Would you like a drink?” Dev asked, politely. “You seem a little unsettled.”

Jess's lips twitched. “Sure.” She said. “I was just trying to decide which of my bad choices I'm going to take. What do you think about flying out now, and getting it over with?”

Dev came back over and handed her a cup, then leaned against her chair, considering the question in her serious, straightforward way. “Hm.”

“Hm?” Jess's brow went up. “What does that mean?”

Dev cleared her throat. “Hm means I really would rather practice sex with you.” She said frankly. “And also, I think flying the carrier into a fight in the storm will likely end up sub optimal.”

Since this was also what Jess thought, she smiled at her partner. “But we'd be a surprise.” She countered, watching the faint twinkle in the bio alt's pretty eyes.

“Or we might get surprised.” Dev countered dryly. “Not in a good way.”

“Or we might get surprised, not in a good way.” Jess conceded. “And I hate surprises, unless I'm the one who's giving them.” She sat down in Dev's chair and sipped her hot seaweed tea. “So here's what we're going to do. We're going to wait until just before dark, and come in then, but not in a frontal assault. I want to do some recon and see if we can slip in through the service intakes.”

“Okay.” Dev didn't really know what that was, but it sounded plannish to her, and it meant they could get some rest. She was good with both of those things. “I think we are out of scan and visual here. Its' a good hiding place.”

It was. Jess watched the surf spray laying down an ice curtain, and figured in about an hour you wouldn't be able to even see the three carriers crouched under the ledge. They could stay there in safety and make sure they were ready to attack, let the snow storm go overhead, and coming in at twilight would neatly split the difference between daylight and darkness.

Maybe she would get lucky. Maybe they all would. Jess leaned on the console and put herself at peace with her decision. “Send a squirt to the others. Tell them to bunk down and get some rest while they can.”

Dev smiled.

“You like that idea.”

“I do.” Dev agreed immediately. She turned and settled an ear cup as she reached for the comms key, setting her cup down on the edge of the console. “Tac 2, Tac 3, Tac 1 admin.”

“Ack.” Doug's voice echoed softly in her ear. “Here.” Chester chimed in with somewhat surprising unorthodoxy. “Just got everything shut down and squared.”

“We are to stay here until one hour to dark.” Dev said. “Then we will proceed.”

“Big old ack.” Chester said. “Going to start a regen.”

“Ack, seconded.” Doug sounded relieved. “Syncing comp.”

The screens flickered as the two carriers published their findings to her database, then settled down to chew over the data, updating her charts with three metrics now.

Dev clicked off and removed her ear piece. “They confirmed.” She paused. “Do you know what we are going to do when we get there? Or are we going to decide that then?”

There was absolutely no censure in Dev's tone, only curiosity, but Jess waited for her temper to spark at the question. After a moment she frowned when it didn't.

“Was that incorrect to ask?” The bio alt prompted hesitantly.

“Yes.” Jess answered. “No.” She corrected herself. “Shit, I don't know at this point. I thought we could come in at the waterline, and see if we could hide the carriers in the rocky escarpment that's at the shore there.” Jess said. “Then find a way in. No way to know how we do that until we do it, but there's openings to the sea where they tunnel in water for the turbines.”

“Like in the cave place, in the citadel?”

Jess nodded.

“It's too bad you didn't bring your board thing then.” Dev mused. “You were amazing with that.”

Slowly, Jess turned and regarded her, one eyebrow inching up until it was buried under the unruly hair on her forehead. “My board thing.”

“Yes.” Dev got up and imitated what she'd seen Jess do, holding her arms out and wiggling her butt a little. “It was really interesting.”

Jess clapped her hand over her mouth and closed her eyes. “Don't do that.”

Dev straightened up. “No?”

“If I have to imagine myself looking like that I'll never be able to stay up on that board.” Jess informed her, eyes still tightly shut. “Anyway, trying to get close to the shoreline on that thing would end up with me being fish food.” She cautiously opened one blue eye then the other one when Dev didn't seem to be inclined to repeat the motion.

“Okay.” Dev went back to her tea and took a swallow, making a small adjustment in the carrier's systems. Now that they were out of the wind and the snow, the energy exchange at the skin of the vessel wasn't as drastic, and she calculated that the batteries would let them keep the environmental systems warming them until they were ready to go.

That was good. But she still wished she had her lined suit. Just looking at all the ice outside made her a little chilly and she moved around a bit, to get her energy back up.

Jess came up behind her and leaned her elbow on Dev's shoulder, just watching the spray turn into ice in front of them. They both watched in silence for a few minutes, sipping from their cups as the dull light from outside the overhang reflected through the frozen filigree.

“Know what I miss?” Jess said, suddenly.

“What?”

“Rad. The gloom all the time gets to me.” Jess admitted. “Wish we'd found some of the old school pills they used to take in that base.”

Dev tried to think about what she felt about rad, but she hadn't had the experience of it enough to really know. “I remember liking the sun.” She said. “They also put us in the sun a lot during sleep but you didn't know you were in it after you woke up.”

“Rad cheers me up.” Jess put her cup down and tickled Dev's ear. “Maybe if we take a nap together, that'll cheer me up. You think?”

Dev immediately grinned.

“Cheered you up already.” Jess turned her back on the window and headed to the back of the carrier, setting her cup down on her console as she passed. She opened the gear trunk and unhooked the back latch, letting down the flap that would give them space to lay down on.

She was tired. Now that she'd laid out a plan that allowed for rest, she could admit that to herself and as she spread the two sleep sacks out over the hard surface she was already imagining how good it would feel to lay down and relax.

The fifteen minutes she'd ended up with at the base didn't really cut it. Once she had the sacks sorted out to her liking, she stepped back from them and started undoing the catches on her half armored jumpsuit.

Dev had already stripped down to her gray under-suit and she was folding her uniform up and putting it neatly away in the small locker assigned to her in the carrier. She eased into the sanitary unit and used it, aware of the metal and mechanics nearly brushing her skin.

'So the put you in a capsule to sleep in?” Jess's voice rumbled from outside the panel.

“Yes.” Dev finished her business and emerged. “It was like an egg.” She explained. “Oval shaped, and soft inside. They said it was supposed to remind us of before we were hatched. They were all on a rotating ring, that went along the skin of our part of the creche.”

Jess came over and undid the neck fastenings of her under-suit, pulling down one side to inspect the burn mark on her arm. At the base, it had seemed a little inflamed, but now it was dark and apparently healing. “Looks good.” She grunted. “I don't know what I would do if someone made me sleep in an egg.”

“It's comfortable.” Dev assured her, as her sleeve was pulled back up. “The motion rocks you to sleep, like when we were on the boat.”

“But you're closed in.”

“Yes.”

“Yuk.”

They sprawled together on the platform, and Dev squiggled over against the back wall, while Jess extended her long length next to her. “Ugh.” The agent exhaled, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling of the carrier. “Wish I knew what the real deal is back at the citadel.”

“I do too.” Dev answered softly. “I would like to know if everyone is okay.” She turned her head and looked at Jess. “I miss having my book with me.”

Jess's eyes widened a little. “You didn't bring it?”

Dev shook her head.

Jess regarded her with a perplexed expression. “Sorry about that.” She ventured eventually. “I never...” She paused to think. Did she care about her possessions back in the citadel? Were there any memories invested in them?

Not so much. “Anyway. Sorry about that.” She repeated somewhat awkwardly. “When we get through this whole crap shoot, we can go back and look for it.”

Dev made a little face. “If it's like the North station, I don't know if I want to do that.” She admitted. “It makes me feel bad to think of people like Clint and Jason all burned up.”

Jess folded her hands over her stomach and tilted her head a little, thinking about Jason and the rest of the people in the citadel dead and rotten on the floor.

It didn't make her feel bad, but then, she didn't expect it to. That's how people like her were made, after all. You just didn't care. That was the whole point, of the battery. It found people who had no sympathy. Had no empathy.

Then she thought about Dev all burned up and felt the immediate, physical difference. Her stomach twisted and her heart gave a huge thump, and she felt a silent scream of horror assemble itself inside her head.

Her eyes popped wide open, and she stared at the ceiling. The sensation was so uncomfortable it felt like she'd been shot in the gut.

“Jess?” Dev put a hand on her arm. “Are you all right? You seem in discomfort.”

“I am.” Her partner agreed. “I think my navel is going to explode.”

Dev hiked herself up on her elbow and gazed at her in alarm. “Should I get a medical kit?

Jess sighed. “Nothing in there for this.” She said, mournfully. “Tell you what, kiss me and it'll probably go away.”

“Uh.. what?” Dev looked extremely confused. “What does that have to do with you being in discomfort?”

“Trust me.” Jess rolled onto her side and tilted her head, as Dev, with a faint shrug, leaned in to kiss her. Sure enough, when their lips met she felt the turmoil relax, as her body found something else to interest it aside from thoughts of her partner toasted like a three day old fish.

Everyone could die, after all. Including her. She gently explored Dev's lips, the tension easing and moderating to a different type as Dev casually draped her arm over her hip.

They moved closer and she edged back over onto her back again, coaxing Dev with her until the bio alt was leaning over her, their bodies brushing through the gray under-suit fabric. She slid a hand between them and unfastened the catches on Dev's, rewarded with the touch of warm skin moving under her touch.

Somehow her own suit got opened, and she savored the heat as Dev pressed gently against her. She swallowed as a pleasant ache erupted in her gut and washed away some of the stress knotting her muscles. It felt good and she wanted more of it, stifling a smile as Dev's fingers started a curious exploration of her breast, the edge of her thumb brushing against her nipple.

Not really sure what she was doing yet, obviously, and yet that was part of the exciting raw edge of this new relationship of theirs. Jess had no idea really what her bio alt partner was going to do – sometimes the surprises were great. Sometimes they just made them both laugh.

She slid the under suit down off Dev's shoulders, blinking as the dim overhead light outlined her slim form and glared highlights off her pale hair. She rolled onto her side again and Dev agreeably adjusted, taking the opportunity to strip her under-suit off to her waist, exposing her back to the cool air.

Dev's attentions moved lower, tentatively nibbling her skin as Jess helpfully peeled the bottom part of her suit off. There was a faint hint of the pleasantly scented but strange soap they'd found in the base, the warmth of Dev's body altering the smell into something Jess found quite attractive.

She slid a hand across Dev's hip and a moment later she felt her partner's thighs clamp gently around her leg and she leaned against her, bare skin now touching bare skin.

Worry about the mission evaporated. Her heart lightened and she gave herself over to the pleasure, sincerely hoping no alert, no squirt, or inopportune knock on the hatch interrupted them.

Was wrong, probably, but she didn't care.

**

A soft chime woke them up, Jess rolling off the platform and standing up before it sounded more than twice. She reached up and silenced it, feeling a restoration of energy that reassured her. “That felt good.” She remarked. “You agree?”

Dev was curled up with her arm still wrapped around a folded blanket she used as a pillow. “Yes.” She agreed. “And the sleep was nice too.”

Jess half turned and folded her arms over her bare chest, one eyebrow hiking, and a rakish grin appearing on her face. “Why Dev.” She drawled. “I didn't know they programmed you for hedonism.”

“Hedonism.” Dev mused, unwinding herself from her sleeping sack and sitting up. “No. I don't think so. The only time I ever heard that word before was from some of the proctors talking about

stealing fish eggs from the lab." She worked her way off the shelf and stood up, going to the storage shelf and retrieving a fresh under-suit from her pack. "I don't really know what that was all about."

"Ah huh." Jess put her hands on her hips and watched, a mild, amused look on her face. After a moment, this disappeared and she went over to her own pack and rummaged in it. She pulled out a thermal under-layer and slipped into it, the micro thin fabric almost sticking to her skin.

On top of that she put her under-suit, and then her half armored jumpsuit, sealing the catches around her. She could hear some soft sounds outside the carrier, and she walked over to the window near Dev's chair and looked out.

April was already armed, and walking around the ledge they were parked on, a long blaster cradled in her arm. Her partner had an engine cowling open and was halfway inside, and next to them, Mike and Chester were just emerging from their craft, long streams of fog issuing from their mouths.

Jess ran her fingers through her hair and retrieved a bottle of kack from the dispenser. "How's the met look?"

Dev was fastening her flight suit. She sidestepped over to her station and pulled a pad over, her fingertips tapping lightly over it. "There is still some snow, and heavy fog."

"Perfect." Jess smiled. She shrugged into her parka and hit the hatch, letting in a blast of cold air that thoroughly woke her up, and nearly put frost on her eyebrows in the process. "Bitchin."

April heard her, and detoured over. "Met looks good."

"Does." Jess agreed, her ears catching the sound of Dev exiting the carrier behind her. She saw April's eyes glance past her shoulder, then return and then heard the soft crunch of Dev's boots against the frosty iced stone ground.

Mike had spotted them and was walking over, raising a hand in greeting to Dev as she moved past and joined Doug at his engine. "Good to get a rest. "He commented. "Haven't had that long a nap in years."

No, sometimes you didn't. Jess nodded. Sleep wasn't assumed. Even in the citadel, which was... well... had been safe, there were always night alarms, sounds, sudden assignments.. you never could count on a full night's sleep. "Yeah, nice to get a shift in." She said. "Lets' get a meal in, then we leave."

"Do we know where we're landing?" April asked, bluntly.

"No." Jess smiled. "I know there used to be a little, rocky flat at the tidal boundary but it's a toss if it's still there. If it is, we'll make for that if we make it in under scan. If not..."

"If not." Mike mused. "If not, we nose first, take out everything we can?" He watched Jess's face, alertly.

She shrugged. "Something like that, but I'd rather get out and get back with something worth the effort. I don't want this to be an end run."

April nodded in agreement. "You think they'll be expecting us, really?"

Jess nodded back. "Sure." She said. "What they did, and my history? They know I'm coming." She walked over and touched the ice covered rock wall. "But I'm betting they'll think I'll be coming for revenge. Heading for Dover base. Biggest of theirs, and a training center."

"For what they did to North?" Mike hazarded.

"For what they did to Base 10." Jess turned and looked at him, her pale eyes taking on the sheen of the ice around her. "That's why they came after us, and wanted to blow us out. They knew I'd come after them." She smiled without any humor at all showing. "I have a family history of unrelenting insanity when it comes to revenge."

April studied her with a mild expression on her face. "I think we studied your grandfather in strategy at school."

“You did. So did I.” Jess turned, crossing her arms over her chest. “Funny watching my whole class make the connection and turn around to stare at me.” She released a faint chuckle. “Grandpa Jack and his cobbled up thermo nuke taking out three bases and half their control stations.”

“That was the last one, wasn't it?” Mike leaned against his carrier.

“That we know of.” Jess wandered over and peered at whatever it was Dev was wrenching at. 'They've still got three headed fish coming out of that area, made it useless to live in for a half million years. Dirty as hell. I figure if they'd come up with one to respond with we'd already know it.”

She tapped her partner on the shoulder. “You done in there?”

Dev pulled her head up and shook her hair out of her eyes. “Almost.” She said. “I'm giving Doug one of our spare sensors.” She explained. “This one's inoperative.” She held up the part, which was crispy and darkened. “About two minutes more.”

“G'wan and finish.” Jess patted her hip. “Then let's get ramped up and go.” She addressed the rest of them. “When we fly in, make sure you're both lined up right on my axis.”

Both agents nodded, then turned and headed back to their craft. Jess loitered around the engine until Dev hoisted herself up over it, braced on her hands, then hopped backwards off, landing with a tiny skid on the ice. “Okay, that should be optimal.” She told Doug. “Try it and let me know.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Doug closed the cowling and locked it down then he trotted off and hopped up into his carrier, the ramp already retracted by his impatient partner, the hatch thumping closed behind him.

“Good job, Devvie.” Jess draped her arm over the bio alt's shoulders and steered her towards their rig. “You've become the queen of the wrenchers.”

“The what?” Dev dusted her hands off and then stuck them in her pockets to keep them warm. “I”m glad I could help out with that system. The component failure in the tracking device would not have been good if we had needed to locate them.”

Jess stopped. “Tracking system?”

Dev also stopped, since she didn't want the warmth along her side to be removed. “Yes.” She said. “It must have been damaged in the fight. The component board was completely destroyed.”

Jess cocked her head thoughtfully. “Hm.” She continued on, climbing up the ramp with Dev at her side, and waiting for it to retract and the hatch to close behind them. “So now they have a component that's the same as ours?” She asked. “It's new? One of the ones that just came in?”

A little puzzled, Dev nodded.

“Have Chester and Mike check theirs.” Jess said. “Do we have another spare if theirs is older?”

“Yes.” Her partner responded. “But I believe that one is functional. They didn't say it wasn't.”

“Uh huh. Well, if it's older, functional or not, replace it.” Jess said, stripping off her outside gear and stowing it. “Tell them it's a precaution.” She dropped down into her chair and pulled her console over, one hand skittering across the surface inputting data

“Okay.” Dev removed her jacket and heavy boots, putting them aside but not away before she went over to her station and settled an ear cup into one ear. “Tac 1, Tac 3.” She keyed the sideband channel. “Requesting comp link, and diag.”

“Ack.” Chester responded amiably. “Stand by.”

Jess listened to the exchange with one ear, while she set up a battle plan in front of her. Details were now slowly edging into place, and the picture of what was happening was starting to form in the back of her head. Coincidences not really coincidental, facts and pseudo facts sorted themselves out were starting to line up.

“Jess.” Dev turned in her seat. “The component they have is a Model 12C2. Older than ours, and older than the one that was in Doug's system.” She reported. “That seems incorrect. That carrier was just retrofitted. It should have had, at least, the version we just replaced.”

“Uh huh.” Jess nodded. “Replace it with the new one you've got here, mkay?”

“Of course.” Dev put her ear bud down and got up to re-don her jacket. “I have told them to open the system for it.” She advised. “Would you like to examine the part?”

“Nope.” Jess got up and retrieved a padded square insulation pack. “Put it in there, and leave it just outside the rock wall there.” She instructed. “Slosh some water over it so it'll freeze down.”

Dev was pulling on her boots, and she paused to look at Jess, with a puzzled expression. “Is it correct to leave a piece of our systems in the open?”

“In this case, yes.” Jess smiled a little. “I'll tell ya all about it later, Dev. Just do it.”

“Yes” Dev straightened up and took the pack, reaching into the stores and removing a card from it that she put inside the square. “Be right back.” She tugged her hood up and stamped her feet well into her boots then headed for the hatch, a determined look on her face.

Jess went back to her plan, nodding a little to herself.

**

They were underway. Dev slid her carrier sideways out from under the ledge, doing her usual circle before she moved aside to allow the other two craft to exit.

The lowering light cast very pale shadows past her, the sky already a dark gray on the horizon rather than the lighter dun they'd been before. There was still a steady snowfall going on, and the edge of the water crashing up against the ice was thickening into a slushy mass.

There was nothing else to be seen, save the channel they'd come down, and the far off edge of land. No living thing was in range of eye or scan, save some blips Dev caught deep under the water that seemed large, but solitary.

Maybe they were whales. Dev dredged up a smile for the idea, then she tugged her restraints a bit tighter and waited for the other two to form up behind her.

She had her course programmed in, and the carrier was as ready as it was going to be. Jess was behind her, setting up her weapons and whistling softly under her breath. “We are ready to go.”

“Go baby go.” Jess responded, glancing to her right to make sure her drop kit was secure. “Let's go do what we do.”

Dev engaged the engines and they started forward, keeping tight to the waves as she skimmed just over the surface of a dark and frothy sea. She had the heaters on for the forward plas, and her view was clear, the clouds building overhead as they moved quickly along.

The trip would be relatively short. Dev had no idea really what they would find at the end of it, but she realized she wanted to find something at the end, get some kind of final resolution to this task, and then... and then see what life was going to be like for them afterward.

She felt sure, inside her, that they were going to continue. She didn't want to stop living, and she thought Jess didn't really want to either. So it would be interesting to see what they would do if everything was gone where they came from.

She thought about Doctor Dan, and what he would do if they rescued him. Would he want to go back to the creche? Would he want Dev to come with him?

Dev thought carefully about that, and didn't like the feeling that created. She didn't want to leave no matter how difficult it was all turning out to be. Then another thought occurred to her. What if Doctor Dan asked Jess to come too? Would Jess want to go up to station, and see what it was like?

See the sun?

Dev frowned. She still didn't want to go back to the creche, but if Doctor Dan was okay, and he asked Jess, and Jess wanted to... well, maybe she would have to go.

Anyway.

“Hey Devvie.” Jess called over from her station. “Get me a long range, wouldja?”

Dev set up the scan and told it to output to Jess's console. “Yes.” She picked up a container of seaweed tea and sipped from it, while another thought occurred to her. “Jess?”

“Yup?”

“What are we doing to do if our place is like North base was?”

Jess remained quiet for a time, then she cleared her throat. “You mean, if it's all gone there? Like, all gone?”

“Yes.”

Another silence. “What do you want to do?” Jess asked. “If we can't go back there. You want to go back upside?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” Dev stated firmly. “I do not want to go back to the creche.”

Jess smiled to herself. “So you're sure about that now, huh?”

“Yes, I am very sure.” The bio alt said. “However this event ends, I never want to go back there. Ever.”

Jess considered that and wondered what exactly Dev's legal status was. “We'll work something out.” She promised her partner. “Don't worry about it.” She added, figuring if they survived the raid, she'd have plenty of time to arrange... something.

She settled back in her chair and reviewed the scan, glad to see nothing on the near or far horizon that might intercept them, but now wondering if that in and of itself wasn't a suspicious warning. They should have patrols out. Especially on this coast, which was so close to their industrial heart.

So were they just waiting for them?

Maybe. Probably. She was probably leading them right into another trap, but this time, her eyes were open and she was waiting to see how she could turn the trap back on them. “Keep low as you can go Dev.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “I'm getting the bottom of this craft wet.”

“Lucky carrier.” Jess snickered.

Dev looked at her in reflection, her face a study in bewilderment. “Excuse me?”

“Never mind.” The agent wriggled into a more comfortable position in her seat and leaned back, her thigh muscles jumping a little in an unconscious release of tension. “I'll explain that all later too.”

Dev shook her head and concentrated on her controls, not leaving anything to the auto pilot this close to the waves. There was no judging when the waves might roll up at them, and she kept a light touch on the landing jets, ready to elevate them if the water got too rough.

She checked her rear comp, and saw the other two carriers obediently in a straight line behind theirs, sticking to their tail. It felt reassuring to have them back there, and let her concentrate on what was ahead of them.

The coastline was starting to become more distinct. She could see the darkness of slopes beyond the edge of the water, but they were gradual and in front of them she could see a lighter colored surface that ran right down to the waves.

It was quiet. She had the external sensors turned on, and only the sound of the waves and the wind echoed softly in her headset.

Her pulse was starting to pick up, and she flexed her hands around the controls, already scanning ahead for the landing place Jess had mentioned. She could see a pinnacle of rock, and past that seemed to be a flatter area, and she adjusted their course slightly to angle towards it.

Scan was short range, and on rapid now. She kept expecting to see the enemy respond to them, and as the minutes went by and they didn't, it made her more nervous rather than less.

She could hear Jess behind her, making a drumming sound, but she didn't dare look behind her to see what her partner was doing. “Ten minutes.”

The weapons systems powered up. Dev could hear the energy surge around her and she focused hard on the route they were taking, lowering their altitude a little more, and steering the carrier around the waves rather than over them. She felt her breathing come a little faster as the land approached, the hills behind the shore now becoming more distinct.

The scan picked up life forms. Dev drew in a breath, then released it when they resolved into sea lions, perched on rocks offshore that comp identified as benign.

Now she could see the structures built into the mildly sloping shoreline, random vertical lines being wire-mapped by scan into vents and narrow towers, the front of the structure sealed and windowless facing the sea.

Like the base was, she remembered. Except for the one opening, that she and Jess had visited.

The rocks here were tan colored though, not the dark slate she'd become used to, and they stood out very distinct against the dark gray of the water that brushed up against them.

The light was fading fast. The clouds overhead were becoming indistinct, and the light snowfall that had continued following them across the water now seemed to be slacking off. Dev angled a little more to the east, so low to the waves that the carrier appeared to blend with the water, the skin melding it's cover to the gray and white surface.

“Go, Devvie go.” Jess rumbled softly. “Right to that beach, there, just past that big upthrust there, see it?”

“Yes.” Dev put a dot on the wiremap. “There?”

“There.”

A wave brushed the bottom of the carrier, rocking it a little. Dev kept them steady though, and a moment later the carrier came behind the rocks and she could no longer see the installation. The beach beyond was cut off from all sides by the cliffs, and a moment later she was over it, selecting a spot near a pile of tan boulders and setting the carrier down onto it with a rotation that put their nose back toward the water.

The other two carriers set down, their skins mottled and morphing from the slate and white of the water to the tan of the rocks and blending in rapidly.

They were down. Dev checked the shields, and did a quick burst scan to see if anything was approaching. “We are clear.”

“Amazing.” Jess was leaning on her elbows and staring at her screens. “We just fly in here, no one says anything, lets us land. What do you think, Dev?”

“I think it's probable they know we are here and are coming to get us.” Dev responded calmly. “What would you like to do? There does not appear to be a route to the facility from this location.”

“There is one. But I'm the only one who's gonna like it.” Jess got up, and came over, flicking on the sideband. “Tac 2, 3, meet waterside, bring water gear.” She released the comm and turned to face Dev. “So here's the deal.”

Dev turned in her seat and listened attentively.

“Just below that big pylon of rock?” Jess indicated the upthrust on the wiremap. “That's their sea intake. I'm going to take Mike and April, and ride the flow inside.”

Dev digested this. “I can't go with you?”

The immediate agreement on Jess's tongue stuck there, as those clear, pale eyes met hers. “B..”

“I wanted to help you rescue Doctor Dan.” Dev explained.

“Yeah I know.” Jess felt a very uncharacteristic sense of confusion. “But you're not that great a swimmer, you know?”

“Yes, thats true.” The bio alt admitted. “I haven't had much practice.” She continued to study Jess. “But also, if something bad happens, I'd rather be with you.”

Oh well, hell. “C'mon.” Jess motioned her over to the stores locker. “You said you knew about their stuff. Maybe we'll need that.” She pulled out a set of gear and then a second. Then she looked up. “If something bad happens, I'd rather be with you too.”

Dev hopped up out of her chair and joined her, studying the gear. “Is this for going under the water?”

“Yes. So you can breathe under there.” Jess handed her a suit. “Put that on over your flight suit. You're gonna need it. Water's a lot colder than the air is.”

“I remember.” Dev agreed, sorting out the new gear. “I got some programming for this. About the under water part. How they made equipment to let you do that.”

“Yeah, that's how most people do it.” Jess muttered under her breath, as she sealed her suit and picked up the breathing pack and it's mask. “Grab those.” She pointed at two pairs of fins and hit the hatch “Let's go. Every minute we wait here is one more minute they can kill us with.”

The suit felt a lot warmer than she expected. Dev picked up the objects and followed her partner out into the chill air. April and Mike were waiting for them, both of them looking surprised at Dev's presence.

“Did you..” April started to ask, glancing at the hatch to her carrier.

“No.” Jess negotiated the half frozen, half wet ground. “Dev's got special programming we're going to need.” She indicated the edge of the water. “Tube's just around the point there.”

“We're going in via the intake?” Mike asked.

“Yes.” Jess glanced at him. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Unexpectedly, he grinned. “Nope. Rather do that then climb that cliff with my ass bare to a blaster.” He indicated the rocks. “Just hope we don't get sucked into a turbine.”

“Don't worry, Dev'll hang on to ya.” Jess slipped her mask over her head and let it hang on her neck, while she strapped the breathing bladder to her side, pausing to do the same for Dev. “She's stronger than she looks.”

Both agents looked at Dev, who blinked back at them without comment.

April remained silent, adjusting the straps on the weapons pack she was wearing and clipping her fins to the hook on the bottom of it.

“Let's go.” Jess started for the water, as the light started to fade and the clouds lowered, snow starting to fall again and dusting their shoulders. Dev glanced behind her, reassured when the carriers blended in to the rock, then she turned and followed Jess towards the surging surf, considering that she might possibly want to find time right now to be afraid.

It seemed like a good time for that.

“Okay.” Jess paused, and faced them. “Make sure the magnos are turned on for the gloves and the knee pads.” She held her hands up. “Soon as we come around the edge of the tube it'll suck you in. Get a grip, and just follow me.”

Dev flexed her hands and felt programming kick in hard, showing her the touch points for the magnets, and giving her the knowledge of when and how to settle the mask, and keep it tight to her. She nodded her head when Jess looked at her, then got right behind her partner and waded into the cold surf after her.

“Good luck.” April said, sliding her mask down as she followed Dev into the water. “Let's go earn our marks.”

“This'll end up shoulder to elbow.” Mike agreed, as he brought up the rear. “We'll start right at the top.”

**

It was cold, and very frightening. Dev felt the water tug hard against her as she copied Jess, sliding the mask into place and holding onto the rocks as she fit the fins over her boots.

A wave nearly swamped her, but she had a good grip and after a second, she regained her balance and continued her task. The water had seeped inside the outer layer of her suit, but the inner one had remained secure, and now she could feel the water between them insulate her a little.

She could feel how cold it was against her face, though, before she put the mask on and her lips and nose had numbed and were only slowly regaining their feeling. Not surprising, she supposed, as snow continued to fall around her and she could feel the ice slush brushing against her body as she edged through the waves.

It was now full dark. She could only barely see the faint light on Jess's wrist, as the agent braced herself against a rock and waited for them to finish gearing up. She then tapped her finger on her mask and tightened the fit, watching them do the same before she turned and motioned them to follow.

Dev did, leaning forward like her partner did and letting the water cover her. As it came over her head, she took a gasping breath in reflex, hearing the soft sound of the reaction from the canister strapped to her side, relieved when her lungs expanded and the mask provided clean air.

It was a simple device. It took in water, made breathing air out of it, and then recycled the exhaled breath into the process. Dev had programming on it, and she understood it's workings, but she realized abruptly the programming was mostly to maintain and manage the devices not so much about using them herself.

That was, the programming told her, one of the things the agents did, like the weapons she knew how to power and fix but not aim herself. She had only rudimentary knowledge of how to put the gear on, for emergencies.

Oh well. It was far too late to go back now. She would just have to use what programming she had and adjust to the situation. It was an emergency, after all... wasn't it?

Dev watched Jess closely, just a bare outline in front of her, and mimicked her motions as best she could. She waved her boots and felt the fins propel her, and she held her hands out in a balancing motion as she swam after Jess. It was quieter than she'd imagined, with just the rush of the water against her ears, and as they moved away from the rocks the water didn't pull so much at her and it became a little more comfortable.

They angled down and approached the tube. Now she could see the end of it, lit dully with a green ring and in that light she could see outlined a metal grate that stretched across from end to end. There was a sense of pressure against her ears, and she swallowed in reflex, feeling it ease as memories of the creche surfaced, those times when they balanced the bio systems and the tanks would cycle.

As they rounded the edge, the force of the water sucked them against the metal with starting fierceness, and she grabbed hold of the grate before the force could suck her through it as April and Mike thumped against it next to her. She glanced at them, their eyes barely visible in the faint light from the helmets.

Jess moved cautiously across the grid, motioning them to follow. She mimed putting her hands carefully on the metal, and shifting her body over the cross pieces. Her knee pads gripped the surface, and she was able to move fairly quickly with her three companions sticking in her shadow with meticulous care.

When she reached the far edge of the tunnel, she stopped and waited until they clustered up next to her. Jess pointed through the square grid, the opening just large enough for her to squirm through it. She reached through with one hand and put it flat on the rounded wall of the tunnel, a faint blue light appearing around her glove after a moment.

She looked back at them.

April nodded and lifted a hand, flexing it's fingers and causing it to glow blue for an instant. Mike and Dev nodded also, but kept both hands firmly in place.

Jess eased through the grate, twisting and getting her grip with a smoothly athletic grace until her entire body was inside, and both hands, and both knee pads were firmly anchored.

She moved a little further, and Dev went next, her smaller form transiting the grate with far more ease as she got her gloves in place and released her leg grip, pulling her lower body in and tucking it next to Jess's. The action was difficult, but she felt it was well within her strength, and now that she was getting used to the pull of the water, it vaguely reminded her of being under heavy G in the creche.

She felt her body adjust to that, shifting and positioning to resist the force almost automatically.

The only light was the faint ones from their gear, and the green ring behind them. Dev concentrated on following Jess, aware of the two agents behind her as they moved along the curved wall of the tube, deeper and deeper into the tunnel until the outer ring and the grid was invisible, and they were coming closer to the intake raceway that sucked the water through turbines they could feel vibrating under their hands.

It was amazing. Dev suddenly felt like despite the strangeness and the imminent danger, being there with the others and working this very difficult task was good and right and she was glad she was doing it. She released one glove and moved it over as Jess did, aware that her partner had paused, and looked back at her, only a slight reflection of her helmet light revealing her eyes.

Dev smiled inside her mask, and saw her partner smile back. Then Jess turned her head and moved further down the tunnel, pausing after about a minute and waiting for the rest of them to catch up.

Jess lifted her hand up and pointed towards a smaller tunnel, half hidden by the curve of the main one. There was a scoop at the edge of it, sticking into the flow and redirecting part of it into the smaller tube, and Jess transferred into it smoothly, this time laying on her belly on the bottom of the curve.

It was still more than wide enough to accommodate her, but she kept her head down and squirmed forward in a side by side motion Dev tried hard to copy. Now that the pressure of the water was behind her rather than at her side, the task was easier, and she got the sense too that the flow was lessening.

Then they came around a slight curve, and Jess stopped.

Ahead of them was a solid ring of light, this one faintly purple. Jess turned as they came up next to her and released one hand from the tunnel, closing her fist, then opening it and fanning her fingers before closing them again.

Scan. Programming kicked in. The ring was a bio scan, like the one they used in the citadel. Dev eyed it, remembering what Jess had said about the ones there, and how they could kill you if you weren't correct.

She doubted any of them were correct right now. She suspected if they passed over the ring, they would be seriously damaged.

Dev studied it. The inner ring was smooth, there were, of course, no control surfaces available but in the green glow, she could see a flush mounted panel behind it, with tracers of lights flickering over its surface. It seemed clear to her that if she could reach it, she might be able to do something useful.

It also occurred to her that of the four of them, she was of least value, and shortest association.

Without further consideration, she released all four magnetized surfaces that held her and let the water yank her forward, so suddenly that even Jess's excellent reflexes couldn't react fast enough to stop her. A flash of purple went past her, and she felt a strong tickle of scan, but then she was through it and activated the magnets to grab on just past the ring.

Excellent. Dev took a moment to look back, a little startled to see Jess's face outlined in the bluish light, so close to the scan she could almost see it reacting to her presence. Her partner's eyes were wide and shocked, and her body was tensed as if she was about to lunge through the ring after her.

So Dev held up a hand, and waved it, then she moved over to the panel and started to examine the surface. Anchoring her knees firmly, she reached inside one of the leg pockets on the over-suit

and removed her portable scanner in the water bag she'd sealed it in, and activated it with some difficulty due to the rubber and her gloves.

The scanner evaluated the system and returned results to her. She observed them, and felt another layer of programming surface, as the codes and outputs slowly came into focus and her understanding. She tuned the scanner and reversed the polarity of it's beam, slowly matching it to the panel's algorithms.

It was difficult. She could barely see the scanner's screen, and the water was thrumming against her, making her waver in the flow.

She glanced to her right, seeing all three agents crouched just on the other side of the ring, watching her intently, and oddly, she felt herself blushing.

Then she returned her attention to the scanner. The codes weren't matching and she frowned, searching in her programming for hints of what to do. It occurred to her that the mission was counting on her to be able to do something useful, and she felt very uneasy about failing in that.

For a long moment she studied the scanner, then she recalled the change she had made to find the fish. She recalled that program in the device and put it in debug, reviewing the code she'd used. It wasn't the same, but there was something there that she felt might be interesting to try.

She made note of the code block and went back to the panel scan, instructing the device to change its matching pattern, referencing her previous block and after a moment, the lights tracing on the panel changed.

That was interesting, she hoped, in a good way. She re tuned the device again and rescanned, and then reversed the polarity of the signal and the lights stuttered, then went out. She turned her head, and saw the purple ring sputter, then morph to a lower, light pink color.

Her eyes met Jess's and Dev had to shrug, lifting one hand and then returning it to the scanner. She shook her head, then sucked in a startled breath when her partner released her hold and sailed through the ring, without taking her eyes off Dev's.

It was over in an instant. Then Jess was grabbing hold next to her, a grin visible behind her mask. She touched the plas front of it to Dev's and gripped her neck, squeezing them together.

It almost made Dev lose her hold. But then the others were alongside and Jess released her, giving her a pat on the side of her head. She looked at both April and Mike, and they both held up one hand with a thumb pointed up at her.

Dev figured that was good. She returned the gesture, then tucked her scanner away and got ready to follow Jess along the tunnel again now that the way was clear.

It was good. She'd done the correct thing. No one had been made dead. An excellent result.

**

Jess held them up just short of the end of the tunnel. The water emptied into a large open space and there was enough light ahead for them to see each other by. Holding a hand up for caution, Jess removed a small reflective square from one of her leg pockets and positioned it, looking carefully up and to all sides to see what was outside the tunnel edge.

Satisfied, she swarmed outside onto the wall, pausing for a long moment to gauge any reaction, before she lifted a hand off the tank and motioned them forward.

Once on the wall, the pressure of the water stopped, and the absence of the thrumming pressure was almost as startling as it's start had been. Dev clung to the wall with one hand and a knee, looking around at the big space with interest. There were grates on one side of it, big and on the bottom. But on the wall there was a ladder mounted, and that's where Jess was heading.

It was still mostly dark. The light from within was a beam focused on the grates, leaving the rest of the space in shadow with only the occasional reflection moving against the wall and across their bodies.

Jess reached the ladder and paused, motioning them to stay against the wall. She removed her fins and clipped them to a ring on her suit, getting her boots on the ladder rungs and moving quickly upward.

Dev watched her, seeing her approach the top of the ladder and remove one hand from the rungs and put it on her blaster grip. She felt motion next to her and saw Mike and April doing the same, both of their eyes glued on their leader.

But Jess released her grip and continued moving upward, the upper half of her body rising up out of the water. When only her boots remained in view, she reached down and motioned them up, and then disappeared completely above the surface.

For a moment, no one moved. Then Dev realized they were waiting for her to go first, and she did, not bothering putting her boots on the rungs just pulling herself up with her arms until she broke the surface, looking quickly around for Jess.

Her partner was standing in a small, open space with her gun out but her body relaxed, apparently just waiting for them to join her. Dev climbed up and over the small wall at the top of the ladder, and let herself down on the other side, moving to the left to let the others out.

She removed her mask and let it hang around her neck as the breather ran out of water to convert, and drew a breath of air that was full of chemical smell and old moisture, abruptly replaced by Jess's scent as she found lips touching hers with gently insistent passion.

“You.” Jess whispered in a barely audible tone. “Are a rock star.” She straightened and took a step back as April emerged from the pool and climbed into the drainage area.

Dev resisted the urge to try and look up what a rock star was. She busied herself getting her gear sorted out, watching Jess and following her lead in draining the water from between the layers of her suits. It ran away down the drain in the floor and she checked her scanner, glad to see it hadn't come to any harm during their underwater entrance.

When they were all secured, Jess motioned them forward, then turned and lifted her gun from her hip, adjusting a setting, then firing at the ground they had been standing on.

Instantly, it was dried, as their suits had already done likewise.

Jess led them through a short corridor and into an area that held lockers lining both walls. Just as they reached it, the sound of a door opening made them all plaster themselves against a dark area to one side of the door, watching as two men entered and went over to different lockers.

They seemed disgruntled. They removed suits from the lockers not very different from the ones Jess's team were wearing, only they seemed bulkier and well worn. The men climbed into the suits and headed for the same place they'd come out of the tunnel from, cursing as they picked up a set of fins from the ones lining the walls.

“Going to fix your hack.” Jess whispered into Dev's ear. “Hope you remember how ya did that for the way out.”

“I do.” Dev whispered back.

Jess smiled and ruffled her damp hair. “It's a good sign. They're not on alert.” She kept her voice very low. “This is one of the first development centers on their side. Techs not razor edge, they don't figure this a target. It's just basic research.” She paused. “At least, that's what we think they think we think.”

“You thought they'd go check that.” April breathed. “That's why you dried the floor.”

Jess nodded. Then she removed a plas from her pocket and put it against the wall. Faint tracings showed up, and she indicated a path on one of them. “We're here.” She said. “We need to get here, so Dev can sync. in and find out where the targets are.”

Mike nodded. “That looks like a remote scan station.”

“It is. We'd never make it to central.” Jess pointed at a part of the map. “Behind six or seven layers of bio. But I think they'd keep Kurok as far away from that as they could anyway, so we might get lucky.”

“You think he's here?” April whispered. “Why here?”

“It's far away from their science center where we'd expect him to be, and my guess is, the project they want him to cough up data on is here.” Jess said. “They want him to duplicate her.” She indicated Dev. “The other side. They don't like bios. They buy them from our side, but they killed their program way back when.”

“But would the other tech be here too? The met blaster?” Mike asked, glancing around. “Why here?”

“Isolation.” Jess folded the map back up and stuck it in her pocket. “No one heard of that new tech. Not a whisper. So either it's all coming out of here, or I've fucked up and we're going to die for nothing. Ready to find out?”

Both agents paused, then shrugged, and gave her a thumbs up.

Jess smiled. Then she eased around the lockers and triggered the door pausing a long moment before she slipped through and into the corridor beyond.

**

They were in the lower areas of the complex, Dev realized. She could hear machinery behind the walls, and the corridors had a rough, utilitarian feel to them that reminded her of the base at the pole they had recommissioned.

So far only two people had appeared in their path, and both times Jess had somehow found a place to hide them and they had walked on by without looking in their direction, busy about their tasks, or talking to each other.

They passed several staircases heading downward, and as they passed the door, the sounds of life trickled up towards them. Soft clashes and bangs and the clatter of metal ware, and occasional voices, and once, a rapid thumping that made all three agents smile in a grimacing sort of way.

Then they turned down a long corridor that was more dimly illuminated, with doors on either side regularly spaced with vents in them that allowed the soft hum and clatter of machinery to leak out. Jess stopped about mid way down this corridor and paused in front of one of the doors, looking quickly back and forth.

They could hear someone coming. The sound of multiple sets of boots were heading towards them, from the top of the hallway they were standing in.

April and Mike drew their blasters, moving past Jess and braced themselves against the wall, cradling the weapons with their muzzles faced upwards, their eyes pinned on the direction of the noise.

Jess faced the door and put her hand over the lock, sliding a probe into the opening and half closing her eyes.

The noise got louder. Dev pressed her back against the wall on the other side of the door, admiring the calmness of her companions. Despite the relative newness of the two rookie agents, they were steady in their resolve, and ready to face off against whoever it was who was coming towards them.

Steady, too, were Jess's hands as she worked to pick the lock, as the echoes got louder and louder, now voices were heard – rough and male voices that matched the heavy booted steps they could hear just around the next corner.

“Okay.” Jess pushed the door forward and stepped in, reaching out to grab Dev and pull her in with her, as Mike and April spun and joined them getting the door shut just as the oncoming group cleared the turn in the hall and came down it.

Two men were inside the room and they stood as the four of them entered, one reaching back for a console keypad just as he was blown apart by April's blaster.

Mike took the other one out, his fire crossing April's fire in a neatly matched sending of death.

“Nice.” Jess had pulled Dev out of the way, now she released her and crossed over to the console. “See what you can get, Dev. Let's get this trash put in the disposal.”

Dev sat down at the half circle of comp and put her hands on it, looking from one end of it to the other and waiting to see what, if any programming surfaced. There was a session open on one of them and she tapped in a common query, regarding the screen intently as the results came back.

The syntax was unfamiliar. She tried again, this time changing the query slightly. When the response came back this time, it was still wrong, but the error message triggered a memory.

“Any luck?” Jess was wiping her hands off on a piece of fabric.

“Not yet.” Dev murmured, her eyes tracing the letters on the screen. Why did it seem familiar? Was it the.. She paused and concentrated hard, closing her eyes.

“Dev?”

Jess's hand was warm on her back and distracting but she thought about the message and then realized why she knew it. “Oh.” She opened her eyes and typed in the request again, changing the order of the words. This time, the response came back readily and she exhaled, shaking her head. “I'm not sure if this is good or not, Jess.”

Jess leaned next to her and looked at the screen. “What's wrong? It's answering you isn't it?”

“Yes.” Dev went a level deeper, using a routine she dredged out of her earliest school memories. This brought up a page of code and she let her eyes run over it, feeling a strange sinking sensation in her stomach as the code triggered further programming and she understood the system she was using.

“And?”

Dev took a breath and started hunting in the system. “Let me see what I can discover.”

Jess clapped her on the back and straightened up. “Dev's in.” She told the other two agents. “You find their schedule?”

Mike came over and handed her a plas, taken off the wall on the far end of the room. “Shift change in about twenty minutes.” He replied. “Not much time.”

“This stuffs old.” April commented. She had one of the floor to ceiling consoles open and she was examining the machinery inside. “You were right, even have some digital converters in here.” She crouched down in front of the system. “I saw some stuff like this in what was left of Cheyenne mountain.” She looked over her shoulder. “My clan sheltered there a while.”

Mike came over to join her. “Yeah – thats not too much newer than the stuff we kicked in the ass up in the ice.” He studied it. “Why the hell didn't they upgrade this place?” He turned and looked at Jess. “If this is where their hotshot stuff comes from?”

Jess shrugged. “Hopefully we won't have an opportunity to ask em.” She went to the door and stood against it, listening to the sounds outside. There were more boots moving through, and she could hear people talking, After a moment she relaxed as the discussion filtered through as one about fishing and the next supply run due in.

Nothing about intruders. Nothing about weird things happening to the perimeter defenses. Nothing about three Interforce carriers huddled just out of sight outside.

So far, it seemed they were undetected. Jess was still nervous though, since such an easy penetration raised immediate concerns in her gut. Was it really possible they'd flown in, landed, and inserted without tripping anything?

Really?.

“Jess.” Dev called over, softly.

Jess left the door and ambled over to the console, letting a hand rest on the back of the chair Dev was seated in. “What's up. Found something?”

The screen was full of characters. Dev touched the surface with one finger and indicated two lines. “There's nothing in here about a new weapon.”

Jess exhaled. Maybe that was why it had been so easy. Wild goose chase.

“However.” Her partner said. “This is a damage report on a part of the facility, and the damage appears to match what you saw at North base.”

“Yeah?”

“A central point of explosion, with a three hundred sixty degree radius.” Dev asserted. “This report is just a recap of equipment that needs to be replaced and a complaint that six persons were damaged during the event.” She tapped in some codes, and the report appeared, in plain lettering that Jess could read. “There.”

Jess studied the images and the text. “Seems the same.” She murmured. “Are there labs around that area?”

Dev brought up a schema and wiremap of the site, her typing growing more confident. She indicated a semicircle around the damaged space. “These are research facilities.”

Jess tapped it with one finger. “That's where we'll start.” She said. “What's this?” She indicated a round chamber on the other side of the facility, one she hadn't seen in their research. “The intel didn't show that.”

Dev sent a request to the system. Then a second. But the response was the same “There is no information on that area.” She told Jess. “Just that it's secured.”

“That's where we'll end, then.” Jess said. “Close it out, Dev. Let's get moving.”

Obediently, she did, getting up to join the agents heading for the door. What else she'd found for now she kept to herself, hoping it didn't mean what it seemed to.

It always was right to get all the information first, wasn't it?

**

Late watch, and the halls were busier than expected. Jess pressed her companions back into an alcove for the fourth time, waiting for voices in a cross corridor to die down, only to have another set grow louder.

“Time's ticking.” April uttered almost soundlessly.

“Getting blasted would make the time go faster.” Jess remarked back. “Immediate gratification, yeah?” She cocked her head and listened. “Okay let's go.” She eased out into the hall and kept flat to the wall of it, moving quickly along the angle towards a side corridor about twenty feet down.

Halfway there a door opened and in a flicker of motion a man was emerging into the hall, turning to close the door behind him and then back around to head right towards them.

April bounded forward and took him, getting him by the throat and breaking his neck in a swift motion as Jess bumped the next door she passed and, feeling it move, shoved it open and stood back as April dragged the body over and dumped it inside.

It was dark in the room, and Jess spared only the briefest of looks before she closed the door silently and they moved on. They got to the cross hall and turned right, spotting the door to the damaged area at the end of the hall, blocked off with warning signs.

It was quiet and dark here. None of the rooms they passed showed any signs of life and Jess ignored the barricaded door as she went to the lab door across from it and listened hard past it.

Dev went to the door that was blocked and studied it, bending her head a little closer and sniffing at the scent coming from it. She straightened and returned to her team mates, tucked behind the angle that prevented them from being seen by anyone in the hall they'd just come down.

The lab door opened to Jess's pick, and they slipped inside, closing it behind them. Inside it was cool and dark, and Mike quickly lit his hand light and moved to the center of the room. April followed suit, and they moved in a circle, revealing the contents of the room.

It was a lab no doubt. Dev recognized a lot of the equipment at once, and she went to the comp station and sat down at it, programming kicking in hard again as she picked up a pad and keyed it on. “The room over there smelled like it did in the base.” She commented softly.

“The burned smell?” Jess asked. “Or do you mean there's dead bodies in there?”

“Yes.” Dev answered, looking up. “I don’t' know what is in there, but it's the same smell.”

“Ugh.” Mike grimaced. “Hope we don't need to go in there. Training or not, my stomach nearly kicked my ass when we were recon over at North.”

April sat down at another console and started exploring it. “Looks like this place hasn't been touched in a while.” She lifted a hand covered in dust.

Dev nodded. “This program was last accessed thirty days ago.” She reviewed the screen. “I don't think this is what we were looking for. It's something to do with peas.” She half turned and looked at Jess. “They attempted to grow them under rad. It didn't work out.”

“Sure didn't.” Mike had been examining a tall rolling cart against the back wall. It was covered in trays. He held up one. “Looks like dead seaweed.”

Dev got up and went over to the tray, examining it. “That's synth biomesh.” She poked a finger in it. “They worked with that up on station, but I didn't think they sent any downside.” She removed a curled, brown crinkly thing from it and looked at it. There were tiny shreds of substance at the bottom of the item. “Part of it worked. They got roots.”

Jess came over and peered at it over her shoulder, pressing her body against Dev's back. “Roots?”

“Roots.” Dev's sudden smile had nothing to do with the roots. “Plants put them down into the dirt, and suck up nutrients. Sometimes in the creche, they would hang them upside down and spray vitamins and things on the roots to make them grow better.”

The three agents regarded her with more than a touch of bemusement.

“Okay, well, anyway, let's go find the next lab.” Jess said. “Dead plants aren't going to do a damn thing for us.”

“Have you eaten fresh plants?” Mike asked Dev curiously.

“Yes.” Dev put the plant down and dusted her hands off. “They tested everything on us. Some of it was interesting in a good way. Some of it wasn't.” She added. “Sometimes people would get sick.”

“You did once.” Jess observed, as they abandoned the lab and headed for the door. “Didn’t ya?”

“I did.” Dev agreed. “But most of it was pretty good, or at least, I didn't mind it.”

They fell silent as they reached the door and Mike and April put their backs to the wall on either side of it, while Jess tilted her head and listened. “Dev, anyone out there?”

Dev removed her scanner and set it to bio, reducing the power. “I didn’t want them to see this.” She started a fast scan, half turning to direct the device along the outer hall they couldn't see. “There are two bio objects.” She said. “About twenty feet from the door. They are stationary.”

She shut the scanner down and pocketed it.

“Yeah I hear them.” Jess leaned closer to the door, as quiet settled around the four of them. She closed her eyes and shut her light off, and concentrated.

Her mind called up the hall outside. The T junction they'd come down, and the curving corridor going the other direction directly opposed to the destroyed room. The two men were near the door on the other side of the junction, and Dev was right, they were standing still.

Talking? Jess carefully focused her ears, imagining herself outside the door but invisible. She was aware of the faint movement of air against her skin from the door vents and on that bare breeze came words.

Two men, definitely. One of them was angry. She could hear the sibilant emphasis, and it suggested to her mind that he was using a pointed finger, and firm gestures. She made an image in her head about it, and then, hearing the hesitant responses, imagined the other person as lesser ranked.

Scientists. She caught a word, project. And then another, alkaloids. Jess leaned against the door and pressed her fingertips against it, absorbing the vibrations as she strained to hear what they

were talking about. Then she heard footsteps, and she straightened and opened her eyes as they came rapidly closer.

Jess took a step back and braced herself, as the steps came right to the door and stopped. She heard the keypad being accessed and took a breath, jerking a little as Dev appeared next to her. “Don't get in the way.” She whispered, her body already tensing in anticipation of the kill.

“There's a cabinet there.” Dev whispered back. “Maybe we could hide and listen to them?”

Split second. Jess made a low sound in her throat and pointed her light to the huge cabinet, door standing half ajar. They other agents moved silently over to it and slipped in side, as Jess and Dev followed, getting the cabinet door shut just as the main door opened and the two men came inside.

They flipped the lights on and walked right past the cabinet, going to the console and standing over it.

The door shut to the lab, and Jess let her hand casually rest on her blaster. It was awkwardly close inside, but none of them moved, staying alertly still as the men started to talk.

Almost still. Jess leaned against Dev, who was standing next to her, and, invisible in the darkness let her chin rest on her partner's head. After a brief pause, she felt the bio alt lean back and a moment after that, a gentle touch on her leg almost made her forget what they were doing there.

They heard noises, then the sound of pad entry, and bodies seating themselves in chairs. No one spoke for several minutes, then they heard creaks, and the sound of a hand slapping metal.

“That is it. I told you, it was wrong.” A deep voice said. “It's unstable. Look. It's right there, in the emitter results. How many have to die to prove it?”

“No one cares how many.” A quieter, gentler voice answered. “Do you not understand, Gregory? They are past caring. All that matters is they can use it to destroy.”

“They took our project!” Gregory shouted. “They took it, and put it to the wrong use, and now look! If they had just waited, we could have perfected it and it would have worked right!”

“And we would have ended up killing just as many people, is that what you wanted?”

“It wasn't a killing device.” The loud man calmed, and seemingly turned to face the cabinet. “It was meant just to grow things.”

The quieter man snorted. “Do you truly think anyone believes that? Oh yes, Gregory. Yes. A device to bring the light of the sun into a cavern and it will grow peas. Yes.” He said. “And oh by the way, it also blows up everything for a half kilometer around it.”

There was a brief silence. “It worked.” Gregory said, shortly. “You saw it.”

“So did Denst. He just saw a better use for it.”

Jess nodded silently. The two inventions had come so perilously close together she'd wondered if they were related. Finding them one and the same didn’t make her job easier, but at least, she only now had one target.

Two if you considered Kurok.

“Well, Denst is on his way here.” The loud man now sounded resigned. “I'm sure he'll get what he wants out of us.”

“One way or the other.” The other man sighed. “Look, Gregory, I am sorry. It would have been a good thing, to be able to grow plants, real plants, downside once more. Maybe if it keeps blowing things up, they'll give it back to us, and we can try again.”

“Maybe with a little more effort, they will get the bio matrix out of our visitor.” Now the loud man chuckled a little. “Save us all a lot of time.”

“Peh. Let's go get some dinner. Leave these damn labs for tomorrow.”

Jess could feel Dev's ears prick, the gently rounded surface moving a little against her shoulder. They listened to the men close up something in the room, then go to the door and open it,

shutting the lights and leaving. She waited until the echo of the door closing faded, then grunted very softly in her throat.

“What was that all about?” Mike whispered. “Who's Durst?”

“He's their equivalent of the old man.” Jess murmured. “Okay, let's get out of here. Now we know at least we're on the right track.” She eased the cabinet door open and paused, then slipped out into the dark room and going to the door. She could hear the footsteps fading, and she almost keyed the lock, then stopped. “Dev, scan again please.”

Dev was at her side, and busy with her device. She ran a sweep, then another, edging the scope out a little. “It seems empty.” She said. “However, there is a power fluctuation nearby.” She showed the display to Jess, the light from it casting stark shadows on the ceiling.

Jess glanced at it. “We better get going” She opened the door and they moved out into the hallway, keeping flat against the wall as she moved past the intersection and along the labs on the opposite curve. The wall across from them was obviously damaged, big dents and protrusions marred the surface, and it was discolored.

The labs on this side of the half circle seemed to be still in use, faint lights showing behind the door frames and inset plas windows, and finally one on the very end that was labeled control.

Jess picked that lock quickly and they slipped inside.

They used their lights rather than turn on the overheads, and found a space that was in active use, with no dust visible. Mike went to the desk and sat down, and April cruised over to a tall data store, opening a panel in it and touching a screen inside.

Jess went to the back wall where there were shelves, that had gear on them. She motioned Dev over, and pointed at them. “Check these out”

“This was the lab.” Mike said. “Code name was Paprikash.” He studied the screen. “Everything's locked down.”

“Got any passwords?” Jess asked Dev casually.

Dev glanced at the console. “No.” She said. “My programming says they change them often. There would not be much point.” She went back to examining the devices, picking one up and studying it. It was roughly square, and covered in a grimy black dust that smelled of carbon.

Inside there was a flat plate, which was scorched and pixelated. She ran her scanner over it and touched one part, examining the gritty dust that came off on her fingertip.

The scanner came back blank. It had no idea what this was, which was interesting to start with. Dev set the scanner down and removed her multi-tool from her pocket, setting to work on the device and easing the sections apart.

“Be careful with that.” Jess observed. “I have no intention of scraping you off the walls.”

Dev paused, and glanced at her. “This is inert.” She said. “But I will be careful.”

Jess hung around for a moment more, then she went over to a cabinet and opened it. Then she blinked. “Well, crap.”

April scooted over and peered inside. “What the hell?” She said. “Is that a tunnel?”

“Interesting.” Dev had stepped to the side and peeked past Jess's elbow. Where the back of the cabinet might be expected here was a roughly cut hole in the rock, it's opening covered with a piece of cloth that half hung down exposing half the entrance.

It was interesting, and there was a damp, cold breeze coming out of it that held a hint of salt on it.

“Never look a gift horse in the ass, kids.” Jess said. “Let's go see where this goes. If it's hidden in a cabinet, in the back of a lab that was doing black ops, chances are it goes somewhere we need to go.”

“Not much here anyway without cracking the codes.” Mike agreed, juggling his hand lamp. “That'll trigger an alert.” He removed his blaster from it's holster and started forward, edging past the

cloth and entering the tunnel. April followed him, after a quick glance at Jess, and then Jess motioned Dev to enter.

“I'll bring up the rear.” The agent said, taking out her own gun and cradling it between her hip and her wrist. She closed the cabinet doors behind her and paused, pushing one open again a bit and then re-closing it just to be sure they would have a way back out.

Never paid to take those kinds of chances. Jess flicked on her light and entered the tunnel, stepping carefully along the uneven ground as she followed Dev's slight form.

A tunnel in a cabinet made no sense to her, on the surface of it. Though she knew there were a few hidden hallways back in the citadel, they were purpose built and formed the same as the facility was. This thing looked like some guy had hammered it out step by step with a hand blaster.

“Not much dust in here.” April commented quietly.

Jess ran her hand along the wall and examined it. “No.” She admitted. “They used this recently.”

“Yeah.” The other agent agreed. “But what's up with that? A tunnel into a lab?”

“Mm.” Jess ambled up closer to Dev and ducked a little, as the tunnel got a bit shorter. She also got the sense it was going uphill, her thighs feeling the motion as she walked along. “No telling.”

Mike paused up ahead, and held his hand up. He moved a pace or two more slowly, exploring with his light the ground on the right hand side of the hall. “Body.”

Jess eased forward past Dev and came up next to him. Not quite a body, but a skeleton, the whiteness of the bones clear and sharp in the raw light from their handhelds. “Huh.”

“Old.” April commented.

Dev slipped in behind her partner to get a look. “We had something like that in our lab in the creche.” She said. “But it was on a stand. They taught us biology with it.”

Jess nudged the skull over, and displayed a hole the size of her hand in it. “Probably wasn't a teaching aide any time recently.” She said, studying the untidy pile of bones, before she leaned over and picked one up, lifting it up and running her fingers across the surface. “Not as old as it seems.”

April focused her light on it. The surface was clean and bare, but nearly white. “Doesn't make sense to find this here.” She looked down at the rest of the skeleton. “That was an open entrance back there. No way they had this body here and didn’t know it.”

“Interesting.” Jess tossed the bone down and dusted her hands off. “Let's see what else we can find.”

They left the skeleton behind and continued along the hall, now noticeably pitching upward. The tunnel got a little wider and in carved pockets they came upon shelves, long abandoned and half collapsed.

Around them, there was an almost constant soft patter of rocks and pebbles shifting, but none except Dev looked around on hearing it. She hadn't been downside long enough to get used to being inside stone walls to where parts of them coming down on her didn't bother her.

Going along inside the tunnel, though, seemed like it was a good thing. Unless they came upon someone sneaking the other way, it looked like this was a good path to take to avoid being noticed.

There were tunnels like that in the creche, actually. Dev smiled a little, remembering them. The service access-ways where older bio alts worked, keeping the station functioning but also providing the youngers a way to sneak past the proctors and sometimes, if they were really lucky, get to snitch an extra ration from the mess area.

You didn't get to use them, so much, when you were out of basic but she felt the thrill of adventure all over again thinking of those odd occasional ventures of her youth.

“Sh.” April drew against the far wall. “Hear that?”

Jess cocked her head to one side and lifted a hand to push her hair behind her ear. There was a moment of silence, and April flushed a little, then the sound repeated. "Air handlers." She said, after a pause. "Cycling, maybe."

"That's a lot of compression." Mike said, after a pause. "Almost sounds like... " He went silent.

Dev considered the sound. "It actually what it's like when you evacuate a chamber to space." She said. "That sound of rushing air just all at once."

The three agents regarded her somberly.

"But I doubt they're doing that here." Dev acknowledged. "Since there's a distinct lack of vacuum downside."

"Vacuum." Jess repeated. "Well, we're heading in that direction anyway." She edged forward and took the lead, one hand holding her light the other on her gun stock.

Dev hurried to catch up, as the other two agents brought up the rear. She stayed just behind Jess, and they made good time up the tunnel as the sound started to become very obvious, a periodic thumping boom that coincided with the bits of rock coming down around them.

It was getting colder, and as they moved up another steep slope a gust of damp, chill air came down and dusted past them, making Dev glad they'd mostly dried out.

They reached a level area and in the faint glare of Jess's light, they could see a sharp turn ahead. They slowed and approached it cautiously, finding a another bend, and a larger open area beyond it, stretching out in the darkness.

Jess proceeded inside, shining her light around to illuminate a large natural cavern with a series of tables inside it. Though the booming sound continued, it still seemed a way aways and she walked further inside and motioned the other agents to spread out.

Dev stayed at her heels, and followed her across to the center of room, arriving at the tables and bringing out her own light and scanner. They were covered with trays, and she scanned the closest of them. "This is bio."

"Yeahh." Jess walked slowly alongside the tables and studied the contents. "What is it?"

"Proto soil." Dev said, poking the substance with her finger. "I saw this in the creche in the labs. It's what they used to grow things." She ran the scanner over the next tray. "There is vegetable substance here." She dug in the dirt and extracted something, which she held up. "That's a plant."

Jess came over and looked at it. "Doesn't look like much."

"No." Dev put it back. "It's a bean, but it's dead. They tried a lot of stuff with beans." She made a small face. "I didn't like them a lot."

Jess studied the tray then she tipped her head back and directed her light straight upward at the ceiling of the cavern. There was something mounted there that was neither rock or natural, and she blinked a few times, trying to force it into focus.

Dev came to stand next to her, running her scanner over it and regarding the results "This is the same shape as the device on the shelf, but much larger." She showed the wiremap to her partner. "Do you think it's the device they were speaking of?"

"Yup." Jess shut her light off. "Not taking that back with me." She turned and headed over to where April was examining an output schema. She was halfway there when a loud bang echoed through the chamber and then several voices were heard along with footsteps, getting louder fast, and coming closer.

'Back in the tunnel." Jess herded them out the way they came, everyone scattering fast as motion started in the chamber behind them and after a long moment, lights came on just barely missing their forms as they darted back past the bend and into the short hallway behind it.

A rising hum of power thrummed through the rock and Jess pressed her self flat against the rock wall, pulling Dev close to her as the sense of loose electrons made her grimace.

"Hair's standing on end." April said. "Somethings got a lot of juice back there."

Dev shut down her scanner and removed the power pack, stuffing both in her pockets. She could feel the flow of power as an itch along her skin. “This is not optimal.” She said, briefly. “Feels like a rad cleaning.”

“Yeah? Then I know why you like water better.” Jess closed her eyes. “Shut your eyes and let's hope this rock protects us from what ever the hell they're doing.” Running back down the tunnel wouldn't much help, she figured, and at least here they could have a chance to get some intel.

She felt Dev press against her left side and without thinking, put her arm around her pilot's shoulders. As the crackling energy surged around them, she heard voices yelling over it.

Dev stiffened. “That's Doctor Dan.”

Jess kept herself firmly in place, her eyes tightly shut. “Save us the trouble of finding him. Today's going much better than I hoped.” She commented. “Now if we don't all explode, it'll be perfect.”

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It was hard for Dev to stand still. The waves of energy were thumping against her skin producing a sensation that was a mix between an itch and a slap and it was growing more painful every second.

She fought the urge to jerk, concentrating on taking deep, even breaths and holding herself still.

“Hang on.” Jess uttered almost right in her ear. “Gotta stop soon.”

Just as she said it, they heard yells, and an anguished scream and then low throbbing thump that blasted against the rock wall and sent them all flying back down the tunnel, slamming against the far wall and reeling to keep their respective balance.

“Holy shit.” Mike grunted, grabbing hold of the wall to keep his head from crashing into it. “What the hell was that!”

“Their super cooker.” April wiped a trace of blood from her nose, which had come to a full halt against the rock wall. “Blowing up I guess.”

“Let's go.” Jess headed back to the wall and pulled her long blaster, coming around the edge of the rock as a roiling ball of black grit and dust boiled through the entrance to the big chamber and overwhelmed them. It was thick and pungent, full of particulate and almost impossible to breathe in.

Dev instinctively closed her eyes, as she half turned away from the particles. She heard Jess curse, and she shaded her face, forcing herself to look as the air around them turned into black unpleasantness. She took a quick breath and followed her partner's dim form as they charged through into the chamber, hearing chaos and loud bangs inside.

It was a nightmare. Lots of loud noises, and crackling sounds, and Dev was hard pressed to keep up with Jess as she bolted across the floor and dove for cover behind the big table in the center. It was half overturned, one corner crumbled into the floor and the trays of samples had scattered everywhere throwing the scent of synthetic dirt into the air.

Barely conscious of it, Dev felt a rumbling overhead and she looked up, seeing traces of fire in the device hanging over them, it, too, hanging partially down with electrical sparks popping out from every direction.

Not good.

On the far side of the room men were yelling. There were two behind a console, and five or six more in a pile near the far wall. They were all struggling, and that's where most of the yells were coming from and as the device above them flared it cast the group in stark shadows before it faded out again.

“Get security!” One of the men yelled. “He's loose! Watch it!!”

A second later a low howl started sounding, and the lights in the corridor outside turned from white to red.

“Uh oh.” Jess peeked up over the top of the destroyed table, and spotted motion outside, coming fast. “Okay” She half turned to face the other two agents. “It's crunch time. I”m guessing our

buddy Kurok is under that pile. Let's get him and get out, and get as many of the other side as we can."

"Ack." April pulled a second gun from another holster, her face lighting up with anticipation. "Bout time for some killing."

"You got it." Mike got off one knee and into a crouch. "I want lots of green dots on this one."

Jess glanced at them, and then shook her head. "Kids." She sighed.

"Glad you asked me along, Drake." April said, giving her a brief grin. "Been a hell of a first mission so far."

"Dev, take this." Jess handed her partner a blaster. "Stay here while we make a distraction. You wait and try and get it into his hands so we've got another vector."

"To Doctor Dan?" Dev took hold of the gun and wrapped her fingers around it.

"Yup. He knows how to use it, and since it's keyed to us, it won't blow up on him." Jess said. "Be careful." She added, after an awkward pause. "Keep your head down."

"Okay" The bio alt put a hand on her knee. "You be careful too. I don't want you to get damaged." It was too dark to see Jess's face, but somehow, she knew her partner was blushing. Maybe because she was too, a little.

"Okay." Jess turned a little. "I'll go first, cover me, then come on. Ready?" She asked, watching both the younger agents nod. "Let's go do what we do."

It was time. She blinked, and focused and then in a flicker of motion surged up and over the table as the entrance filled with half armored bodies. "Yeahhh!!"

Guns focusing on the pileup arrested their motion as helmets turned and saw her in mid air and all of a sudden a security response turned into an intense firefight. Blaster fire erupted everywhere in an instant and amid the darkness and the dust blue and green flares cast intense shadows.

Dev took a grip in the gun she had been given and watched the activity, half of her scared for Jess, half of her unsure of whether giving Doctor Dan the gun was a good idea.

She hoped he would really help them. It was so very unsettling to have seen his name, and his code in the consoles. As though he had worked there. But Jess seemed to have no reservations about him, and she supposed the one thing she could trust was Jess's judgment since, after all, she'd trusted Dev, hadn't she?

Yes, she had. She'd trusted her utterly, after only a very short time.

There was blaster fire overhead. She kept behind the table, with the air full of dust and debris is was very hard to tell what was going on, though somewhere nearby she suddenly smelled flesh burning and heard a hoarse scream.

The alarm out side changed, going from a low howl to a klaxon, and as she watched the other entrance filled with newly arrived bodies, behind half shields, all shooting inside. She felt a bolt come past her, and the heat made her blink hard.

It occurred to her that bad things could happen.

She edged around the side of the table and kept low to the ground, straining her eyes to see what was going on in the corner. She could see four people on top of the pile of bodies, their arms and elbows flying as they pounded what was underneath. Something they were hitting was moving, though, twisting and turning and through a break in the dense air and the fire, she caught a brief glimpse of pale hair and a familiar profile.

She felt a sensation of shock, as though she'd jumped into cold water.

It was Doctor Dan.

They were hurting him.

Without thinking any further, Dev turned everything over to instinct. She scrambled out from behind the table and raced cross the floor, hopping suddenly as a bright flash headed towards her.

The blaster fire hit the floor and vaporized a pile of dirt, but she was past it, tucking the gun under her arm as she reached the struggling group of people and grabbed the nearest one of them and yanked backwards as hard as she could.

He came tumbling off the pile and smashed into her, but she hopped out of the way and let his body roll past her as she moved forward again to grab the next person.

Hands grabbed her though, and she twisted, pushing her elbow into the dimly seen form behind her and hearing a gasp from the motion. She ducked past the figures arm and it triggered programming, as her body responded automatically and pulled her adversary to the ground.

Then she went back to her task, and hooked an arm into the arm of a man hitting something, turning and using leverage to pull him up off the stack and over her own back, to thump on the ground.

"Dev."

Dev turned and saw a hand extending from the pile and she grabbed it, hauling backwards and yanking the owner of the hand with her, sensing something coming at her from behind.

She ducked and went to one knee, as a bolt came right over her head, sizzling into the now unraveling pile and sending body parts exploding everywhere. A hand bounced off her as she got her hands on Doctor Dan, who was turning over and reaching for her at the same moment. "Doctor Dan!"

"Sh." He looked bruised and in great discomfort. "Lets get under cover."

"Are you okay?" Dev asked. "I think you are bleeding."

"Probably." Doctor Dan wiped his hand across his head, and it came away with a dark stain. "Now I remember all over again why I switched to science." He muttered, ducking instinctively as something came hurtling over his head. "Move, Dev. Before we get squashed."

They half crawled, half scrambled, ducking bolts and running bodies as they got behind the big table, hearing more screams and something exploding.

Dev got the gun from under her arm and handed it to him as they crouched behind the fallen cover. "Jess said to give this to you."

He covered it with one hand and looked past her, then his eyes met hers. "She did, eh?" He managed a faint smile. "Hmm."

"Yes." Dev said, slightly confused. "She said it would be good to have another person on our side." She ducked as a blaster hit slammed into the table, and sent a shower of synth dirt over them. "This is very difficult."

"Yes it is." Dan exhaled. "Far more than I thought it would be." He looked past her again, then drew up the gun and leveled it, cocking his head a trifle as he aimed and fired. "Take that, you stupid bastard" He watched the bolt slam into one of the running figures. "So is there a plan to this, Dev?"

"They were going to distract everyone so I could get you the gun. That was about it." Dev said. "Jess didn't say what was supposed to happen next."

Doctor Dan, surprisingly, chuckled. "Some things never change." He said. "All right, let's go help. Stay behind me if you can, Dev. I don't want you to get damaged." He cautiously lifted his head up over the edge of the table and got both arms clear, leaning on the surface and cradling the blaster in both hands.

With the smoke now billowing out of consoles, it was almost impossible to see what was going on, or who was shooting at who. But Doctor Dan was taking aim and letting off short blasts of plasma,

Dev wished there was something she could do. She spotted Jess and came half up on her knees, her eyes going wide as she saw her partner being slammed against the wall by three of the half armored men and one of them raising a blaster to shoot her.

She really didn't understand what happened next. One moment she was kneeling at Doctor Dan's side, the next moment her hands were hitting the back of one of the half armored men and she

was pounding on him, yelling her head off as she yanked on his arm as she attempted to pull him over and away from Jess.

He struggled, but she was past thinking about it and she pulled him away, and tossed him across the floor where a blue bolt intersected him.

His body exploded into several pieces. In the glare, his face was shocked, his helmet coming off and his eyes protruding from their sockets as he died.

Dev jumped over the flying leg that came her way and headed for her partner again. She picked up a piece of the table and swung at one of the guards holding Jess, feeling a sense of ferocious rage that shocked her – but not enough to make her stop.

She saw the man raise his gun towards her and she batted it out of his hands, whacking at his chest and head and anything she could aim at to make him get away from Jess. He went down and she leaped over him, heading for the third guard.

He turned as she approached and his gun hit her metal piece, sending it flying from her hands.

Then she was grappling with him for a minute before a loud sound happened next to her and then the man was just taken out of her grip and slung against the wall like a bag of silica packets. She ducked to one side and then was grabbed herself, but there was a friendly feel to it and the next second she had Jess's voice in her ear.

“Nice! Let's go before we all croak.” Jess pushed her forward and let out a startling sound that was high pitched and clear, in a pattern that made everything in front of them shift.

Bodies moved. Somehow, Jess knew the difference between the good and the bad ones, as she hauled them all back toward the tunnel and pointed her blaster up over her shoulder, firing an intense, long burst at the device hanging over the table as a dozen enemy soldiers pelted toward them.

The device slowly lit up and then abruptly flared, and as they reached the back corridor a heavy, crackling sound suddenly filled the chamber and then yells followed it along with a booming roar that nearly blew them into the opening and flowed past them to rattle the stone.

The ceiling started to come down, on the room, and on them, and rock slid and pummeled them as they twisted and turned and fought their way through it to let it fall behind them and block anyone from following them.

“Shit!” Mike yelped, as a rock nearly smacked him in the head. “Did that thing blow up?”

“Hope so.” Jess replied. “That was my intent. Now move!!!

They half rolled half stumbled around the corner and pelted down the rocky tunnel, as it filled behind them with debris, hauling up for an instant as a dust cloud puffed at them and turned their dark suits grayish white

“They aren't following us.” April concluded. “At least not this way”

“Let's get out the other way, and see if we can make it out of here.” Jess said, in a short, gruff tone. “Doctor Kurok – you okay?”

“I'll live.” Doctor Dan replied. “I'm very surprised to see you all here.” He commented. “Gratified, but surprised.”

“I bet.” Jess turned as she walked, glancing at April and Mike, who were now silent and covered in soot and burns. “You two all right?”

“Not bad for my first firefight.” Mike held up a hand, which had a scorch from fingertips to elbow. His jumpsuit was penetrated, and there was some blood there. “Got four of them.”

“Three here.” April said. “But no hits.” She added, with a touch of pride in her voice. “But I tell you what, Drake – I've never in my life seen someone move like you do.”

“I have.” Kurok said, dryly. “But not for a good long while.”

Jess wiped her hands off and gave him a brief smile. “I”ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.” The doctor said. “Thank you all, by the way. It was getting pretty gritty in there.” He ran a hand through his dust streaked hair, and there was a viable circular bloody bruise on his wrist. He was dressed in a nondescript jumpsuit, but there were rips and gashes in it that also showed blood.

“You need med?” Jess asked, briefly.

“You have med?” Kurok turned the question on her. “If not, then no.” His eyes twinkled just slightly.

It was dark in the hall, and it was hard to see what was really true and what was just bluster. Jess understood that though, and she smiled to hide a grimace of her own as she twisted the wrong way. “You okay, Dev?”

“Yes, fine thanks.” Dev was physically unhurt, but her head was filled with wondering about her attack on the people who had been hurting Jess and Doctor Dan. She knew she had programming not to do that. In fact, it was echoing in her head right now, bothering her as she tried to keep her footing on the uneven path.

Bio alts were not supposed to hurt natural borns. The programming was very, very clear. Even with the overlay of the tech stuff, and all that it was one of the first programming basics they all got on their very first session.

Dev remembered it. She remembered coming up from it, and looking at the programming tech, and feeling almost ashamed, because of how powerful the lesson had been and how clearly it had been made to her it was a rule never to be broken.

And here she had just broken it. She had hurt a natural born. She had caused another to become dead.

She wasn't sure if she was in more discomfort about that, or about how little discomfort she'd felt in actually doing it

“What if they know we're here?” April asked, after a minute's silence, as they walked quickly along the dark tunnel, using just the barest hint of light to lead the way.

“They know you're here.” Kurok said. “That second klaxon was the intruder alert. The first one was just for me.”

“Figured that. I know at least one of those guys recognized me.” Jess said. “Just makes it more interesting.” She slowed as they reached the end of the tunnel and approached the half cloaked entrance to the cabinet cautiously.

With the edge of her gun she moved the cloth aside, pausing to listen hard. Everyone went still behind her. Jess moved forward at a slow pace and put her hand against the inside of the cabinet door, pushing gently against it and opening it out into the lab.

It was dark, and still as they'd left it. Jess emerged into the room with the rest of them following, and she went right to the outer door and stopped to listen again.

Still quiet. She opened the door and they all flowed out into the hallway, turning quickly right and bolting down the corridor the way they'd originally came.

Then the klaxon burst into blaring alert and all around them echoed the sound of running feet and Jess knew they weren't going to get out the way they got in. She led them down a side corridor as they heard a patrol coming up towards them and going by instinct she ducked past a long, tall wall mounted ladder and saw a service hatch next to it.

Yells went up in the next hallway, and she heard the overhead in battle language, theirs, tracking them. Not good.

One touch on the blaster and the hatch burned open. She kicked it in and wormed her tall form inside, pressing her body flat against the wall as the rest followed her. She shoved the hatch shut and burned it closed, running a melt point along all three edges.

Then she indicated the narrow, panel filled space that had barely room for Dev to walk in, with lights and tracers on either side of them. “Careful. Most of that's live.”

“Nice.” April muttered.

“No one's gonna chase us through here then huh?” Mike eased forward and took point. “We know where we're going?”

“Where are we trying to go?” Doctor Dan spoke up. He was just behind April, with Dev and Jess behind him.

“Going for the wet.” Jess said. “Know a route?”

Kurok glanced over his shoulder at her. “The wet. Should have figured. We've got a Drake with us” His lips twitched, almost unwillingly, into a faint smile. “I know a route. Not going to be easy.” He tucked the blaster in the back of his belt and motioned Mike back. “Let me go in front, if you don't mind.”

“Sure.” Mike amiably changed places. “You know this place?”

“I grew up in it.” Doctor Dan replied, in a very wry tone. “But that's a long story we don't have time for now. So just follow me, and hope I remember this place as well as I just boasted I did.” He moved cautiously forward, turning sideways to ease through the electrified walls.

Dev glanced at Jess, whose brows twitched, but otherwise didn't react. Instead, she tucked her own blaster away and put her hands on Dev's shoulders as they moved forward, Mike turning sideways as well, but April managing to edge through with just a finger-span clearance on either shoulder

It felt good to have that touch on her. Dev could also pass easily between the walls, but she felt Jess twisting behind her as it became too close for comfort.

It was warm, and she could feel the electricity on either side of her raising the hair on the backs of her hands. “I'm glad we found Doctor Dan.” She whispered to Jess, hearing her partner laugh very softly under her breath.

“Me too.” Jess whispered back.

“He knows this place.” Dev's voice went even lower.

“Figured he might. The stuff you got on the other side came from somewhere.” Her partner uttered, her lips very close to Dev's ear. “It's okay.”

Dev nodded, falling silent. Jess surely knew what she was doing. Maybe she could talk with her after. If they came out of this undamaged.

“You all right?” Jess's breath tickled her earlobe.

Dev took a breath. “Yes.”

“Thanks for whomping on those guys for me” Jess said, casually. “Shoulda seen the look on that one bastard's face when you body slammed him. Cracked me up.”

Dev didn't answer, feeling a very uncomfortable twisting in her gut thinking about it.

“Okay.” Doctor Dan called back at that moment, making her push that aside. “We need to climb.” He pointed at a wall mounted ladder that extended up into the darkness, seeming to go on forever. “No way to get through on this level.”

“Then lets get climbing.” Jess said. “Sooner the better before they sweep in here and figure out where we are.”

“I”ll go first.” April didn't wait for comment, but got her hands on the rungs and started moving up.

“Let's hope they haven't' found the carriers.” Jess murmured. “Or it's going to be one hell of a long, very cold swim.”

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It was a long climb. Jess realized after a few minutes that whatever she'd done to herself was going to make the effort extremely uncomfortable but she sucked it up and pulled herself up after Dev stolidly.

Pain was relative. Where she'd been injured now felt like a knife had been stuck into it again, and she felt like she'd maybe broken a rib again.

But there was no med, as Kurok had pointed out, and no option so she pushed it to the back of her mind and just kept going. So far, she thought, things were going better than she'd expected. They'd gotten in, found the new tech, found out it wasn't all it was cracked up to be, found Kurok, rescued him, and were now trying to extract.

Really, could have been a whole lot worse.

Not to mention she'd gotten to see Dev go a little crazy on her behalf, the look of intense fury so out of place on her cute face that laughing at it had almost lost her a hand.

Jess glanced up, to see her partner swarming up the ladder ahead of her, moving easily and lightly up the rungs, the line of her jaw visible as she watched Mike ahead of her.

Damn she was good looking. Jess let the thought distract her, glad she had something to think about besides how much danger they were in and how much her body hurt.

She wished they were somewhere else. She wanted a few days just to hang out with Dev again and she was pretty sure they weren't going to get that anytime soon. Jess sighed, dredging up a memory of the taste of hopping shrimp and how it felt to have Dev kiss her.

“Pst.”

Jess only barely stopped in time, her shoulder bumping Dev's leg. The climbing had stopped and now she looked up to see Kurok slowly easing into a duct that ran along the top of the wall they'd been climbing up and she was relieved to see her climbing was over for a while. She climbed up another rung and felt Dev's hand come to rest on her shoulder, a friendly bit of warmth that made her smile, if only briefly.

Far off, she could hear klaxons. “Bet they're running all over the place looking for us.”

“Yes.” Dev responded quietly.

They moved up a few more rungs as April disappeared into the duct, settling near the entrance to let the others get a bit further inside. Jess glanced at Dev's face as they remained momentarily still, and saw a tension there that seemed new. “Hey.”

The pale eyes tracked to hers. “Yes?”

“You okay?” Jess put a hand on her arm as she prepared to move off the ladder. “You look pissed off.”

Dev paused in mid motion and looked at her partner, one pale eyebrow lifting.

“Never mind. We'll talk later.” Jess heard a loud bang behind them and she guided Dev forward and scrambled after her, getting the hatch cover closed just as running boot steps sounded loud and echoing below, expecting and hear the sound of hands and feet on the first set of rungs on the ladder. “Move it people.”

“Heard em.” Mike said.

Jess waited for Dev to get a body length down the duct before she turned and sealed the hatch with her blaster, leaving a square of blackened metal that sent a wave of heat out that made her blink. She reversed herself and swarmed after the rest of them, realizing the tiny space and cramped motion was even more annoying than the climb.

Ugh. Jess caught up to Dev's heels and now they progressed with silent speed, heading towards a T junction she could just see the outline of ahead of them. She could hear sounds below and behind the duct they were in, and briefly hoped the space was important enough to prevent the enemy from just vaporizing it.

She could feel air pushing against her though, and figured it was part of the ventilation system and when you were primarily below ground, that was, in fact, important.

They hit the corner and started to the right, and the duct started to slant downward. At first the pitch was gentle, then Jess could feel gravity tugging at her, pulling her forward as the angle steepened.

It was also getting darker inside and colder, and as Jess reached out to touch the duct wall, she felt moisture on it that faintly stung her fingertips and as she got a few body lengths further she felt herself slipping and knew where they were headed.

Instinctively she reached out and grabbed Dev's ankle. “Turn around.” She said, as her partner reacted. “Go feet first.” She released her hold and braced her arms on either side of the duct as she swiveled herself around and watched Dev do the same. “Okay, go.”

It was dark past her and the sounds of the others had faded a little. Dev slid a few feet more then she shot forward as the angle steepened further and without hesitation Jess shoved herself after her. She let gravity take her, but got her gloves on and used friction to control her speed so she didn't overtake her partner.

An explosion sounded to their rear, and Jess yanked her hands in as she felt a pressure wave building behind her. She caught up with Dev just as a rumbling roar vibrated the walls of the duct and bright light erupted behind them and cast sharp shadows ahead.

They reached a sharp turn just as the blast wall hit them, and then they were falling as the duct turned straight down, just barely ahead of the fireball. Jess kept her head tucked down and tried to ignore the heat against her neck, as they passed outside the duct and were in free fall in the air.

Everyone was eerily silent. She could smell water strongly, though, and she crossed her legs and tucked her arms around her body. “Dev, cross your ankles.” She risked a call out.

“Yes.” Dev sounded nervous.

Then they heard in succession three splashes and judging the depth by the sound, Jess reached out suddenly and caught hold of Dev's shoulder, pulling her closer and wrapping her arms around her pilot just in time to get her secured before she sensed the impending impact and they hit the surface of the water.

Ice cold. The brined chill invaded their suits immediately as they plunged downward. Jess released one hand and clamped it over Dev's mouth and nose, unlocking her legs and kicking hard against the downward motion. She felt Dev start to struggle and kept a firm hold on her, as their plunge slowed.

The chill faded a little as the water got trapped in her suit, and they started upward as a cloud of bubbles exploded around them. Jess kicked harder and blinked a couple times as the water stung her eyelids, and then they were reaching the surface and their heads emerged in the air.

She released Dev's mouth but kept hold of her as she shook the hair out of her eyes, looking around in the dense gloom and spotting motion nearby. “You okay?” She asked Dev, keeping her mouth close to her pilot's ear.

Dev coughed a little. “Yes.” She finally said, after clearing her throat.

“Good.” Jess turned on her side and started swimming, heading for the edge of the huge pool they were immersed in. Cavern walls rose around it, and there was no obvious exit, the water touched the rock on all sides. “Not sure we just didn't slide out of the frying pan and into the fire though.”

Dev paddled for a moment, then memory kicked in past the thrumming shock and she remembered how Jess taught her to swim. She moved from a hesitant motion to a more confident one, as she followed Jess through the water to the far wall where the others were gathering.

In a moment they were all face to face. “Now what?” April asked, keeping her voice very low.

“What is this place?” Mike asked. “Collecting tank?”

Doctor Dan had one hand on the wall and he was rubbing his eyes with the fingers of the other. “Desalinization sump.” He looked around the cavern. “They're on to us. They flooded the exit.” He pointed at the wall across from where they were. “That leads outside.”

“How deep?” Jess asked.

Kurok studied the wall. “Fifty feet. Which, on one hand probably saved our lives, but on the other... “ He cleared his throat. “And it's at least three hundred feet through the flooded tunnel to the outside.”

Jess nodded. She stripped off her water kit and handed it over to him. “Put that on.” She said. “Everyone else, gear up.” She turned at a faint echo then ducked as overhead flood lights came on, bathing them in stark brilliance. “Move. Fast.”

The first blaster fire hit the wall a second later, as everyone got their gear in place and Jess shoved them towards the far wall.

Kurok grabbed her arm. “What about you?” He asked, watching her intently. “If you think I'm leaving you back here, you've got another thing coming, Jesslyn.

Jess smiled briefly at him. “I”ll be fine. I can hold my breath.”

“No one can, that long.”

“I can.” Jess ducked a sizzling burst. “Move it or it's gonna be a moot point.” She grabbed both Kurok and Dev and shoved them underwater, as she heard a power launch land in the water at the far end of the cavern. She ducked her head under and pitched downward, into the dark depths of the water.

Dev had her mask on but she was half turned in the water, watching Jess with a worried expression on her face Jess smiled at her, aware of the tiny bubbles of air trickling from her nostrils.

They were sinking down in the water and she spotted the outline of the luminescent tag on April's blaster. Going horizontal in the water she pushed her two charges forward, and swam after them with easy kicks.

Above them, she could hear motors approaching and she angled lower, watching April and Mike watching them approach. She lifted a hand and circled her finger, pointing at the almost invisible, flooded entrance tunnel below them.

Kurok and Dev kept looking back at her, and as they all reached the tunnel level, Kurok turned and made to lift off the mask he was wearing, signaling that he would share it with her.

Jess pointed at the tunnel insistently and pushed him towards it. The pressure was building on her chest, and she let a few more bubbles slip out before she realized Dev was swimming towards her, a determined look on her face.

She grabbed Dev and tried to turn her around but her partner pointed at her mask, and looked adorably worried about her. Jess sighed, but when she looked past the bio alt she saw the rest of the group headed in her direction.

Jess released Dev, and held her hands up in a stopping motion. She hurriedly emptied her lungs of the rest of the air and felt her body twitch, as it sensed what was coming. She consciously contracted her chest and, as Kurok reached her and Dev grabbed for her arm, she coughed out the last free air and let her lungs expand, drawing in the icy cold water in.

It was a shock, as it always had been right from the very first time she'd done it, back in the day, back when she was just a kid and had no idea what she was doing until it was too late.

It was almost pain, a rush of tingling ice as the water filled her and her lungs struggled to react, switching from their normal function to one so different. But after a moment it was done, and she felt the familiar sense of effort in drawing in liquid rather than gas, that drag on muscles not often used for this purpose.

Jess blinked again and felt the clear inner eyelid slide down over her eyes, allowing her to focus and just in time, because the sound of underwater sleds cut through them and they were out of time. Jess pointed urgently at the tunnel and started towards it, sweeping them all ahead of her as they got out of their own way with wide eyes still staring at her.

There was no time to consider the implications. Jess increased her speed, and herded them all ahead of her as they entered the tunnel and started through it.

The sleds caught them halfway through and Jess turned, pulling her blaster out and hoping the sealing held as she pointed it and fired. The energy burst lit up the tunnel, outlined their enemy

and fortunately didn't cause the weapon to blow up in her hand. She locked her knees together and moved her body in a smooth motion, aiming at the nearest sled and firing.

She could hear the weird sizzle as the blaster fired through the water, the seal at the muzzle allowing the energy out. The beam hit the sled and it veered off, slamming into the wall of the tunnel as the other two sped up and came at her.

She could hear the roar of the ocean coming closer. The sleds had light fins, and were mech models, not intended for surf and she sped up herself, ducking a blast that nearly hit her head and glanced off the roof of the tunnel.

Two return shots came past her from the other direction, and the two chasers dove for the tunnel floor. Jess sucked in water faster, the strain of the mechanics of breathing liquid adding to her already protesting body's discomfort.

She pointed the blaster down and got a shot off, as she kicked against the wall to avoid a return hit from the sled's gun. Another shot came past her, then a second, and as the sled aiming from her tried to avoid it, a wash of surf came in the tunnel and shoved it sideways into the third.

Jess turned in the water and got her arms flat against her sides, letting her body settle into a rhythmic motion that caught up to the rest of the team as they reached the end of the tunnel and headed for the protective grid. Just short of it the water rippled, and then a blue light burst into being, outlining the metal and pulsing it's own warning.

Everyone hauled up shy of the metal and they turned, as the sound of more chasing sleds echoed loudly behind them.

Trapped. Jess ran her eye over the grid. It wasn't scan, just plain old electrified with enough current to turn them into octopus crisps. The squares were small, probably large enough for them to get through but one current wrong would send them into the rippling blue light before any chance of avoiding it.

Mike and April looked at her, as Jess cautiously approached the glowing surface, holstering their blasters for now.

Dev settled against the floor of the tunnel, her heart thumping so fast it was shaking her. She felt very overwhelmed, and programming or not all her confidence had slipped away leaving her scared and unsure of what to do.

So she watched Jess, moving around in the water without any gear at all on, breathing water.

Nothing in her programming had prepared her for that. Even Doctor Dan was watching her and his eyes were wide too, his head shaking a little back and forth almost unconsciously.

How was she doing that? It was like someone going out into space without a suit.

Unable to fathom it, she turned and regarded the grid. She could feel the power running through it from where she was, and realized belatedly that they were trapped behind it. A motion caught her eye and she turned to see Mike and April turning and facing the tunnel, drawing out their guns and preparing to fire.

Light blazed down from the chamber, and she could count four, and then six big lamps approaching them. Doctor Dan floated next to her and took out the gun Dev had given them, putting himself between her and the coming lights.

He looked over at her and gave her one of his kind, sad smiles, reaching over to pat her on the shoulder.

Dev turned to look for Jess, finding her near the bottom of the tunnel, just short of the grid, examining something on the surface there. She pushed off from the wall and swam over, watching in fascination as her partner's mouth opened and she sucked in water, her shoulders and chest moving visibly.

Jess looked up as she approached and pointed at the ground. Dev settled to her knees next to her partner and looked at what she was looking at, which was a box welded into the tunnel surface. Jess pointed at the box, then pointed at the grid, then shrugged her shoulders in question.

Dev looked at the box. Then she turned and looked at the tunnel wall, then tipped her head back and looked up. She pointed at the ceiling, where a half round duct was visible, then followed it with her finger as it stretched back towards the inside.

Jess moved suddenly, grabbing her and throwing her down as blaster fire hit the bottom of the tunnel next to them, sending a wave of almost heat over their bodies as they tumbled in the water, drifting dangerously close to the grid.

Mike and April returned fire, but the inside of the tunnel lit up with counter fire, as the ten sleds barreled towards them. Jess grabbed Dev's lower leg with one hand and turned to drop onto her back, reaching up and triggering her blaster pointed at the ceiling just past her partner's ear.

Dev flinched as a rolling blast of water hit both of them, and before either could react they were shoved against the grid with an audible crunch. Instead of being blasted into a crisp, they were just bumped and bruised, and Jess managed to get her hands on the metal and pull herself through and into the open sea.

The sleds arrived a second later, and slammed into the grid.

The rest of the team opened fire as they swam rapidly towards escape, and for a long moment the entire tunnel was filled with criss crossing blaster beams.

Then Mike, April and Doctor Dan came rolling out into the sea, Jess aimed her gun inside and fired off a pinpoint shot, and the grid reactivated and shorted explosively as it arced across the sleds jammed against it's surface.

The power of the blowout scattered them and sent them tumbling through the water, bouncing off the rocks that lined the channel as they fought to regain control of their motion.

Jess was the first to do so. She quickly whirled in mid motion and headed for Dev, who had managed to get a grip on a piece of rock and was looking around in a dazed sort of way. Just past her the agent spotted Mike and April, and furthest away, Dan Kurok.

As she reached Dev's side she looked back at the entrance to the tunnel, and saw it half energized, sputtering and flashing as the sleds, or what was left of them, drifted apart and bodies drifted without internal motion.

Well, that gave them a few more minutes. Jess pointed at the surface and started swimming upward slowly, taking a route parallel to the coast.

Fifteen minutes later, they were surfacing in darkness, only the sound of the surf around them. Jess had led them to a small pinnacle, and they clung there catching their breaths. Or in Jess's case, exchanging hers as she spent a moment expelling all the water in her lungs, preparing herself for the effort as she lifted her head out of water and got herself up into the air enough to lean forward and cough as hard as she could.

There was always that one moment of near asphyxiation.

So there they were, heads just above the surface, lips blue and shivering, four of them staring at Jess as she coughed and hacked and nearly ended up dry heaving as her body reluctantly resumed processing air.

“They'll be after us in a minute.” April said, after a long moment of silence.

“Yes” Doctor Dan said, in a weary tone. “Everyone all right?”

Jess rested her arm on a rock and her head on her arm. “As all right as I'm' gonna get.” She said, her voice a hoarse rasp. “Carriers' are half a mile that way, around that point.” She indicated the darkness that blanketed everything. “Gonna be a bitch getting there.”

“Yeah, thought that was a different direction we were going in.” Mike said, quietly. “Guess we better start swimming before they figure out what happened in that tunnel and launch a patrol.”

“Sorry about that.” Kurok spoke up. “There's a cross tunnel there that would have taken us under the rock all the way along the rock along the coast but it was closed off. No way to get into it when it's flooded like that.” He now, carefully, looked at Jess. “That's quite a trick.”

Jess coughed again. “Yeah, I'm a hit at parties with it.” She looked around. “Maybe we can get out and go overland.” She examined the coast, only barely seen in the night.

“Tumbled rocks. Be a hike.” April said.

“It's mined.” Doctor Dan said, briefly. “Probably not a good..” He fell silent as another sound came over the waves. “Ah, they're on the way.”

A boat's engine rumbled, getting louder as they listened. “Okay.” Jess said. “We should go down again. We've got enough charge in those cannisters to last 48 hours.” She coughed again, pushing away from the rocks as she prepared to duck under the surface again. “Keep the slope on your left hand side. We'll make our way near shore.”

The sound of the boat got louder, suddenly and they scrambled to get gear in place and get under the water. Dev settled her mask and tried to ignore how cold she was, when suddenly, the noise triggered something in her. She reached out to Jess and grasped her arm. “Wait.”

“What?” Jess moved closer. “You all right?”

“That sound is something I remember.” Dev said. “It's... “ She pulled her scanner out and lifted it above the waves, waiting for the water to drain before she popped the cover and booted it up. “I think I... “

A light pierced the darkness, sweeping around.

“Better think fast, Devvie.” Jess said. “We've come too far to get splatted this easy.”

The scan came back. “Look, Jess.” Dev showed it to her. “It's the fishing boat.”

“The fishing boat? What fishing boat?” Jess peered at the screen, rubbing her salt irritated eyes. “You mean.. you don't mean Sigurd's boat? The one we stole?”

“And brought back. “ Dev said. “Yes, it is.. it has the same profile.”

The other agents and Kurok were clustered around, peering over Dev's shoulder along with Jess. “What does it mean?” April said. “What's it doing here?”

“Good question. Along with, who's driving it?” Jess said. “In either case, that boat's something we need, and maybe cover enough to get us back to the carriers. So we're gonna find out who's in it the hard way.”

Kurok cleared his throat. “Maybe they'll pick someone up floating in the water.” He suggested.

“Not one of us voluntarily.” Jess said, briefly. “We stole the boat last time.”

“Not one of you, but maybe me.” Doctor Dan said. “Some old scientist washed overboard of something.” He added. “Worth a chance, isn't it?”

“What if it's already been commandeered?” Jess said, after a moment's silence.

Doctor Dan smiled. “Then I'm no worse off than I was, and I can likely distract them long enough for you all to get away.”

“What makes you think we'd try?” Jess smiled back at him. “But you can distract them long enough for us to climb on board.”

Kurok chuckled a little “Deal.” He took off his underwater rig and handed it to her. “Good luck.” He slipped off the rock and started swimming towards the sound and light of the boat.

“You too.” Jess said, just loud enough to be heard above the surf.

When he swam out of site she settled the mask around her neck and regarded the rest of them. “Let's go.” She said. “I'm not going to wait for them to make a decision, whoever they are.”

“Right.” April got her rig adjusted and disappeared under the waves. Mike was right behind her, and they both moved off in the direction Kurok had gone.

Dev and Jess regarded each other for a minute in silence. Then Jess moved forward and tilted her head, giving Dev a long, warm, passionate kiss. When she backed off, her pilot's lips looked far less blue, and her expression looked far less bleak. “C'mon. When we get out of this, you and I are going to find a place and lose the world for a good long time.”

She put Dev's mask in place and took her hand, putting her own mask over her face and slipping under the surface with her partner in tow, the last sounds she heard the clanging of a bell, and the sound of changing gears.

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The light beam penetrated the water, sending a spear of green tinged white almost far enough to hit Jess. She finned clear of it, then went still as she felt the tickle of scan on her skin.

The other agents felt it, and hands went to blasters instinctively. Jess watched the light outline Kurok's body for a long moment, then she turned in the water and headed for the far side of the boat.

As they passed under the hull the engines rumbled audibly, and looking up Jess could see a faintly circular motion starting. So they were turning towards Kurok. Who was taking a big chance, being casually brave in the way they often were who were part of the corps.

It's only life, right? Jess focused on a low rock outcrop just past the boat and when she reached it she turned, studying the position of the boat and sorting through her options. Only life, and it never paid to plan too far ahead because crap like this happened and you just had to go with it.

Jess pointed up at the hull, making climbing motions with her hands. The eyes watching her looked doubtful, but the heads nodded and she started upward with a quiet, sinuous motion.

Her throat hurt. It felt raw and sucking in a breath of air sent prickles of discomfort across her chest. Jess grimaced and swallowed, knowing she'd be paying for her little party trick for a good long while. She put the pain aside and studied the hull above her, now closing in as the boat moved slowly across the surface.

Big engines churned the water, making it hard to see, but she caught sight of the side, and the flushing panels for the big tanks and headed for them.

Chancy. Right between the engines. But she knew where they lead. Jess pointed to the hatches, which were in the open position allowing water into the holding tanks, and the rest of them nodded. Useless right now to tell them how tight the timing would need to be- she just made a sign for them to stick close behind her and went for it.

It was fast, and hard and as she banged through the open hatch and into a tank full of irritated fish she had to wonder how good an idea it was to begin with.

As her hips cleared the opening she whirled in mid motion and caught the edge of the hatch, reaching back through and yanking Dev past her, as the two other agents caught hold just as the engines increased power and they swung around, slamming Jess into the tank wall.

Mike lost his grip and his body went into the prop wash, as April grabbed him by the belt and held on Jess reached back through and added her own hold, pulling April into the tank and getting a good grip on Mike's arm.

April had the sense to get out of the way. She released her hold and swam clear, coming to rest next to Dev holding onto the back tank wall.

Mike got hold of the edge of the hatch and pulled himself in, turning as he cleared it to make sure he still had all his body parts. He shook his head and floated free, banging against the tank wall as he checked his legs.

Jess turned her light on and sent a beam through the tank, seeing the reflection as thousands of eyes were mirrored back at her from the nearly full tank.

Damn good thing Mike hadn't gotten cut. Jess spared a grimace for the idea, then she pointed forward and started to swim towards the other end of the live fish hold.

Above her, she could hear the tackle being retracted, and hoped it meant that Kurok was on board. There was too much metal for her to hear any voices, but she could hear muted tones of what might be yelling. That could be good, and could be bad for them.

The fish parted as they swam through. It was a mixture of catch, some larger specimens with a host of smaller ones, a lot of cod mixed with some barracuda, and a few small sharks. Jess

ignored them as they moved through, nothing was close to their size and likely to want them for lunch and the bulk of bio hid their human signatures to any average scan.

She was aware of Dev swimming gamely at her side. A sideways glance, though, showed her a very tense look on her partners face, and it occurred to her that she might be pushing the bio alt past her abilities, given she'd been less than a month on the job.

But Dev's jaw was clenched in a stubborn way, and now that they were in the holding tank she was taking brief moments to look around at the fish they were swimming through with a hint of curiosity.

Then she seemed to sense the attention and her eyes met Jess's, a brief smile appearing on her face as she licked her lips.

Jess felt a flush of warmth flood her skin, and was glad the mask hid her blush. Crazy. Ridiculous for her to react that way given how long she'd been on the job and all those years of learning control.

Dev took hold of her arm suddenly and she jerked her attention back to her partner, then realized they were about to crash into the wall. She put a hand out to stop them and waited for the rest to catch up, light from the deck filtering down through the heavy hatch cover and painting them in greenish blue stripes.

Jess slowly moved to the surface, staying flat against the wall until her head emerged into the small space between the top of the tank and the hatch. The others emerged a moment later, and they remained quiet and still, listening to the sounds now very audible through the deck of the boat.

Dev pulled the mask off her face and let it sit around her neck, glad to have her head outside the unrelenting chill of the water. The air was cold too but it seemed somehow less so than the water, and she blinked a few times, and drew in breaths of air that were filled with brine and fish scent.

It was so strange to think they were inside the tank, on the boat. She remembered being on the deck, and the polar bear, and now she wondered who was on the boat and what had happened to the fishing people.

“Bring it up!” A loud voice yelled. “Hurry!”

The hydraulics cut in and they felt the boat shift as it pulled something up.

Jess listened to the boots crossing to watch, and when they faded, she eased the service hatch up a trifle and peeked out. A moment of watching, then she pushed it all the way open and pulled herself up through it, clearing the way and rolling out of sight behind the big bait lockers.

All the men on the boat were on the far rail, watching the crane pull in something in a net. She couldn't see any faces, but a quick scan of the profiles didn't trigger her memory of any bad guys and when the other three joined her, she stayed crouched where she was, holding her hand up for silence.

The crane was swinging over when powerful flood lights suddenly lit them from the cliff side, and then the roar of engines sounded over the waves.

“Kill your engines. Prepare for boarding” A loudspeaker pealed out. “Remain where you are or you will be shot.”

Jess exhaled. “Gonna be one of those days.”

“Going to be?” April asked, with a quizzical expression.

The crane came to rest with it's net on the deck. It was wrapped around a man shaped figure, but the crew ignored it as they scattered to stations, yanking open the big weapons chest against the back wall and arming themselves.

“Stay still.” Jess watched the action, as the crew returned to the rail, all of them with their back to her as they waited on the approach of the heavy armored cruisers.

Every crewman had a weapon There was a surge of motion suddenly, and a familiar figure shoved his way to the rail and stood, hands planted firmly on his hips as the boats approached.

Dev smiled, recognizing the captain. “Look, Jess.”

“I see.” Jess managed a brief grin herself. “Old bastard. Knew he was too tough to get squashed in ice.”

The first destroyer swung to, floodlights hitting the side of the fishing vessel and whitewashing it in glare. “Stand to.”

'Kiss my ass.” The captain yelled back. “What the hell d'you want?? You're scaring off the damn fish!”

The man with the repeater stared at him in silence. “You're in restricted waters!” He finally yelled. “Prepare to be boarded.”

“Like hell!” The captain yelled. “You put a foot on here I'll blow it off!” He brandished an old, scarred blaster. “Show me on what chart it says this is restricted? It's just an old shoal!”

“He's got guts.” April said, mildly. “They could blow him out of the water in ten seconds.”

Jess braced herself against the wall and rubbed her eyes. The tension was ratcheting up in her and she felt her body starting to twitch. It took a lot of effort to stay pressed against the side wall, behind the steel separator that was between them and the rail the crew was lined up against.

'They could, but they're not.” Mike said.

“They won't.” Jess peered through a rope hole in the wall. “They depend on fish loads just like everyone else does in the big pop centers. Piss off the independents and you end up eating limpets and scraping algae.”

“They have leverage.” April nodded. “The elders taught us about that, back home.”

The destroyer motored closer, and swept the deck. “We're looking for a man overboard. Have you seen them?”

Sigurd laughed. “So now you want my help?” He said. “Get lost! There's nothing here but fish, buddy.” He waved the blaster at them. “We've been here for hours. Didn't see any man overboard. Overboard of what? That rock?” He pointed at the pinnacle.

The boat came even closer, and Jess could see them sweeping the deck with scanners, and she pressed back, turning her body sideways to them. “Ready.”

'See them.” Mike aligned himself next to her, as Jess tucked her head down a little behind the bait chamber.

“What the hell are ya doing?” Sigurd yelled. “Stop that!” He released the catch on his blaster audibly and then fired off a blast, making the other vessel erupt in angry chaos. “Keep your filthy tech to yourself!”

Someone else fired on the other side, and the next minute bolts were going everywhere, hitting the metal deck and deflecting.

“Hold!” The other ship captain bellowed. “Hold your fire!”

“Assholes!” Sigurd called out. “Consider your dock closed for us!” He waved a hand at the crew. “Pull in the nets! Let's get out of here.”

The crew burst into motion, heading for the big net wheel in the back and holstering their weapons to grab tackle around the deck. The hydraulics kicked in and the crane arched over to open up the back hatch of the tank, as the net started to retract and bring it's catch into the hold.

The net the crane had brought on board was forgotten, near the front of the deck and apparently empty and lifeless. The destroyer idled nearby and didn't move away, the scanners sweeping them despite Sigurd's threat. But as the net came aboard, and the shining bodies of fish started to disappear into the hold, the scans faded.

“Find other waters.” The captain of the destroyer ordered. “We won't hold fire next time, hear me?”

Sigurd made a gesture at him, his arm outlined in the lights on the back of the deck with it's rude symbol. The captain watched the ships slowly turn and start quartering in a searching pattern, keeping themselves between the shore and the fishing vessel.

Now powerful lights were coming on at the shoreline, and the waters were churned and illuminated, outlining anything below with piercing light. A shout went out,and a loud double thump sounded, then a low rumble that erupted into a booming roar that exploded up through the surf and sent a shock wave outbound that rocked the fishing boat violently.

But the crew took it in stride, and once the end of the net was aboard Sigurd yelled for the helm to turn around, and take them on an outbound course to the west. The crane rumbled over head and two of the crew attached it to the big hatch, standing back as it swung the big portal closed.

The destroyers and their explosions faded off behind as they moved away from shore and into the waves, as the fishing gear was lashed down and the crew gathered near where Sigurd was standing, his arm braced against the steel hull, the blaster cradled in his other elbow.

Silence fell, only the whistle of the wind, and the slosh of the sea heard over the rumble of the engines.

Jess judged the distance, then she pushed off from the wall and stepped around the bait locker, with the rest of her little gang behind her. She stopped a few body lengths from the rest of the crew, her hand resting on her blaster. “Dev.” She said. “Go check out your buddy.”

Dev slid out from her shadow and trotted across the deck, kneeling down next to the net.

Sigurd studied Jess. He moved away from the control station and came over to her, the blaster cradled in one arm not quite pointed at her, but not quite not. He stopped just within reach and tilted his head to look up at her, pale eyes as cold and hard as hers were. “Know why I'm here?” He asked, after a moment of silence.

“No.” Jess answered, honestly. “Last time we met you abandoned me and this tub to a trap in the ice. Didn't expect we'd be meeting again.”

Sigurd nodded. “So I did.” He glanced around. “So I was paid to do. Didn't expect to see you again either. Or this boat. But you brought it back.”

“I did.” Jess agreed. “Never considered otherwise. Runs in the blood.”

The fisherman shifted a little, the gun easing to one side. “Well.” He glanced around. “I don't like owing people.” He scowled at her. “I screwed you over, and you repay me for that by leaving me a boat, with a profit, and enough god damned black diamonds to retire on. You suck, Drake.”

Jess smiled, with only a little humor. “You're welcome.” She caught the looks of the crew, which were far more friendly than she remembered. “Hope everyone got a cut.”

The captain nodded. “You didn't ask me how I knew where you were.”

Jess waited.

Sigurd chuckled. “I saw you come in.” He gave her a piratical grin. “Just before dark, over the horizon. Wonder what the hell you were up to.”

True? Not true? She shrugged. “Don't care how you knew.” Jess pointed at the horizon. “Need to drop us off past the western turn. We'll swim in. No sense in risking this tub.”

“Then we're even.” Sigurd said. “I drop you, we're done.”

“Yes.” She turned her head. “He okay, Dev?”

Dev was helping Doctor Dan sit up. The scientist looked more than a little battered and there was blood on his head, but he lifted a hand in her direction and waved it.

“All right. Let me get this thing pointed right.” Sig handed his gun off to one of the crew. “Sid down for a few minutes. I don't' want those goons to catch on.” He climbed up to the control bridge, leaving the agents to take his advice and sit down on one of the equipment lockers.

Doctor Dan came over to join them. “Well.” He looked around. “Unexpected.”

Jess nodded. “It's not over.” She said. “We've still got to get to the carriers and get out of here.” She made space next to her so Dev could sit down. “I'll feel a hell of a lot better once Dev's got her hands on the throttles.”

Dev managed a smile.

One of the crew approached, with a drink container and a stack of cups. He offered them the cups in silence and they took them, holding them as he poured something steaming into them. “Agent.” He addressed Jess. “Sorry about the ice.”

Jess lifted the cup in his direction then brought it to her lips, the half spicy scent of seaweed tea reaching her nose as she sipped it.

“We heard about the bases.” The man said. “One of them from North was a cousin.” He turned and left them, as the fishing vessel started a slow, almost meandering arc that took them away from the brightly lit search site, as another explosion reached their ears.

“They're going to end up blowing up something important.” Doctor Dan said, his hands wrapped around the cup he'd been given. “But at least it's keeping their attention.”

No one asked anything. Jess slowly drank her tea, aware of Dev's body leaning against her, glad of just these few minutes of stillness and peace.

She was tired and she hurt. She could see that April and Mike were equally exhausted, though neither had said even a word of complaint. She knew Kurok was hurt, and she could see Dev was stressed. And now they would have the challenge of entering the water again, then finding a way ashore unseen, then finding their carriers and hoping like hell they were still hidden and their two techs were safe, and not dead.

All that to worry about, not to mention finding a way home from deep enemy territory when she knew every soldier they had would be hunting them, and then, if they did manage all that, having no idea what she was going home to.

Ugh.

She sipped the hot tea appreciating the warmth on her sore throat, knowing that no discussion of anything would take place before they were safely in the carriers, and that was all right by her, since it gave her some time to think about what they'd done and try to understand it.

The boat started motoring around in a searching pattern of it's own, as though it was looking for fish. There was some chance they were still under surveillance, and Sigurd was taking no chances as he meandered slowly west, heading for the promontory headland their carriers were hidden behind.

At least, she hoped they were. She didn't think she could trust Sigurd to take them home. Though. She glanced at Dev. At least if he did, they'd both get some rest. The thought of curling up in bed with her partner was so enticing, she almost wished...

No, she didn't. Jess finished her tea and stood up, adjusting her over suit and preparing it to go again into the water. “Be glad to get these off and get something dry on.” She commented. “We've got a medkit in the bus, Doc.”

Kurok smiled wryly at her. “I think we should get as close to shore as we can.” He said quietly. “If the tides out, there's a rock wall – if they can pull up against it we can stay dry.”

“You know a lot about that place.” April spoke up.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan agreed.”I was born there.” He leaned back against the wall. “Grew up there, until I became part of a project that ended up with me changing sides.” His lips twitched. “But that's a story for another time.”

“Wow.” April said, with a note of respect in her voice. “That must be quite a story.”

“Mm.” The pale haired man made a sound in his throat, glancing at Jess and then looking away. “It was.”

The crew stayed away from them. They worked at their tasks, and got the nets ready, just going about their jobs as though there weren't five strangers sitting on their deck, and patrols watching their movements.

A few minutes later, one of the women came on deck, with a pot of something and a stack of worn plates. She put it down on the locker and offered April a spoon, then walked away, disappearing back down into the interior area of the ship.

“This safe?” April indicated the pot.

“Is anything?” Jess handed out the plates, and the utensils piled on them.

“Good point.” The younger agent dumped portions of the fisherman's typical fish stew on the plates and then sat down and started in on hers. “Better than that stuff at the pole.”

Jess took a mouthful and had to agree. She watched Dev from the corner of her eye, as the bio alt stolidly worked through the stew and gently nudged her with her elbow.

Dev looked up at her in question.

“Want more tea?” Jess asked.

“No, I'm okay with this.” Dev pointed at the stew. “It's warm.” She added. “But I agree I will be very glad when we can change into something dry.” She seemed to perk up a little at Jess's continued attention. “I'm really glad the fisher people came out okay.”

“Me too.” Jess agreed.

“But they said they left us there on purpose.” Dev frowned. “That wasn't good.”

“They got paid to.” Jess scraped up the last of her stew. “It happens”

“Then why are they helping us now?” Dev whispered. “It's confusing. Couldn't they be being paid to do bad things now too?”

“Any thing's possible.” Jess also kept her voice very low. “But Sigurd's shackled with the same ten ton ball of honor that I am. When we were with him before it was a handshake deal. He had no pact with us, just did it as a favor to his old uncle. Must have been a lot of cred, to get him to walk away from this thing.”

Dev frowned.

“When I brought the boat back, I put him in deep debt to me.” Jess went on, in a casual tone. “Both in cred, and in honor and he's got to pay that off.”

“Oh. He has to?”

“Has to.”

“I see.” Dev finished up her stew. “I am going to speak to him then.” She put the plate down. “I want to see if he got my note.” She ducked past Jess before the agent could react, and headed for the control center, moving past the crew and mounting the steps with stolid confidence.

Jess put her plate down and paused, not sure if she should follow or not. She glanced at Doctor Dan, who was sitting quietly having finished his meal.

“Not what you expected, hm?” Kurok inquired.

“No.” Jess admitted.

“Me either.” The scientist sighed, shaking his head. “Me either.”

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Dev opened the door to the control area, pausing when the men inside turned to look at her.

Two of them immediately headed her way, but the captain lifted his hand. “Leave her.” He growled. “Take off.” He added, gesturing to the door. “I can handle this crate.”

The men walked past Dev, making a point of staring at her as they went by. Dev merely looked back at them, waiting for the door to close and taking a moment to enjoy the lack of cold wind.

Sigurd kept his hands on the controls, but one eye on her. “So.”

“Hello.” Dev came over and stood next to the console. “This was a very pleasant thing to drive. I liked it.”

The captain's eyebrows hiked up. “You drove it?”

“Yes.” The bio alt agreed. “I had to.”

Sigurd eyed her. “So. You're a jelly bag brain?”

Dev nodded. “I'm a bio alt.” She said. “I don't 'think I have any jelly in my head though. There's not much room with all the programming in there.”

“That's freaking strange.” The captain commented. “I never would have pegged you for that.”

Dev took that as a compliment. “Well, I didn't expect you to let us die in the ice. So I guess you really don't know about people, do you?”

Sigurd turned his head fully and looked at her. “You wrote in my log.”

“I did.” Dev put her hands on the console, flexing the fingers a little as the chill left them. “I wasn't sure what happened to you and your family, but I hoped you made out okay, and I wanted you to know that.”

“Why?” The captain asked. “We screwed you over. Left you to croak. Hoped the ice crushed you and this tub, and they promised me they'd replace it.”

“Yes, I know. But I still hoped you made it out okay.” Dev said. “A lot of people try to hurt us. I was taught to expect that.”

He sighed. “Great.” He said. “Enjoy that hopeful attitude while you can cause life's gonna beat it out of you.” He glanced at her again. “Anyway, those bastards double crossed me and we ended up running for our lives from em. My fault. Paid a kid for it.” He looked out at the water. “So get out of here, okay? I gotta figure out where I can set where they don't know I”m letting you off.”

“Okay. Goodbye.” Dev touched the console and turned, retreating from the control surface and heading for the door. “Good luck.”

“Yeah, you too.” Sig said, without turning around.

Dev closed the door behind her and climbed down the steps, passing the two crew members who immediately clambered up past her. She started around the corner only to crash headlong into a tall body coming the other direction, and bounced back, trying to catch her balance. “Oh!”

“Ah.” Jess grabbed and steadied her. “There you are.”

“Here I am.” Dev agreed. “That discussion was not very successful, but I'm glad I had it.” She told her partner. “I was in discomfort thinking those people had all died. I'm glad they didn't.”

“Since they just saved our asses, me too.” Jess leaned against the wall and stuck her hands in her pockets. “Be glad to get back in our bus though.”

“Me too.” Dev echoed her words. “Its been a day full of much discomfort.”

“No kidding.” Jess sighed.

They both fell silent for a bit. Then Jess cleared her throat. “You did a hell of a job in there, by the way.” She indicated the way they'd come. “Didn't have a chance to say anything before.”

Her partner leaned on the wall next to her. “It was difficult.”

“Very.” Jess said, giving her a sideways look. “Cold?”

Dev nodded. “There was a lot of under the water things.” She said. “I was just thinking how nice a hot shower would feel.” She admitted.

“Mm. Yeah it would.”

They were both silent again, for a moment. Then Jess draped her arm over Dev's shoulders and simply stood there, as the fishing boat made it's lazy circle and started to drift towards the promontory. The waves were building and it made the vessel rock as it slowed, the lights outlining white tinged waves all around them.

“Storm coming in.” April came over to stand next to them. “Heard the crew talking about it. They don't want to stick around.”

“We don't either.” Jess said. “Another ten minutes and he'll be close enough to that wall. Let's get ready.”

They gathered on the port side of the deck, staying behind the bait locker as the boat maneuvered back and forth, setting out their nets and then moving clear of the lines, slipping sideways in the water as they turned to view the set. Then, casually, Sigurd turned the bow around and as he did, the lights on the boat blinked out and five dark clad figures hopped onto the seawall.

Then the engines revved, and the lights came back on, and the boat moved around the promontory as it laid out another line of nets, rocking in the waves as from the darkness, one of the destroyers appeared, splashing them with floodlights.

Jess led the way across the seawall, broken in spots and dangerous. She got to the end of it as they heard the destroyer engines, and jumped off onto the rocky beach they'd landed on.

One turn of the lights and even the carrier's camouflage skin wouldn't help them. Jess bolted across the surface and led the way to where they'd left the craft, coming around the corner of the rocks and knowing a moment of perfect relief as she spotted the faint outline in the reflection of the destroyer's floodlights.

The other two agents split off and got to their rigs as Doctor Dan followed Jess and Dev to theirs, Jess barely leaving enough space for the hatch to open without smacking her in the face as she palmed the lock.

Battle lighting was on inside and the hatch shut behind them as they entered. Dev went to the pilot's station and strapped in, undoing the catches on her water suit and peeling it down off her shoulders and exposing the clinging under suit beneath it. She started her preflight checks, getting ear cups settled and reflecting that she was gladder to be sitting down in her seat that she could have possibly imagined.

Jess stripped her outer suit off to the waist as well, glancing over to where Doctor Dan was fastening the restraints around him on the drop rig seat. She got into her own chair and swung her panels around, hearing the rising hum as Dev powered systems in the faintly blue lit darkness of the inside of the carrier.

The front window went from opaque to clear, and she could see searchlights moving in the darkness over the water. “Dev, give me power please.”

“Yes.” Dev shunted batteries to the weapons systems and got the engines online. “Tac 1 to Tac 2 and 3, status?”

“Tac 2, ack.” Chester murmured. “Two to go.”

“Tac 3, ack.” Doug waited his turn. “Ready.”

“Dev, get ready to lift. I think your fishy buddies could use some help out there.” Jess got her targeting systems aligned and leaned back in her seat, very glad of the support and wishing for some painkillers. Now that she was sitting down, it was getting harder to push the pain aside, and she took a deep breath then released it, forcing her concentration.

“One moment.” Dev got her power grid aligned and stripped her gloves off, dropping them to the carrier deck as she curled her hands around the throttles. “Ready.”

“Go go gadget.” Jess said. “Hang on.” She advised Doctor Dan. “I learned that the hard way.”

Doctor Dan tightened the restraints on the rig and leaned against it, giving her a brief nod in return. “Anything not water's good for me right now.”

Jess studied his face. “You gonna last?”

The scientist regarded her with a wry expression. “I have broken ribs.” He said. “If one of them doesn't puncture a lung, I'll be fine. Thanks for asking.” He ended that with a slight grin, seeing the grimace of sympathy on Jess's face. “I wouldn't cooperate with them and they didn't like that.”

“You went with them.” Jess said, not quite asking the question.

“I did.” Kurok answered. “They wanted me. I wanted to see what they were up to. Neither side got anything positive out of it since they wouldn't tell me why they wanted me.. aside from hinting they wanted me to teach them how to create something like her.. “ He moved his head in Dev's direction. “And.. “ He sighed. “In the black humor department they somehow forgot what business I was in before I went upside and ended up shocked and enraged when I killed a few of them after they spent a few hours applying electrical leads to me.”

“That what we busted up?” Jess knew what that felt like, and acknowledged a moment of true sympathy for the man. Now that she had time to just sit quietly and look at him, she realized he probably had more than broken ribs.

“I figured I might as well see what all the fuss was about as long as I was being beaten up for it.” Doctor Dan relaxed against the drop frame, letting his hands rest on his thighs. “And yes, they'd just caught up with me when they suddenly realized I was the least of their worries.”

Jess let her head rest against the padded chair. “Glad we found you.”

Kurok smiled. “I'm glad too.”

Dev boosted fast, up and over the ridge of rock with the other two carriers right behind her and as they headed over the water they spotted the fishing boat facing off against the destroyer, dodging a bolt of blaster fire. “Jess!”

“Yeah, I see em.” Jess swung the targeting system around and drew a bead on the enemy vessel. “Jacktards.”

“They have seen us.” Dev said. “I think they're going to shoot.”

“I think I”m going to shoot first.” Jess locked on and fired a long burst. “Take us right at em.”

Dev nodded, and complied, sending the carrier at almost water level past the fishing vessel right at the destroyer. She saw the energy suck a moment before Jess cut loose on the forward guns, stitching across the side of the ship in a barrage that brought a thunder of explosive eruption that lit the night sky for a brief moment.

Then the water boiled, and the destroyer was gone. Dev flew the carrier through a dark cloud of smoke that dispersed as she bent their course into a tight curve, feeling the welcome pressure of g force against her body. She slowed the carrier as they approached the fishing vessel, and peered at it. “They seem intact.”

Below them, the bell on the ship was ringing. Dev piped the sound inside, as the other two carriers lifted and joined them. They hovered briefly, until the fishing vessel started back around to pick up their nets, several figures on the rail visibly waving at them.

Jess chuckled. “Now they owe us again.” She safed the weapons. “Dev, take us due west, stick to the coast, stick to the waterline. Tell the kids to follow us.”

“Will do.” Dev transmitted the instructions, then plotted her course and swung the carrier around to point and engaged the engines.

It felt so good to be sitting down in her space. Dev wished she'd had time to completely change, but the warmth inside the carrier was penetrating her chilled skin, and she adjusted the temp a bit upward, as the shivers had almost worked their way out of her body.

It occurred to her then that they had likely done well with this mission. Some big important thing had been destroyed, and they had Doctor Dan with them. She and Jess were both functional and she hadn't wrecked the carrier this time. Excellent, really.

She just really hoped there was someone left for them to report it to.

“Keep a tight eye out, Dev. If they pick us up this is going to be ugly.” Jess got up from her position and opened a locker, pulling out a dry shirt and pulling it over her head. She got one for Dev and moved forward, putting it down on her console. “Put that on. You must be an ice cube.”

Dev had just finished engaging the autonomic systems, and she lifted her hands clear and picked up the fabric gratefully. “Thank you.” She said. “It was really cold in that water.”

“Yeah.” Jess patted her shoulder. “I”m going to heat up some tea. My throat's killing me.”

Dev pulled the shirt on, the warm, dry fabric feeling wonderful against her skin. She released her restraints and stood up, pulling the water suit all the way off, storing it neatly on a hook and removing a standard jumper from her kit. She pulled that on and fastened the catches over the shirt, at once a lot warmer.

She rubbed her hands and sat back down, reviewing her course and checking the wiremap closely. The coast was rugged, full of cliffs and outcroppings and though the autonav was programmed to avoid collision, she didn't want to take any chances.

There had been a lot of chance taking, this last while.

She could hear Jess moving around and getting her drink, and wondered how Doctor Dan was doing. A glance in the mirror showed her partner's profile, but she couldn't see Doctor Dan from where she was sitting. Then something caught her eye. "Jess?"

"Hm?" The agent turned around and came over to her, handing her a steaming cup.

"I think you did yourself damage." Dev said, gravely. "There is blood on your back."

"Yeah? Oh crap." Jess turned her back to her partner. "Fresh?"

"Yes." Dev put the cup down and got up again, touching Jess' shoulder blade. There was a spreading stain on her shirt. "May I look at it?"

"Sure." Jess rested her hands on her console, feeling the brush of cool air as Dev pulled her shirt up, the pain now becoming evident to her since she had to focus on it. "Damned knife."

"Traitor's knives are sharpest of all." Doctor Dan had half turned in the rig area and was watching.

"So true." Jess said, after a moment. "There's a kit behind the locker there, Dev. See if you can clean it off, and put something over it. "

"Yes." Dev went to the locker and retrieved the aid kit. "Doctor Dan taught us to do this." She smiled a little, and looked over at her mentor. "We would get hurt sometimes in training."

"Yes." Doctor Dan smiled back at her. "I remember it well."

Dev brought the kit back and got the cleaner and some plas bandages out. She eased the shirt up over Jess's shoulder and studied the injury. "Something has penetrated your back here." She reported. "Also, it is very bruised. Right here." She touched the edge of her partner's shoulder blade.

"Is it the same place I got hurt last time?" Jess studied the console.

Dev regarded the skin before her, touching the scar now red and visible. "Yes." She said. "It appears to have opened up?" She gently cleaned the place, aware of the sound as Doctor Dan released his belt and came around the weapons console to peer at the injury.

"Hm." Kurok said. "Let me take over this, Dev." He said. "I've had a little more experience." He removed the pad and the cleanser from Dev's hands. "Have your tea. I think your lips are still a little blue."

Dev was glad to step back and let her teacher take over. She scanned her boards again, then sat down in her chair, picking up her cup again and sipping from it.

She didn't think her lips were blue, since she felt quite warm now. She settled her ear cups in place and started a comm scan, listening for the faint sounds of enemy radio. She caught the faint echo of the carriers behind them, and then she keyed in the sideband system. "Tac 1, Tac 2."

"Tac 2, ack."

"Stand by for nav sync."

"Ack."

Dev sent their course and lock, and waited for an acknowledgement, trying not to think too much about how tired she was. "Is it okay, Doctor Dan?" She asked, noting that the wound already looked a lot better.

"Oh, I think it'll do fine." Kurok murmured. "This was a really bad puncture."

"Yeah." Jess said. "dalknife, six inches, to the hilt."

Doctor Dan stopped moving and craned his head to look around Jess's shoulder. “Beg your pardon?”

“Dalknife.” Jess said. “Must be new since your time. Carved from basalt rock, triangular, sharp as hell, but with burrs all along the blade so it carves you up like a seaweed milkshake.”

Kurok pulled his head back and looked more closely at the old wound. “That explains the triangular bifurcation.” He said. “That must have.. “

“Nearly killed me? Yeah.” Jess didn't sound upset about it. “I lost what felt like half the blood in my body before they got me into a chill kit and back to the tank.”

“Wow.” Doctor Dan seemed at a loss for words

“Yeah, that's what the meds at base said.” Jess sighed. “They're not really sure how I managed not to croak. Certainly Joshua meant me to.”

“Joshua?”

Jess glanced back at him. “My last tech.” She said. “My former partner, who went to the other side.” She eyed her own shoulder. “Thought it healed.”

“Mostly.” Doctor Dan said, in a quiet tone. “Looks like most of the internal is healed, but this outer part split apart... maybe in the fight.” He carefully applied a plas tack and eased the edges of the opening closed, putting a layer of goo over it and putting a bandage square in place. “There you go.”

“I banged it up at base when they went for you.” Jess recalled.

“I remember that.” Dev reached over and put a hand on Jess's arm, giving it a squeeze. “Against the door.” She heard a hail on comms and turned to answer it. “Excuse me.”

Jess straightened up and slid her shirt down, then she went over to her locker and got out of the water suit, trading it for a dry regular issue she eased over her now quite painful shoulder and fastened. She turned, to find Kurok watching her, with a quiet, grim expression.

She managed a brief grin, then she sat down in the gunners chair and relaxed, glad, at least, she hadn't done anything newly lethal to herself. Bruises, for sure, but that didn't involve external blood loss.

“You know.” Doctor Dan perched on the edge of the rig casing, just to her right. “I didn't understand, truly, what the situation with your former partner was, when they asked us to participate. They didn't explain and Alex didn't either.”

Jess glanced at him. His eyes were shifted slightly off her, a hard, sea ice glint to them. Dressed as he was, with that look, most of the scientist about him had faded away leaving something more primal in it's wake. “They just wanted it fixed.” She agreed.

“They said it was a trust thing. I didn't get it.” Kurok now focused on her. “I couldn't imagine what a tech could have done that caused that much upheaval.”

“Think I was some prima donna or something?” Jess's lips twisted into a droll wryness.

“No.” He answered quietly. “I knew you weren't. I thought it was political. It wasn't.” He indicated her back. “That wasn't. That was a personal betrayal on a level I can hardly comprehend.” He shook his head. “Not from.. not from one of us.”

Jess felt something long tense relax in her, unexpectedly. She watched him faintly shake his head, one hand slowly closing and opening, so very obviously remembering a time when he had been what Joshua had been, trying to fathom doing what he'd done. “Yeah.” She said. “You got it.”

Dev watched them both with deep interest. This was a side of Doctor Dan she'd never seen, and it was fascinating, because as he said those words she felt the programming in her echoing them very intensely – he was aghast at the thought of that betrayal and she could feel that in her gut, in perfect echo.

He had said, one of us. That was the first time she'd heard him refer to himself that way, but it was true. She could see that now, see how he was more like Jess than anyone she'd known in the creche. More like Jess, and April, and Doug, and even Jason, back at the citadel.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan sat down in the equipment ledge, letting his elbows rest on his knees. “I do get it.”

Dev went over to the dispenser. “Would you like some tea, Doctor Dan? I think that clothing you have is still wet.”

He gave her one of his gentle smiles. “I would like that a lot, Dev. Thanks.”

Jess got back up and went to the gear locker, rummaging inside it. “Here.” She dug out a thickly woven over shirt and handed it to him. 'That'll probably fit.”

“Ah.” Kurok touched the fabric. “Something from home, eh?” He glanced at Jess. “Haven't seen that pattern in a while.” He took the cloth. “Drake's Bay harbor shirt.”

Jess smiled in reflex. “Always keep one around for gale force conditions.” She was glad to shift the conversation to something far more mundane. “It's woven to keep wind and sand out.” She explained to Dev, who was looking curiously at it. “Next time we're there, I'll get you one.”

“It's pretty.” Dev reached over and touched the fabric. “I like the colors.” She added. “It reminds me of the cloth thing in the big room there.”

Doctor Dan looked up at her. “You've been to the Bay, Dev? I didn't hear about that.”

Jess took a cup of hot tea back to her station. “Happened after you went hostage.” She said. “My mother was in an air crash. We went to her processing”

Several conflicting emotions flashed over Kurok's face. “I see.” He murmured. “Sorry to hear that.”

Dev retreated back to her chair and checked the nav. Everything seemed stable, and comp showed no scans, and no targets, save the other two carriers. Nothing was following them.

She thought about the shirt, and about getting one if they went back. Maybe they would go there if the base was damaged, Jess had said, and Dev found that thought appealing. She had liked the place, even if people were strange, and there seemed to be discomfort about her, and Jess there.

“Yeah, well.. it was more an excuse to get out of the base, and see what I could do about coming out to find you.” Jess admitted, with a smile. “She and I never really got along, after I went.”

“Ah. I see.”

Dev glanced in the mirror, and saw that Doctor Dan had taken off the top part of the water suit so he could put on the dry shirt. The light inside the carrier wasn't bright, but she could plainly see the patterns on his arms, faded, but visible against his pale skin, a good portion of which was also darkened with bruises and crossed with thin red marks and cuts.

It seemed like he was in discomfort. But he put the shirt on and picked up his tea, and smiled back at Jess, his eyes gently twinkling in the overhead battle lighting.

It seemed like things were starting to be better again. Dev sipped her tea with a sense of lightening tension in her, and she settled herself into her chair as the feelings of uncertainty and doubt faded.

Really, it seemed like they could do anything.

**

Daylight found them skimming over ruffled gray waters, warily eying a dark black line off in the distance heading for them.

Dev had just settled back into her seat after a short nap and she had a ration box clamped down next to her as she studied the met report. Behind her, Doctor Dan seemed to be sleeping almost standing up, and Jess had just leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes for a while after driving while Dev rested.

She felt okay. It would have been excellent to have slept a little longer but the irresistible urge to close her eyes was gone and she felt like she could keep going as long as she needed to now.

Her chair was still a little warm from Jess's body, and she smiled as she leaned back in it, checking their course and reviewing the results of her most recent scan. There was nothing around except the other two carriers, even the waters they were cruising over seemed empty of most life.

They had left the land far behind. Nav was reporting they were just a few minutes shy of crossing the invisible line that divided her side and the other side, and she directed the scan downward to review the ocean bottom below.

Yes, there it was. She traced the line on the bottom that marked the intercontinental plate, remembering her lessons about the geology of the planet downside they never saw. There was a certain sense of relief as she crossed over it, even though she knew it really did not keep anyone from following them.

It meant they were that much closer to.. Dev paused and considered. Was the citadel home? Had the creche been home? She tapped the word into comp and waited for it to come back, studying the results with interest. What was home, anyway?

Home was a place of refuge or residence, apparently. It was a place one belonged to, where they kept their possessions and where they did a significant part of their daily living.

Well. Dev pondered. That, for her could be either place, or, in fact, this carrier. She'd done a significant part of her daily living so far sitting right in this very seat, but she was pretty sure that wasn't really want was meant.

Ah. 'Archaic – home was often not a place but philosophical location, where one would feel at ease and at peace, a comfort of the heart.'

Hm. Was there any place that fit that for her?

Dev heard a faint sound behind her and she glanced in the mirror, seeing Jess shift a little in her chair. Her eyes were closed, and she was using one of the thick jackets as a blanket, her head resting against the padded surface of her swiveled back chair.

The lights were dimmed inside the carrier, only the consoles emitting a low, faint blue glow but she could see Jess's even, slow breathing and she felt herself relaxing as she watched. One of the few peaceful moments she'd encountered thus far in her short sojourn at Interforce, she realized, had been curling up with Jess to sleep and she wished they could do that now.

Even without the sex thing.

Dev sighed, and returned her attention to the console, setting up another scan with slightly different parameters and letting it start. The course Jess had given her would take them north of their base, almost to Quebec City, and then south, but first there was this storm to get past.

There were no ice caves to hide in, she noted mournfully. Perhaps they would get to the outer edge of the lonely escarpments past Quebec before the storm caught them, and shelter there. She adjusted the thrusters a little, and regarded the output of the scan, glad to see nothing on the horizon aside from the threatened met.

Her ear bud crackled slightly, and she pressed it a little more firmly into her ear. “Repeat?”

“Tac 1, Tac 3.” the soft response came back. “This is Mike.”

“Ack.” Dev responded in a low tone. “Status?”

“Nominal.” He responded. “Reporting low band chatter, sea level based, northwest.”

Dev checked her own comms, seeing the faint signal. “Ack.” She said. “Ident?”

“Negative.” Mike said. “Fishing boat, maybe.”

They'd out flown the only fishing boat Dev developed a personal interest in. They were days behind them now, and she didn't think getting involved with another boat would be an excellent thing to do. What would Jess do, though? Would she want to see what was out there?

Dev frowned, shifting her attention from the comms to the reflection and back. Jess wanted to get back to the citadel, that was for sure, and diverting could get them in trouble with the weather. She wondered if she should wake her partner up to ask.

But Jess looked so tired. Dev wavered another moment, then clicked into comms. “Tac 3, Tac 2, Tac 1. Divert ten degrees northwest, long scan, report.”

There was a brief silence. Then the comms came to life. “Ack.” April said. “Ten degrees, at mark.”

“Ack.” Mike sounded distinctly relieved. “Signal locked, parsing.” He reported. “Stand by.”

Dev adjusted her own course and nodded, feeling a sense of relief, and also, of correctness. She picked up her dispenser of tea and sipped from it, then set it down and selected a seaweed cracker from her ration and put it in her mouth.

She wasn't sure, really why Jess didn't like them. They were crunchy and slightly spicy and they went well with the tea. It also provided some contrast to the fish roll, which tended to be a little bland.

Another sound made her look up again, but this time it was Doctor Dan, who came over to her and sat down on the side of the console, holding a ration kit. “Good morning, Dev.”

Dev smiled. “Hello.” She greeted her mentor. “Are you in less discomfort now, Doctor Dan?” She asked. “After your rest?”

“Oh, somewhat, yes.” He sipped his tea. “It's been a very long time since I've had to deal with being kicked around like that, no doubt about it.”

His voice was soft, and a little hoarse. Dev studied him from the corner of her eye, noting the painful looking bruise along one of his cheekbones. “Why did they hurt you?” She asked, keeping her voice very low to avoid waking her sleeping partner.

“Mm.” Doctor Dan pondered the question. “Probably because I was doing my very best to make trouble for them. They don't like that you know, Dev. I wasn't being very correct to them.”

“Oh.” Dev listened to the scan results, then restarted it when it came back empty. “I guess we were doing that too.”

“You were.” Her mentor agreed. “Doing a damn fine job of that, in fact, Better than I did. But that does usually end up with someone getting into a bit of discomfort.”

“Like Jess's back.”

“Mm.” Kurok nodded slowly. “But that.. the original hurt, Dev, that was a very wrong thing.” He added, gently. “It made me very angry to see that, you know, because what you are doing, this work, involves a lot of trust.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “It would be like you hurting one of us.”

Doctor Dan went very still, his eyes staring at the steam from his cup for a long moment before he looked back up at her. “Yes, its that kind of trust.” He answered quietly. “You have to trust, that the things I do to you are not going to hurt you.”

“I do.” Dev responded. “We all do.” She added, half turning to look seriously at him. “Not everyone else.”

Kurok put his cup down and laced his fingers together, resting his chin on them. “Why is that? Why me, and not others, Dev?”

Oh, that was a good question. Dev shifted her eyes to the window and looked out at the choppy sea, almost a black color frothed with white as it passed under them. “I don't know.” She finally answered, a little unsettled. “I just feel like you wouldn't hurt me. I always did.. we always did. I talked to some of the others, and to Gigi.. you remember Gigi?”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan smiled at her. “I do remember Gigi.”

“She said the same thing. That when you went down, you.. “ Dev paused. “Sometimes you wondered. But with you we never did.” She heard him sigh, a little. “We always thought you cared what happened to us.”

“Mm.” Doctor Dan made a low noise in his throat. “I do care.” He answered softly. “In a way, Dev, all of you are, to me, as though you were my children, the ones I never had myself.”

Dev smiled, and her eyes lit up.

“So maybe that's what you feel, when you feel that way.” He concluded. “What happens to you all matters to me, even though sometimes I know those things can sometimes be bad, and unhappy things.”

“Bad things happen to natural borns too.” Dev said, after a pause. “Like what happened to Jess.” She reached out and touched his hand, where another bruise was evident. “And to you.”

“That's true.” Her mentor returned her smile, then it faded. “When bad things happen, it's hard for natural borns to trust other people, because it could happen again. But I think Jess does trust you.”

Dev nodded. “She knows I care about what happens to her.” She answered readily. “And I do, but Doctor Dan.. “ She glanced at the console, and adjusted a setting. “I think that made me do something very incorrect. When I saw them hurting Jess, I .. “ She hesitated.

“You hit them.” Doctor Dan said. “I saw you.”

Dev nodded. “Yes. I did. That was incorrect, wasn't it? I remember the programming for that.”

“Ah.” Doctor Dan opened his ration box and removed the fish roll inside, setting it on the console and fishing the crackers out with it. “That's a complicated question, Dev.” He opened the crackers and ate one. “Because you understand your basic programming, and you know that was in there.”

“Yes.”

“Well, it was.” Doctor Dan leaned back a little, against the side of the control area. “But when I was preparing you for this work, I did do some changes to that programming, because I knew you might end up in a situation like that one, and I wanted you to be able to respond to it.”

Now, that was a surprise. “Oh.” Dev murmured. “You did.”

“I did.” Kurok bit into his fish roll. “Because I think you realize Dev, that I used to do work very much like this.”

“With Jess's father.”

There was a long pause before he answered, and his face twitched a little. “Yes.” He finally said. “I didn't know you knew that.”

“Jess found out before we left.” Dev sensed some serious discomfort on his part. “They sent her some of her father's things, and one of the things was a picture.”

“Of us?” Doctor Dan said, after long breath.

“Yes.”

He sat quietly and finished his roll without saying anything else for a few minutes. Dev finished hers as well, and waited, since she could see he was thinking hard about something. She checked the console, and the chron, and calculated it would be another ten minutes or so before they were close to the signal's location and could see anything.

“Well.” Doctor Dan rested his elbows on his knees and nibbled on his crackers. “I didn't expect that, Dev, but yes, it's true. I was her father's partner, way back when.” His face looked quiet, and thoughtful. “So you see, I knew very well what I needed to prepare you for.”

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “The programming is excellent, Doctor Dan. I've known everything I needed to.” She indicated the carrier. “Especially about this vehicle. It's been difficult, but I could do it.”

He smiled, a warm sweet smile that made her smile back. “Thank you, Dev. It's always nice to have your work recognized, isn't it? I don't get that opportunity often.”

Dev knew a moment of delight, seeing her mentor's unexpected reaction to her words. Of course, she knew what that was like, to have your work praised, and yet somehow she never thought... She looked at Doctor Dan again. “Thank you.” She said. “I'm really glad I got this assignment.”

“Even though it's so hard?”

Dev nodded. “Yes. It's hard, but it's good work.” She glanced in the mirror then looked back at him. “And I'm glad I'm getting to help Jess.” Another glance in the mirror would have shown her a pair of interested blue eyes watching, that had now gained a faint twinkle in them, but Dev focused her attention on her mentor. “That's been really good.”

He grinned a little. “You like your partner.”

“Very much.” Dev assented immediately. “Jess has been so nice to me, and she's so excellent at this work.”

“Mm. She comes from a long line of people who were very good at this.” Doctor Dan said. “Sometimes natural borns have traits, like sets can have, and they inherit them from their mothers and fathers in the same way that we develop sets to have certain talents in the creche. You understand?”

“Yes. Is that how she does the fish thing?” Dev asked. “That was a very big surprise. There were some people in the citadel who said Jess was a fish, but I didn't think they meant that so literally.”

Doctor Dan looked thoughtful. “That was a big surprise to me too, Dev. I can tell you, having pulled him out of a number of underwater situations, that she did not inherit that from her father. It must be something that was being modified slowly through generations in her family. Its very interesting and I hope I get a chance to talk to her about it when we're done with this part of the mission.”

“It's amazing. I think Jess is amazing, and I'm so glad I got to do work with her.” Dev got it all out in a rush, feeling a warmth on her face and a slight feeling of confusion. “I really like her.”

“Yes, I know you do.” Doctor Dan's smile broadened. “I'm glad.” He patted her knee. “No matter how hard this gets, Dev, remember that part. It's the really important thing.” He told her. “Its very important to be able to take good care of our friends, right? So that's why I changed your programming a little, so that you'd be able to do that if you had to.” He hesitated. “Don't ever feel incorrect about helping people you care for.”

“Yes.” Dev felt a true sense of relief. She didn't like thinking about being so incorrect. “So it's okay for me.”

Kurok nodded. “It is okay for you, because we're asking you to do very difficult things that most bio alts don't get to do.” He clarified. “So don't worry about it.”

Dev nodded at once. “It's like the sex thing.” She said placidly “Right?”

Doctor Dan chuckled unexpectedly, putting his box down and rubbing his face with one hand. “Ah, well, yes, I guess it is, sort of.” He sighed. “In that, it's all right for you to do things that your creche mates will not get to do, because of the work you're involved in.”

“Good.” Dev was satisfied. “Thank you for telling me that.”

He patted her shoulder and went back to his fish roll, chuckling a little to himself and shaking his head.

“Tac 2, Tac 1”

Dev touched her ear cup. “Tac 1 Go.”

“Scan complete, standby to sync.” Chester reported. “Check tab 2.”

Dev engaged the comp and retrieved the scan from the other carrier, reviewing it and matching it against her own. She was aware of Doctor Dan peering over her shoulder, and moved aside a little to give him a better view. “We heard a comm signal.” She explained. “We weren't sure what it was. “

Chester's scan showed only a ghost profile. She compared it to her own, and tuned the comp a little more, warping the sine waves and resending the probe.

Doctor Dan peered at the screen and tilted his head just slightly to one side, his eyes narrowing a little. “That looks old.” He said. “Reminds me of the remote base stations they used to run on the coast, before they put the sat relays in.” He looked thoughtful. “Hm.”

“Hm.” Jess's voice startled both of them, and they looked up to see the tall agent coming to stand behind Dev's chair, draping her long arms over the top of it. “Sorry. Couldn't sleep through people complimenting me. What's up?” She gave them both a wry grin.

Dev blushed, wrinkling her nose as she sorted through the surge of emotion. “I'm sorry, did that cause you discomfort?”

“Nope.” Jess peered at the screen. “We pick something up?” She eased around the other side of the chair and leaned against it, her elbow resting on Dev's shoulder.

“A signal.” Dev pointed it out. “It's just an echo on Chester's scan but I can see the sine of it.” She traced the line with one fingertip. “It's not very strong.”

“No.” Jess shook her head. “What did you say it looked like?” She asked Doctor Dan.

“Local signal hub.” He answered succinctly. “Used to be a lot of them in relay, before we had topside.”

Jess regarded the readout and then she keyed in met and brought up the storm front, her eyes flicking from one to the other rapidly. “Okay. I don't want to leave this unseen, but we're out of time. Let's do a water level overfly of the coordinates, then take us up and to the north, Dev. Get over that line of clouds.”

“Yes.” Dev got her restraints in place, as Jess pushed off and went back to her seat and did the same. Doctor Dan collected the remainder of the rations and stowed them, moving back to his position in the drop rig and strapping down. “Do you think it could be another fishing boat?”

“Maybe.” Jess got her targeting systems up and synced, powering the forward guns up with a light touch. “But I'm not going to take any chances. Someone paid Sigurd to skunk us.”

“Seems an easy answer to that.” Doctor Dan said. “We know they were looking for you for Gibraltar.”

“Seems like, but I”m not sure it is them.” Jess said. “We saw some funny things in the white. Found a cavern full of jacktards pretending to be Interforce that were gunned down but not by us.” She got her gloves on and settled into her chair, leaning back and letting her eyes focus past the screens.

“Rivals?” Kurok suggested.

“Don't think so.” Jess tightened her restraints. “There's something out there I think we've been missing. Tied into the leak we had at base, and how they've been able to penetrate us pretty much at will lately.”

“Hm.”

“They got all the way into our shuttle base after you.” Jess reminded him. “A dozen security sweeps and we can't find someone who has the intel and access to allow an attack force of that size to get all the way in to our pad? Really?”

Doctor Dan eyed her thoughtfully.

“And they knew you were there.” Jess tuned the guns. “Dev, bring us in.” She settled herself. “Let's make sure we don't leave some loose end at our backs that ends up burying a knife in it. Have had enough of that this year already.”

Dev got the carrier off auto nav and took control of the engines, giving them more power and feeling them respond as she brought the craft down to wave level and cleared the light layer of fog, giving them a clear view at last.

In the target zone they could see a small rocky island, and as they approached, craft launched against them. “Here we go.” Jess flexed her hands. “Bet they didn't expect us.”

“Bet they didn't” Doctor Dan said. “And we didn't expect them either.” He added .”Whoever 'they' are.”

**

Flying the carrier into battle was very different then just flying it from place to place. Dev felt her peripheral vision expanding as she tried to take in everything around her as she bent their course downward, skimming the tops of the waves as they bore down on the island.

Two blocky forms were headed right at them at equal speed and she felt the weapons systems draw power as Jess took aim, then scan blared back at her with solid green blips and comm crackled urgently. “Jess..”

“Yep, I see it.” Jess lifted her fingers off the firing controls but didn't remove her hands from them. “Broadcast our ident.”

Dev did so, blasting out the signal that defined their craft type and serial number across a wide band.

“Incoming, incoming.. “

“That's Jason.” Jess keyed comms to sideband. “Tac 1, Tac 2, Tac 3, stand down. Potential friendly.”

“Potential?” Doctor Dan was watching the screens with interest.

“You never know. “ Jess keyed to main comms and selected one of the emergency short range channels they used. “BR270006 calling BR083003, copy.” She listened to the crackling. “Jason?”

Blast of static. “Holy shit! Jess!”

“Definitely Jason.” Jess felt their speed slow as they closed in with the two oncoming carriers.

“They are damaged” Dev commented. “Twenty five percent power output, and very fractured external skin.”

The two carriers eased off and now, at this distance they could see the ravaged exteriors. “Jason, go back and land. We'll follow you in.”

“Who you got there?” Jason's voice came back at once. “Scan's nothing but scrap in this thing.”

“April and Mike and their techs.” Jess said. “Me and Dev, and the doc.” She watched the two craft carefully, seeing them shift off axis and try to hover on jets that were visibly sputtering. “We're just coming back from the other side.”

“Op codes are correct.” Dev reported. “But those machines are severely non optimal.” She started a calibration scan, moving away from the erratically shifting craft. “There are three persons on board. One in the closer carrier, two in the other one.”

“Okay Jess... back.” Jason's voice crackled through. He sounded exhausted. “Fucking glad it's you.”

Yeah. “Tac 2, 3, stand by to land on that rock pile.” Jess instructed. “Drop in on the east side.”

“Ack.”

“Ack.”

Dev carefully trimmed her landing jets as she followed Jason's carrier in, close enough now to see the horrible damage. One engine wasn't functioning at all, and there were rents across the back and side of it, all the way to the pilot's area that had taken out part of the clear plas as well.

Worse than she'd done her first flight, in fact. Dev checked the register and confirmed the second craft belonged to Elaine and Tucker, and that Jason seemed to be alone in his. She wondered what that meant, and hoped it didn't mean something bad had happened to Brent.

Though it seemed likely, since things right now were so difficult.

But her fears were unfounded, as she gently settled the carrier on top of a pile of rocks near the water, and spotted Brent's powerful form climbing up from the waterline to meet them.

He was dripping wet, and there was a fish in one hand, large and silvery and still twitching. He looked over at them as they settled on the uneven surface, and as Dev extended and balanced the skids, she saw a look of relief on his face

“Now let's see what the hell's been going on.” Jess released her restraints and stood up, slapping the holster with her hand blaster on it to her flight suit before she headed for the hatch. “Set up a long scan, Dev. Don't want to get caught with my ass on this rock pile.”

“Yes.” Dev started that up, as she heard the thump of the hatch opening and a blast of cold, wet, salty air blew in. She watched Jess and Doctor Dan emerge from around the side of the carrier and walk towards where Jason had gotten his carrier safely landed, meeting up with Brent as he approached the off gassing machine.

She finished setting up the scan and released her belts, pausing to stop and get her jacket and put it on before she headed for the outside. The ramp was only partially extended, as the rocks were

preventing it from fully deploying and she carefully transferred her weight from it to the slippery stones as she got outside.

The line of dark clouds were moving ominously closer, and she fastened the jacket's catches as she made her way across the rocks. April, Mike, Doug and Chester caught up with her as they reached the others, where Elaine and Tucker had also arrived to hear Jason starting to explain what had happened to Jess.

“Fucking disaster.” He sat down on a rock nearby. They were standing in the center of a cleared area, down close by the water where waves were crashing up with increasing intensity. “Big ass fucking disaster. We started getting weird ass scan not long after you left.” He rested his elbows on his knees. “Three, maybe four hours. Everyone thought it was just some strange met or something, but we kept losing long range scan, and then short range was going in and out. So Bain asked me and Lain to do a standard patrol.”

Elaine also sat down, bracing her hands behind her. She had a painful looking burn on one cheek, and had been limping. “So we did.” She said. “Six hours, until we saw a big storm coming in and figured we should get back inside before it got to us. On the way back to the base, all hell broke loose.”

Jess was leaning on a tall boulder, her arms crossed over her chest. She remained silent however.

“We were about a quarter hour out from the pad when we started getting squirts on the emergency freq, but they didn't make sense. Power outages, things going crazy, the pad roof opening... couldn't tell what was going on but then we got into visual and we knew.”

“We knew.” Elaine echoed him. “We could see the tonks blasting at the side walls.”

Jess looked grim.

“So we came in from the west and went to work.” Elaine added. “Did the best we could, figured we were making some headway when the storm came out over us and … we ducked out of it but they didn't.”

“They kept attacking.” Jason confirmed “Every system we had was being blasted by met and they just kept flying.” He glanced at Jess. “Someone mighta mentioned they came up with that instead of that grow shit.”

“They're connected.” Doctor Dan remarked quietly.

Both agents looked hard at him.

“Its some kind of energy transforming system.” Kurok said. “Originally transferring hydro to photosynthesis, but someone found out how to use it to change EMF polarity and let it slide past instead of disrupting.”

Everyone was briefly silent, watching him with intent eyes.

“Sorry” Doctor Dan said, to Jess, after the silence had become uncomfortable. “What with everything else we really didn't have a chance to talk about it.”

“Anyway.” Jason continued “We were trying to find a way around the storm when we heard you incoming.” He looked at Jess. “Whatever the hell was going on just got crazier then. We saw Bain get out.” His expression only twitched a little, but the effect expressed his feelings about that more explicitly than words would have.

“Yeah.” Jess said. “So then what?”

“They got the base sealed.” Elaine said. “Complete lockdown, and no matter what those bastards wanted they weren't getting in. So we took off.”

“Lock down.” Jess murmured. “No comms?”

“Nothing. Sealed like a virgin outsider.” Jason confirmed. “Wouldn't respond to emergency, to squirts, idents, nothing. We got out of there before they came back with something bigger to blow the doors open with. Headed out after your trail – but then we went headlong into all of them trying to get back.”

“That was a long ass fight.” Elaine chimed in. “If they hadn't been tweaking these things we'd be vapor right now. As it was, we only got away because they got some kind of recall and took off.”

“Probably was Bock, calling them in to skunk us at the pole.” Jess spoke quietly into the wind ruffled air. “He's dead. I killed him after I found out he turned us over to them.” She added, watching their jaws drop. “I've seen North. If Ten looks like that, we might as well go hunt p.. “ She caught the frown on Dev's face and paused. “I mean, scrounge. Maybe take over the pole again and see what we can live on.”

“Bock.” Elaine spoke the name slowly. “He was the hole?”

“He was a hole.” Jess confirmed. “In more ways than one.” She added drolly. “Though.. he didn't start to be so much of an ass until lately.” Her expression turned thoughtful, and she glanced at Dev. “In fact, not until after we came back from that second run.”

Jason exhaled heavily “Anyway we just barely got to this place, and we've been hanging out here trying to fix these damn old buses enough to get back home.” He paused. “Whatever home is now.”

“Well.” Jess regarded the incoming weather. “With that coming in to hit us, I think you should leave the damn things here and come on ours. We managed to get through our mission mostly intact.” She regarded the three other carriers. “Let's lift, and find some shelter other than this rock.. which is.. what... Bermuda shoals?”

Jason nodded. “Sounds good.” He stood up. “Glad you made it.” He waved his hand. “Let's pack up and get moving, Brent. Sorry we wasted your time fishing.”

“Sokay” Brent regarded the fish with his usual glum expression. “No idea what to do with it anyhow. Figured we'd do it raw.” He glanced at Jess. “Though I heard you can cook em.”

“I can. Just not now.” Jess sighed. “Hell. Maybe if Ten is a graveyard I'll take you all back to Drake's Bay with me. Make my family's day.”

Doctor Dan snorted lightly under his breath, his lips twitching. “I see not much has changed there.”

Jess produced a brief grin, then pointed to the carriers. “Let's go.”

Tucker and Brent went to grab kits and everyone else headed for the three carriers, Jason letting them all go ahead as he dropped back with Jess. “Hey.”

“Hey” Jess repeated.

“You sure about that space doc?”

“Yeah.” Jess nodded. “He's okay”

“You figure out what his background is?” Jason persisted. “There's some weird stuff we heard about him and with all this scamming bullshit going on, don't want to take a piece of it back with us. He can get lost between here and there, you know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean.” She kept her voice down, watching the scientist and his protégé heading for her craft. “Yeah, I found out what his deal was. We can talk later about it, but he's okay.”

“He was us?” Jason persisted.

“He was us.” Jess confirmed. “Matter of fact, he was my dad's partner.”

Jason almost tripped and went sprawling, saved only by Jess grabbing his arm and steadying him. “What?”

“Yeah, small fucking world, huh? We'll talk later.” She gave him a slight shove towards April's carrier. “G'wan. We got enough troubles without inventing any from him.”

She got back on board as Dev was spooling the engines up and she sat down with a sigh. “Dev, lift, then when the rest of them hold and give me full power. I'm gonna blow up those crates.” She settled into her position and keyed up the guns, pulling down the restraints and buckling them in an absent motion.

She was glad they'd found Jason and Elaine. Of all the agents at Ten, she liked them the best and she had the most confidence that they weren't part of the problem.

At the last minute, Brent scrambled on board and hit the hatch lock. “Hullo.” He grunted, looking uncomfortable. “Jase said to fly with you.”

And, Jess had to smile inwardly, he was one of the few who would challenge her judgment and act to protect her even if she had no need or want of it and know she wouldn't likely shoot him in the head in response. Not that Brent was an agent, but he was big, and muscular, and he'd take orders from her.

And he wasn't a bio alt, whose creator was, in Jason's mind, still suspect.

Dev turned around and smiled at him. “There's a seat up here.” She indicated the jump seat next to her console. “But please hurry as we are starting to get wind alerts.”

Brent looked a smidgen happier, stowing his kit in the locker and going up to join Dev in the pilot's station. He pulled down the jump seat and extended his legs forward, strapping himself down and exhaling. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Dev responded. “I'm glad you aren't damaged.”

He had a few scrapes on him, but he half grinned in response. “Yeah, back.”

Dev got them underway, feeling better about the mission now that she knew for sure that not everyone in the citadel had become dead. She'd developed a mild liking for Brent, and thought they had gotten along pretty well before all this had started.

She handed him over a set of ear cups and got the carrier to altitude, pausing and rotating as she sent power to the guns A moment later, the carrier vibrated as Jess fired, blowing first one and then the other damaged craft and sending pieces of them flying off into the roiling ocean.

“One way to get a new bus.” Brent commented. “Damned piece of crap.”

Dev took them into a tight curve, then headed north west, running a long scan to determine if they were going to make the coast before the storm caught them, nudging the throttles forward and taking them to full speed.

They crackled through the sound barrier just as a thunder boomed overhead.

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They made the coast with a minute, literally to spare. Dev dove at full speed towards the cliffs, already losing some control as lightning exploded around them, both Brent and Jess yelling advice at her and pointing to barely seen gaps in the stone wall through the blinding rain.

She saw the slot canyon and turned the carrier on it's side going through it, not entirely due to it's narrow width. The sudden motion made her passengers yelp and grab for handhold, giving her a moments peace to get the jets under control and fight off the violent gusts of wind.

She hoped the others were behind her as she barreled through the gap, spotting the crooked entrance to what seemed to be a cave on the left hand side wall. She aimed for it, dropping down and cutting the engines as a lightning flash blasted the top of the carrier, waiting a breathless five seconds for the charge to dissipate before she kicked in the landing jets.

Then they were inside. It was a bare crevice and there were cracks and gaps letting in torrents of water, but the wind cut out and gave her control to land near one wall clearing space behind her as the two other carriers piled on hot on her tail.

The storm rolled in on top of them and there were so many lighting strikes it blinded scan completely, and nearly deafened all of them until she cut the sensors and shut down everything hard.

Power was crackling everywhere around them. It was worse than the first storm she'd felt outside Quebec, and Dev had all she could handle to make sure the systems were safed and the guns deactivated. She saw Brent activating the heavy shield that slid down by gravity alone over the windows wrapped around her station and the entire craft was vibrating with the force of the thunder booming overhead.

“Holy crap.” Brent said.

“Indeed.” Doctor Dan had gotten away from the drop rig, and it's associated floor plate opening and he was now seated on the back shelf they used for sleeping, tucked against the back of the carrier. “Forgotten how much I don't miss weather in space.”

Dev was glad the shield was down as something thumped against the carrier with enough force to make it move on it's skids. “Thank you.” She told Brent. “I”m not really used to all this weather either.”

Brent snorted, giving her a baldly skeptical look. “I can't freaking imagine what you had to fly through up there then.”

That was, she supposed, a compliment. “Mostly sims.” She admitted. “They emulated weather but not like this.”

He studied her. “No shit, that first time out with us was your first real gig?”

She nodded, giving him a sheepish little smile.

“Fuck.” Brent shook his head in bemusement.

“I'm going to make sure those other two landed okay.” Jess had her jacket on. She got her hood up and sealed a moment before she hit the hatch, then jumped back and half turned as a blast of lightning outlined the opening in brilliance.

“Maybe not.” Doctor Dan dove across and slammed the hatch shut, throwing his arm over his head as another blast nearly came inside. “Bloody hell.”

Jess had her hand shielding her eyes as she blinked furiously. “Shit.”

Dev got up and went over to her, putting a hand on her arm. “Jess, are you damaged?”

“Over flash.” Her partner shut her eyes and dropped back into her seat. “What the hell is going on with this weather? This something else they're cooking up, Doc?”

“Not that I know of no.” Doctor Dan cautiously picked his head up, and then moved back to his makeshift seat. “One thing we learned the hard way, eh? You can't screw with mother nature.” He studied Jess. “You all right, Jesslyn?”

Jess kept her eyes closed, still seeing the after flashes against the inside of her eyelids. She felt a moment of narrowly avoided massive stupidity, and the warmth of Dev's fingers on her shoulder was guiltily comforting.

After a brief moment the warmth increased, as she felt Dev's hip press against her shoulder, and cautiously she opened one eye halfway, and peeked up. To her relief, though there was still an after flash, she could make out Dev's features as her pilot looked at her with that deep, intense concern. “Well you don't have two heads. I'm probably okay.”

Both of Dev's eyebrows hiked up.

“And I could see that, so it seals the deal.” Jess leaned back in her seat and relaxed a little, opening her other eye cautiously and very glad they had most of the internal lighting off. “That was a dumbass thing to do. Thought we had more cover in here.”

“We were talking about weather before.” Brent spoke up. “Gettin worse. You said it. Ain't nothing like this I remember from when I was a kid.”

Jess considered that, thinking back to her childhood on the coast, and the days and days she'd spent outside on the water “No, me either.” She said. “Met said, back at Ten, storms were increasing. Problem is no one knew why.”

“Figure this was what Syd drove through?”

Doctor Dan cleared his throat “Syd?” He said. “From North?”

“Used to be.” Brent glanced at him. “Oh right. Happened after you were gone.”

Kurok looked from him to Jess and back, his fair eyebrows lifting in question.

“They took out North station. Seven of then got out, two made it to Ten alive. Barely.” Jess supplied. “Probably now it was a waste of time, and waste of Dev's heroics.”

“They destroyed the base?” Doctor Dan repeated “Both of them?”

Jess heard the note in his voice, and smiled grimly to herself, knowing that ferocious urge to retaliate down to the nth degree. Kurok was one of them, all right. No matter how long he'd spent up on that station, or what he'd done up there, that loyalty was baldly evident. “Yeah. With that energy weapon, we think.”

Kurok exhaled. “Stupid.”

“Comms out.” Brent commented. “Saw the other two safe land though.” He added, after the awkward silence had gone on too long.

“Thanks Brent.” Jess remained where she was, closing her eyes again. “Guess we should just stay put and wait for the worst of it to pass.” She ran a few things through her console, bare responses from the few systems Dev had left running. They had at least an hour to wait, she figured, before they could move out again, go west, and south, and come in to the citadel to see what was left.

If anything was. The idea of moving on to Drake's Bay was becoming more real, and now she had to consider the idea that bringing a squad of Interforce home might also make it the other side's next target.

Never let the other side have the last blood. Wasn't that the rule? Jess let out a slow breath.

The rain redoubled it's thundering roar, and the booming overhead was almost continuous. They all fell silent and sat quietly, listening to the noise. Jess checked the met screen again and then she shrugged, leaning back and composing herself to grab a power nap.

Funny how that was so easy now. She was in the middle of a death storm on a mission from hell with at least three strange people in her bus and she felt her body relax as though she was back in the citadel in her own bed. When Josh had been her driver... hell, even before she'd have been gulping kack and taking stims the whole damn time.

There was something tremendously fucked up going with her. But a nugget of pragmatism shrugged it's shoulders since really, what was there else to do?

She heard Kurok settle himself on the shelf, apparently with the same idea. “Just get as much rest as you can.
She spoke up. “Not much else to do until this passes.”

“Yup.” Brent grunted agreement. “Anyway bad news can always wait.”

Dev set the long range scanner up to do a continual sweep, then she tilted her control chair back and let her muscles relax, her peripheral vision catching sight of Brent getting as comfortable as he could on the jump seat.

The carriers weren't really meant for comfort. The seats were functional but mostly unpadded, the other surfaces hard and unyielding. It was meant for relatively short missions, even the food stocks were generally set for no more than a week.

But if you were tired enough, you could sleep and Dev felt that stealing over her, the thrum of the rain becoming almost hypnotic. She half turned her gimbaled chair so she could directly see Jess's station, and after a few minutes watching her partner rest, let her own eyes close.

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Thunder was still rumbling as Dev brought the carrier in a wide arc to the southwest, coming up on a line roughly close to the one she'd used the last time they'd approached the citadel, when they were coming back from Drake's Bay. They'd received no communications from the facility and Jess was standing behind her, hand resting on her chair as she watched the craggy slope approach.

“Crap.” Brent grunted. “Place looks dark.”

“There are no emissions from the faculty.” Dev confirmed. “Scan shows no pattern.”

Jess sighed. “Dev, go for the side entrance I told you about the last time.” She was already in her battle suit. Now she went to the area near the hatch and added her long blaster to it's leg holster.

“I”m sure this is gonna suck. Brent, tell the other two to drop after me, and we'll meet just inside that hatchway.

Brent was trimming the comp responses and squirting them to the others. He nodded, and continued his work.

It was raining outside. There had been no response to their secure channel squirt, and no reaction to their presence. Jess had, generically speaking, a bad feeling about all of that and she'd steeled herself to find inside what they'd found in North base.

Then. “Jess.” Dev started. “Incoming message, single band, on base frequencies.”

Jess darted back over to her and studied comms intently. “Huh.”

Brent craned his neck to look. “That's base.” He said. “Took em long enough.”

“Should I make a standard contact?” Dev asked. “The signal is correct.” She waited for Jess to nod, then keyed in the frequency. “BR270006 to base. Copy?”

There was a brief silence, then comms lit up. “BR270006, centops. Stand by for class a scan.”

Jess nodded. “That's right.” She said. “Brent, tell the others what's going on.”

Brent nodded.

“Mm” Doctor Dan had eased up on the other side of her, his hands on the back of Dev's chair. “Hopefully finding us inside won't trigger a destruct sequence.”

Jess eyed him. “Was that a joke?”

“Maybe.” Kurok produced a faint, wry smile.

They felt the scan, heavy and intense, passing slowly through the craft, leaving behind a tingle that had an almost slimy consistency. Jess tried not to hold her breath, her hand flexing as the scan passed through the chips in it, causing a deep itch.

“What is that?” Dev asked Doctor Dan, in a low tone.

“Full genetiscan.” He replied briefly. “They'll match that to the files, to make sure whoever on this carrier is safe.”

“I see.” Dev adjusted her ear cup. She could hear the faint hum of the radio sub carrier and tuned it a little, waiting for a response. “I'm glad someone's there, at least.”

“Hm.” Doctor Dan grunted.

“BR270006, confirmed. Please have your flight approach emergency entrance 12 south, be aware there is no faculty.”

“That doesn't sound good.” Brent said. “Bay must be trashed.” He cocked his head slightly. “That sounded like Mike.”

“It did.” Jess said. “Dev, the south 12 is down near the base of the mountain there.” She pointed at a now visible half round opening near the ground. “Hatch is open. Usually they don't use that for things this big. Just send the collecting trucks out that way.”

“Okay.” Dev dropped their altitude to almost ground level and started a slow approach, tuning scan as they angled around the barren rock surface and came in line with the entrance. She turned on the front floodlights and engaged the landing jets, aiming for the very center of the bare opening. “There does not seem to be much power on.”

“Scan was on emergency beam.” Brent said. “They must be on batts.”

Jess drummed her fingers on the back of the chair. “Hold up, Dev.” She said, her eyes sweeping the inside of the cavernous entry. “Tell them we see some obstruction – and we're going to find an alternate entry.”

Dutifully, Dev relayed the message.

“You can see inside there?” Doctor Dan asked, in a quizzical tone.

“No. Well, yes.” Jess said. “I can see inside but I don't really see any blockage. I'm bluffing.”

“BR270006 – there is no reported damage in the entry. Please proceed.” Comms crackled overhead, as Dev piped it through, half turning to look at her partner in question. “Also, Jason wants to speak to you on sideband 5.”

Jess picked up a headset and put it on, tucking the ear cup into her ear. “Jase?”

“What's the deal?” He asked. “You think we won't fit?”

“Something doesn't smell right.” Jess answered honestly. “Why that bay?”

“Only one clear enough?”

Maybe. Jess studied the bay, calling up in her head where it was positioned in the citadel, and what led to it. “Go on and enter. I”m going to go park on five deck.” She put her hands on Dev's shoulders. “Take us to that place I showed you first.” She told her pilot. “Jase, if they ask, just say I didn't think we'd all fit. Keep in comm sync though.”

“Ack.” Jason clicked off, and then April's carrier moved slowly ahead of them, towards the indicated bay with Mike's coming in behind her.

Jess watched them approach for a minute, then squeezed Dev's shoulder. “G'wan.”

Dev gently eased them across the harsh and stony ground on the back side of the citadel, the rain pattering noisily against the stone and running down in rivulets down the slope and on down further to the lowlands that merged into the inland sea just out of view.

“Centops, this is BR270006. We are sending Tac 2 and Tac3 ahead.” Dev spoke quietly into her comm. “We have propulsion damage and are not certain of close in steering.”

Both Doctor Dan and Jess turned and looked at her in surprise.

“Nice.” Brent nodded. “Last thing they want is a bus slamming in there.”

“Acknowledged, BR270006. Standing by.”

Dev fired the side jets and slowly brought the nose up, running through some steering tests in apparent random that ended up with the carrier lifted up several levels and coming even with a small, half ledge midway up the slope. “Is that the one?” She said. “I didn't want us to get in trouble for refusing to do what they were saying.”

“So you lied to them.” Jess looked amused.

“Yes.” Dev nodded. “We know how to do that.” She added, after a pause. 'Its not something they teach us.”

Doctor Dan chuckled softly under his breath. “She's right. We don't teach that. It's part of what makes us human.” He took a step back. “Are you going to go in that door?” He asked Jess.

“Yes.” Jess went over and resumed her long rifle, going to the hatch and seating the rest of her weapons more firmly. 'Put me down gently, Dev. I don't want to use the drop pack they'll pick up the plasma ejection.” She flexed her hands. “If I get in, I'll open the big door and you can land.”

“Want some company?” Doctor Dan asked.

“After I open the door. It's keyed to me. Seeing yours and Brent's body parts flying off into the mist isn't on my schedule at the moment.” Jess could sense the wall coming closer and she put her hands on either side of the hatch, waiting. “Open when ready, Devvie.”

“Ah.” Doctor Dan grunted softly. “You're the safety officer.”

Jess turned her head and looked at him, a faint smile on her face. “Senior agent. If they haven't re keyed it. We'll find out in a minute.”

The hatch opened, and a blast of cold rain smacked her, sharpening her attention before she jumped out of the carrier, landing on the nearby rock ledge with a faint skidding motion. She could feel the edge of ice in the downpour and quickly went to a small angle in the rock and stepped inside it, bumping open a scan plate and putting her hand on it.

Now, one of two things would happen. Either she'd get blasted half to hell, or the door would open. Jess was tired despite her nap and she didn't really want to be blown out into the rain.

She felt the tickle against her left palm, the remedial scan finding the chips embedded in her and keying to them. After a long pause, she heard a soft click, then felt a vibration where her shoulder was pressed against the stone and then an opening appeared to her left, outlined in lurid blue.

Deep scan. She drew her breath and stepped inside it, feeling the penetration to her very core. There was no way to fake this out, it did a walk of the entire DNA chain and she swore she could feel it do just that as it wound inside her and the bio scrape held her in stasis until it was done.

Either you passed, or you died. It was an isolated system, not hooked up to centops, and only the principal and the sec comp who keyed it knew whose codes would work and those two were never command level. An obscure and somewhat cynical check and balance.

Abruptly the scan broke off and released her, and she started breathing again. Apparently Bain's note hadn't gotten to security nor been deemed official, and she was still a grunt.

Jess smiled grimly, as she drew her blaster and very slowly moved inside, feeling the change as her vision flattened and sounds become sharper and more clear. A small hallway dog legged to the right and she slid into it, listening hard.

It was cold, and damp, and only emergency lighting was on. She didn't hear anything other than faint mechanical, so she moved further in, getting around the dog leg and into the larger area beyond.

It was empty and silent.

The emergency bay was generally shut down and unused at the busiest of times. There were a few lockers against the wall, that had gear and weapons in them, and at the far end past where a carrier could park there was an entrance into the ops level of the station.

Everything might be on the up and up. Jess went over to the manual controls of the large external door and triggered them, opening the casing and exposing the very old fashioned and completely hand operated chains that opened the hanger bay. She unlocked them and holstered her blaster, cautiously starting the process of ratcheting the bay open.

Rain spattered in immediately, along with a powerful beam of light from the front of the carrier waiting patiently outside. Jess got the door opened enough to let Dev land, and the landing jets flared as her pilot slid inside, cutting off and dropping the carrier to it's extending skids in very short order.

The hatch popped open and both Kurok and Brent hopped out “Jase's screaming for ya.” Brent said. “They tried to slam the door shut on them, that new kid got their bus halfway out and blocked it.” He gave Jess an appreciative look. “You called it.”

“Yeah.” Jess sighed. “Sometimes I hate being right.” She climbed up inside the carrier and went over to where Dev was shutting down the engines. “Hey.”

“Hold on a moment.” Dev uttered into comms. “Jess.. “

“Yeah, I know.” Jess picked up a headset and put it on, keying the comms to the backup board. “Finish shutting down.” She pressed the ear cup to her ear. “Jase?”

“Fuckers!” The agent bawled in her ear. “Where the hell did you go? We're hauling ass across the rocks, fuckers were in there waiting for us with blasters. April let off a barrage and we got out while they were picking up their own heads and asses.”

“Keep coming along the ridge line to the big gray rock. Check behind it.” Jess sighed. “Thought this was too easy.”

“So they got this place.” Jason was still fuming, sounds of the storm surrounding him. “Lazy ass jacktards let em take it.”

“Kids with you?”

Brief silence. “What? Oh.” Jason coughed a little. “Yeah everyone's here. You said that big rock? What … oh.” There was another silence. “I see it. Be there in a minute. Out.”

Jess put the comm set down. “Shitcakes.” She sighed. “Well, at least the place probably isn't a smoking hole.”

“Yes.” Dev was just climbing out of her seat. “I told centops we had mechanical difficulties, and they advised we were no longer on scan. I suggested it might be the angle we had to hold at.” She turned and regarded her partner solemnly “They did not call after that.”

Jess sighed. “I”m going to have to shoot them all to get into bed with you aren't I?”

Dev blinked a little, then issued a hesitant half grin.

Jess grinned back and motioned to the hatch. “Sooner I start the better.” She put her hand on Dev's back as they walked down the carrier ramp and back into the bay to join the others. “Let me go wave them in and shut the door.”

She ducked out into the rain and shaded her eyes, spotting six jacketed figures bolting along the rough ground headed towards her. They were hidden from the oversight above by a ridge of rock, and a minute later they gained the hatch and pelted inside.

“Fuckers!” Jason hissed as he rambled to a halt, his jacket shedding rain everywhere.

“Uh huh.” Jess closed the manual hatch and looped the chain around the mechanism. “Keep it down. I'd rather them not be sure where the hell we are for the moment.”

The rest of them shed their jackets and then gathered around her. “Did you know that was going to happen?” April asked, checking the blaster seated at her side.

“Still not sure what did happen. Not sure if it's that this place is taken over, or they think we're outlaw.” Jess told her, in a calm voice. “Though based on the fact the hatch let me in its starting to look more like we got bad guys inside.” She glanced around the cavern. “Not that you can see much in any case.”

“Emergency power.” Doctor Dan remarked, as he finished a circuit of the bay. “Could just be manual ops.”

“Could be.” Jess exhaled. She went across the bay past the carrier to the inner hallway and pulled out a panel, peering inside it. “Perimeter system is active, according to this.”

Dev squirmed in next to her and peered at the old tech with interest. There was a very basic representation of the citadel, faded tracings of hallways and chambers, with dimly illuminated rings here and there. “This is the central place, isn't it?”

“Yeah.” Jess put her fingertip on a spot near it. “Problem with that is, if we go through any of these gates they'll know where we are.”

“That's a bad thing?” Brent asked.

“If someone other than us is in charge up there? Yeah.” Jess rested her hands against the outer walls of the console. “You know how centops is. They've got the big over scan that shows them where everyone in the cit is.” She pondered the problem. “I'm sure they're on their way here now.”

“If they know where it is.” Jason folded his arms across his brawny chest. “Not everyone did. If they've taken over, no guarantee anyone told them about this.”

“No guarantee they didn't. Depends what jacktard was in ops.” Elaine sniped. “Glad Sandy'd already bought it she'd have had them waiting outside with an antipersonnel mine.”

“Well.” Jess left the hatch and went to the small and nondescript door that would lead further into the citadel. “No sense hanging around letting them have time to figure it out. Let's go.” She cautiously palmed the lock and felt it give way under pressure from her shoulder, moving outward and letting into a tight, enclosed space. She eased into it and cleared the way for the others, moving forward into the chute like corridor until she was at the far end.

There was a turn to the left, and then another, the walls melding at the end of that from the natural gray rock to the smooth surface of the inside of the citadel.

She drew in a breath, and the air smelled familiar. Clean and sterile, with a hint of mech on it and a faint tinge of salt air, this far down, this low in the facility. No stink of battle, or of burning, she noted.

Another ten minutes walk east, and she'd encounter the rough hewn hallway that led to the intake cavern, and on the far side of the corridor they were about to emerge into was the entrance tot he lower spaces where the bio alts lived.

Jess paused, and considered that, as the rest of her little gang filled up the hall behind her. She'd been down there maybe once, maybe twice just on a fam tour years back, and remembered very little of it.

Cautiously, she approached the opening, it's slanted gap blending into the walls and making it invisible when looked at from the outside. She paused just short of it and listened, but there was no sounds trickling in, no motion or even a far off klaxon. A gentle touch on her back nearly made her gasp, but she bit the inside of her lip and looked back over her shoulder.

Dev was there, her pale hair distinctive in the shadows. She held up her portable scan. “There are people approaching.” She whispered. “They have weapons.”

“Mm.” Jess glanced at the screen. “Yeah. That's no good news.” She moved forward and slipped into the outer hall, finding it dark and empty. Not surprising since these were the very lower levels of the faculty and only really frequented when something needed fixing, or you wanted to get to the cavern.

Jess had always been after the latter, and had found the entryway to the manual chamber years back but never bothered wondering what it was for until she'd been taken there the night she'd made senior. She'd always figured it was a storage space, for the gear they used on the outside.

Everyone did. No one was encouraged to ask about it. She looked down the long, empty corridor and started walking quickly along it, spotting the first distinctive outline of scan at the other end.

“Pst.” Kurok hissed softly, and pointed at a dark, sealed doorway to the right.

“What?” Jess looked at it. “We go in there, they'll have us cornered. It's a storage chamber.”

“It isn't.” Doctor Dan went over to it and opened a panel. “At least, it wasn't.” He amended, peering at the circuitry inside. “You used to be able to get down into the bio alt living quarters from here.”

Jess studied him with interest. “What does that get us?” She asked, one eye watching the scan console. “They're probably in there scared crapless.”

'Well.” Kurok keyed in a few codes. “That's probably true. But they're far less likely to shoot us than the people on their way here. So unless you're prepared for a very long and probably lethal firefight in the hall, let's see if we can find another way into central.”

With a faint click the door opened. They slipped inside and Jess got her hand light on, shining it around a bare and apparently abandoned chamber before Kurok shut the door behind them. “Not much in here.”

“No.” April got her own light on and stepped to one side. “There's a portal there. Looks like it hasn't been used for a while... but that...” She stepped closer and peered at a looming piece of mech and her nose twitched a little. “What is that?”

“Processing unit.” Doctor Dan said, quietly. “That's the outer wall skin there. This is where they handled bio alt dead.” He fell silent, then went to another door on the far side of the chamber. “This should be a lift.” He touched a palm pad and lights came on in the chamber, low and stark.

Dev eyed the big machine, feeling a chill come over her. She remembered the processing she'd witnessed and felt a desire to get as far away from the device as she could.

“We're out of time..” Elaine had been listening at the door and now she took a step back, drawing her blaster. “They're coming in.”

“Keep trying Doc.” Jess joined her, and Jason took up a position next to the processor. “We'll keep em occupied.”

“I”m sure.” Doctor Dan muttered, as he pecked at the console. “Damn it.”

Dev and Brent peered at the controls from either side of him, while the other techs plastered their backs against the wall. They'd just gotten into position when the door blasted open and then the room was filled with plasma fire.

Jess dropped to her belly, her eyes taking in the attack squad and absorbing the clothes and the stance and freeing her trigger finger to pinpoint them. She took out the first one and then blew an arm off the second, her body halfway protected by the step she was sheltered behind.

It was loud.

The attackers were yelling, in battle language that wasn't theirs and they had full armor on and it was a mess. Jess heard April let out a yell and saw a figure flying past her, but she squirmed around and put herself between the bad guys and that door and just kept firing.

The armor took a lot of hits, but Jason kept up a crossfire in counterpoint to hers, and after a few minutes the door closed again and they were inside with six dead enemy bodies, a room full of plasma smoke and the smell of burned flesh.

“Everyone okay?” Jess asked, after a brief pause.

“Yeah.” Jason came out from around the processor, going to the door and swiftly opening it to peer out. “That was ridiculous.”

“Bullshit.” Elaine grimaced at a long burn down her arm. “But now we know. It's them.”

“It's them.” Jess got up and rolled a body over, examining the full armor. “Any luck, Doc?”

“Yes and no.” Kurok said. “I got the door to trigger, but ah.. most of us can't go through it. It's keyed to organisms with biosynaptic control collars.”

Dev reached up and touched her neck in reflex. “Like mine?”

Doctor Dan studied her somberly. “Yes.” He glanced at Jess. “They locked it down from inside. Apparently someone took some care to keep them safe.”

Dev went to the door, hauling up as Jess got there ahead of her. “No she can't.” Jess said, her body blocking the door. “We've got no idea what's down there. They could all be compromised.”

“They could be.” Kurok agreed in a mild tone. “Nevertheless, she's the only one of us who can go.”

“They're going to come back.” Jason remarked. “I can hear an alarm.”

“Yeah.” Elaine pulled her head back in. “Lot of boots heading this way.”

Dev regarded her tall and irritated obstacle. “Jess.” She could see her partner was in discomfort. “I think I could do good work in there.”

“You do good work everywhere.” Jess studied her intently. “But you've got no idea what's down there.”

“That's true. But if I go, I'll find out.” Her partner responded in a mild reasonable tone. “And if I can get to the control sets, I can let you all in.”

Jess was aware of Kurok's eyes on her, but he remained silent as she weighed the risks.

“Incoming!” Elaine yelled, getting back form the door as Jason and Mike grabbed the dead bodies and jammed them against the inside of it.

No real choice. “Go on.” Jess said. “Be careful, huh?” She moved away from the inner door and took up a position in the angle of the alcove, taking aim at the door frame and putting a thin bead of plasma around it.

“I will.” Dev touched her on the side and moved to the door, as Doctor Dan keyed in something then gave her a nod. She went into the square space and felt scan take her, the collar on her neck twitching a little as she closed her eyes.

It seemed to get hot. She felt a moment of panic. Then the inner panel slid open and there was a step down and she moved over, and the panel shut with a bang behind her.

She was alone.

Then she turned and a second door opened, and she was facing a wall of bodies, and a bright light blinded her.

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Instinctively, Dev threw her hand up in front of her eyes and then closed them, half turning her head. “Ow.” She could see the flashes from the intensity of it on the inside of her eye lids. “Please stop!”

Then light shifted, and she heard voices, whispers that resolved into her short name. Cautiously, Dev opened her eyes and looked at the crowd, seeing row after row of bio alts, all staring at her.

“NM-Dev-1.” It was one of the Kaytees. “How did you get here?”

Dev blinked a few times and let her hand drop. “Hello Kaytee.” She said. “We just arrived at this facility. What's the situation?”

The bio alts were very upset, she could tell. She could now see anxious faces and there were smudges of dirt and bruises on the Kaytee's face.

There were three or four Kaytees in fact, and some Beeayes, in the front. Behind them, she could see the other sets, some of them hurt, many with blood on them as well.

“Incorrect people came and did bad things.” The Kaytee closest to her said. “They made a lot of natural borns dead, and some of us too.” He showed his arm, which was covered in a clumsy bandage. “We can't get to med.”

“That's bad.” Dev said. “Are there many of them, the bad ones?”

“Yes.” A second Kaytee said. “They came in through the big bay, and the place where the shuttle comes.” He said. “They made the base systems incorrect.” He looked exhausted. “Nothing is working. There were some big explosions, and only batteries are up.”

Dev nodded. “They have a new gun.” She said. “I was at North Base. It made everything burned there.”

“Yes.” A Beeaye said. “That's what we heard.” He winced, and held his left arm with his right, closed to his body. “The natural borns made us come in here, and locked the hatches.”

“The bad ones, or ours?” Dev asked.

“Ours. They were afraid more of us would be made dead. Tech Super Clint made us come in here.” The Beeaye said. “We don't know what is happening upstairs. The systems are all down, but they put on the scan to keep the incorrect people out from here. They said no one could get in.”

“Yes.” Dev said, again. “I was upstairs, and I was the only one who could come through the door.” She pointed behind her. “We came in a secret way, and now I have to make it so the people who were with me can come down here.”

The Kaytee looked doubtful. “Will they hurt us? They told us to stay here and not let anyone in.”

“Its some of the agents. My partner Jess, and also, Doctor Dan.” Dev told him. “They want to fix things.”

“Doctor Dan?” The name echoed back from many lips. “Doctor Dan's here?” The Kaytee asked. “They said the incorrect people took him far away and made him dead!”

“We rescued him.” Dev said, knowing a moment of intense, personal pride at the reaction, and the widening eyes of these, her own kind. “He was far away on the other side. We had to do a lot of difficult things to get him back.” She explained. “But we did, and he's here, in the other room.”

“The bad people here said they would stop doing incorrect things if the natural borns gave them the one you are with.” A Beeaye said, hesitantly. “The one you called Jess? They are very angry about that one.”

“I know.” Dev said. “We did bad things to them.” She said. “But that was because they were keeping some of the natural born from here from coming back.” She glanced behind her “But we have to let them in here or I think the bad people above are going to make them dead.”

“If we let them in here the bad people may make us dead.” The Kaytee said. “They already made a lot of us dead. We don't want to get hurt again.”

Dev straightened up, the faint lights catching on the piping and insignia she was wearing. Her collar was covered and theirs weren't, and she wondered if they viewed her as one of them, or one of the natural born. “We have to let them in.” She stated quietly. “It's the correct thing.”

The group hesitated, many eyes going to the Kaytees as the most advanced of the sets among them. But it wasn't a Kaytee that finally spoke up.

“They may make us dead anyway” The Beeaye nearest Dev shook his head. “It doesn't matter. We should help Doctor Dan.”

Now a lot of voices erupted, and heads nodded “We have to help Doctor Dan.” One of the PeeAres said. “He will keep them from making us dead.” He said. “He'll know what to do.”

Dev waited, as the discussion went around. She knew she had no way of forcing the question, so she waited to see what the result was going to be. Before she took things into her own hands, because she had the programming for that, and it was her job.

She would help Jess and Doctor Dan, even if the others refused to do so.

Maybe the Kaytee knew that because he looked at her, and he nodded. “We should help Doctor Dan.” he agreed with the majority. “And Beeaye is right. They might make us dead anyway.”

They cleared the way to the control consoles, where three of the bio alts were just sitting and watching screens. Dev went up onto the platform and one of them moved to make room for her, letting her sit down. “They have systems locked upstairs.” The man said. “We can't touch anything.”

Dev pulled the pad over and examined it. Then she keyed in a routine and entered her credentials, waiting to see what would happen. One of two things were likely, either the systems would stay locked, or they wouldn't.

After a moment the screen cleared and gave her access, and she nodded and started keying in other things. “They did not block access from here for someone with operations credentials.” She commented. “That was not optimal for their objective.”

The bio alts were all gathered around watching her attentively. “They did not expect any of us to have them.” The Beeaye said. “You are the first.”

“I am the first.” Dev agreed. She called up the routine for the door and studied it, mindful of the need to hurry. She didn't know what was going on in the outside room, but she didn't think it could be good based on the thumps and bangs that were transmitting through the stone and metal between her and where Jess was. “Get away from that access and be safe.” She ordered. “I am going to open it.”

The bio alts all scattered to the walls and crouched down, obeying her as if she was a natural born, even the Kaytees. Dev altered the programming and recompiled it, then applied to the door, and an instant later there was chaos everywhere.

Dark clad bodies tumbled through the opening and fired back the way they came, then bigger fully armored forms came hauling through with a deflector sending blasts back over everyone's heads.

Instinctively she dove off the console and got behind it as the room filled with blaster fire, and falling bodies, and a lot of yelling. It smelled of burning substance and scorched stone and she tucked her head behind the panel and hoped Jess was okay.

She heard Jason say get down and she closed her eyes, pressing against the wall as she heard a powerful explosion, and the vibration nearly sent her tumbling.

Screams broke out, and then, after another rattling explosion, she heard the sound of hatches sealing with a deep, ear impacting whumphing sound.

Then, abruptly, it was quiet.

“Fuck that was close.” Jason's voice broke it. “I get em all?”

Dev got up and hopped back up onto the console, freezing when she saw the floor covered in bodies. “Oh.” She blinked in the heavy smoke and felt her heart sink, as the impact hit her. “You... what did you do to them?” She asked Jason, her heart starting to race.

All the bio alts, the ones she'd been just talking to, were on the ground, limp, unmoving.

Jason was half covered in blood and he stared at her, then looked across the space filled with bio alt dead. “Sorry.” He answered briefly. “Didn't have time to code anything but us.”

Dev took a step back and bumped into the console, feeling like she was going to be very sick. She saw Doctor Dan starting to move towards her but a second later Jess was there instead, putting a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at her partner. “They let me open the door because I said they would be safe, and they believed me.”

“They sent a bunch of them in after us.” Jess told her, in a quiet tone. “We were out of options, Dev.” She looked around. “Check them. They might have just been coded for unco.”

“Do we really have time for this?” Jason asked impatiently, falling silent when Jess's blaster came around and targeted him. “Did you just totally lose your mind?” He asked her. “They're bios.”

Jess stared at him, then looked at Dev, then looked back at him. “I might have lost my mind but not about this. Bios or not they're ours.” Jess said. “Check them.”

“She's right.” Doctor Dan spoke up. “You are responsible for them. It's in the contract.” He moved past Mike and April and went to the first of the bodies, lowering himself next to it. “They're not krill.”

“It's not going to matter if they catch us in here. We'll be feeding the krill.” Jason stated. “We don't have time for this...” He caught a motion and looked back at Jess, who had taken the safety off her blaster. “You're seriously going to shoot me?”

“Yes.” Jess said. “But for insubordination under fire this time.” She motioned the rest of the agents. “Check them.”

She stayed by Dev's side, as the agents started moving amongst the bio alts, and joined Doctor Dan in kneeling by their side. “If those were our grenades, they should have had them passive coded. I helped test the damn things.”

Jason shook his head and went to the group near the wall, stepping over the broken and obviously dead bodies of the enemy soldiers. Elaine had already knelt next to one of the AyeBees, touching the side of his face with relative gentleness.

Kurok looked up from a Kaytee. “They're hard down.” He said. “But I think I can probably bring them back up.”

Jess felt Dev's shoulders relax a little. “How long?”

Doctor Dan shook his head. “Don't know. No gear here.” He stood up. “We can leave them where they are. They'll just stay down.” He straightened slowly and rubbed his hands together. “Maybe this was the safest thing for them, Dev.” He came up onto the platform. “Are you all right?”

Dev took a deep breath, and released it. “Yes. I think so.” She could feel her knees shaking, and the feeling of wanting to throw up was easing, a little. “That was a terrible feeling, Doctor Dan.”

“I know.” He patted her on her other shoulder, since Jess had possession of the one closest to her. “So now what, Agent?” He asked Jess. “Now that we didn't get blown up, that is.”

Jess sat down at the console and started accessing things. “First thing is, secure that damn door.” She said. “This your login Dev?”

“Yes.” Dev sat down too, because she felt like she was going to fall down otherwise.

“Good work.” Jess keyed through systems, mirroring the ones from centops and hoping no one up there was watching. “Surprised they didn't close.. oh, okay I see what you did.” She chuckled softly under her breath. “Clever, Devvie Very clever.”

When Dev didn't answer, Jess looked over at her, surprised to see a few tears sparkling on her face. She was leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and her hands were folded together, tense enough to have her knuckles show through the skin over them.

Kurok sat down next to her and patted her arm and Jess felt a surge of emotion that made her forget completely about the console. She half turned away and then saw all the rest of the agents and techs headed towards her, now that the fate of the bio alts appeared settled.

They were watching her. Jess felt briefly at a complete loss, all her instincts driving her to pay attention to the woman next to her and the cold hard knowledge of her training that told her she better do otherwise or risk losing control of the group. Jason had already called her into question, and though he'd backed down, she knew the barb had legitimate sting.

Damn it.

With a good deal of effort, she wrenched back around just as April reached the platform, forcing her eyes to reread the screen twice before the details registered.

“So whats going on up there.” Jason braced his hands on the console and peered at the screen, apparently setting aside their previous disagreement. “That centops?”

“Yeah.” Jess muttered. “Just standard scan... not sure what the hell they're doing but they know we're here.”

Mike and April sat down and started to key in screens, using general access that would be expected from the bio alt area. “Maintenance is off line.” Mike said. “Power's about twenty percent.”

Brent came over and wedged himself on the other side of where Dev was sitting and cleared his throat self consciously. “Thanks for getting us in.” He addressed the bio alt. “They were about to fry my ass in there.”

“You're welcome.” Dev answered quietly. “I'm glad everyone is safe.”

Jess felt her hands start to twitch and she lost focus, not really caring what was on the screen in front of her. “Fuckers.” She uttered. “I just want to get them out of here.”

Jason patted her on the back. “Easy, Jesseroo. Don't lose your mind again on us. We'll get em out of here.”

“They've got control of centops, and main ops.” April concluded. “I can't get any parsing from there at all.” She regarded the reporting stats. “Most of the systems are down. The bay is locked open, and it looks like there was a lot of boom in there.”

“Ah.” Jess said. “Yeah, that's the one big place we're vulnerable, if that big hatch is open. But we've got scan in the corridors..”

“Scan's off.” Jason had been tapping on the pads. “Makes sense, or they'd be dropping like flies going through he halls.”

Oh. Yeah. Right. “Well, then we can go through them too, if they haven't figured out how to reset it to block us.” Jess said. “Anyone want to guess what they want? What they're holding out for?”

“You.” Jason stated bluntly.

“That much for revenge?” Jess tilted her head and stared at him. “Get out of here.”

“Ah.” Doctor Dan cleared his throat. “That is one detail I managed to ferret out. Sorry I neglected to mention it I've been a bit distracted.”

“Yeah me too.” Jess finally turned away from the console and let her knee bump Dev's, getting a quick flash of those pale eyes and the briefest of grins in return. “So what did I do outside blowing out half a mountain?”

“Their ruling council was meeting in it at the time.” Doctor Dan informed her. “You wiped out half the leading scientists and all their top politicians. Which I think explains, by the way, their interest in me.” He added, in a musing tone.

The agents turned and stared at Jess.

Jess remained quiet for a short while. “I wasn't aiming at that.” She muttered finally. “I was just trying to be a distraction so Jase could get those teams out.”

“Shit yeah.” Jason said. “No way were they a target we didn't even know they were there.” He added. “Did we?” He looked at Jess. “Did Bain know?”

“Not that he told me.” Jess admitted. “That facility wasn't even a specific target.” She looked at Kurok. “We wouldn't have even published it, since we knew we had a leak.”

“Mm.” Doctor Dan grunted. “Alex said nothing about that. Possibly on purpose, if he thought they would try to compromise me.” He continued, without any seeming emotion. “Certainly, the other four that went with me didn't last long.”

“They tortured them?” April asked.

“No. They just killed them outright.” Kurok replied. “Didn't have any use for them. They had no intention of negotiating they just wanted me and knew I would insist on coming with the others if they went.”

“Did they know that? The guys that went with you?” Jason studied him intently.

“No. They weren't Interforce. Alex thought if he gave them some administrators it would pacify them.” Doctor Dan patted Dev on the back. “He held you and Jesslyn in much greater esteem.”

“It could have been tables turned easily. I .. “ Jess looked at Dev. “We could have been blown out fifty times in that. It was only Dev's flying that saved our asses.” She got up. “So I've got two choices. Either turn myself over to them and hope they take me and leave, or we have to take the base back and hope it frustrates them enough to give up.”

“And the reason they are interested in her.” Doctor Dan concluded. “Is that Dev's been a greater success than any of us had intended. If I could replicate that success for them, it would solve a number of their problems.”

Dev straightened up and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “I tried to do my best.” She murmured. “Was that incorrect, Doctor Dan?”

“No.” Jess answered before he could. “Fuck them. You just do what you do. What happened wasn't your fault.”

Dev looked at her, then at Doctor Dan, who smiled and nodded. “But many people took damage.” She looked around at the still, silent forms of the bio alts, and the dead soldiers. “Is that really correct?”

“No time to argue about it.” Jason tapped the screen. “They're doing a sweep, and if they have enough firepower they're just going to blow out that door. We're sitting ducks.”

Jess absorbed all the eyes on her, and knew a moment of truth in her guts.

“Jess.” Dev's voice was suddenly loud and next to her. “You weren't really considering allowing them to take you away were you?”

Jess turned her head to meet her partner's eyes. “If I thought they would just take me and fly off, and leave the rest of you alone, I would.” She responded bluntly. “But I think they just set this up as a trap, and once they get me, they'll blow this place with everyone in it and if I”m going to die today, I'm not going to do it gagged and immobilized.”

“So we really should have flown off back to the pole.” April mused. “This is an end game.”

“It's always an end game.” Elaine said. “Didn't they tell you that in school? We're always expected to splat for the cause.” She rubbed some dried blood off her hands. “Granted, we try not to splat in huge numbers. It drives the school crazy trying to replace us.”

Jess looked at her, then scanned the rest of them. “So is that what you want?” She asked bluntly. “You want me to turn myself into them and let you all get out?”

They all stared back at her.

“That's not what I meant.” Elaine said. “It is what it is, Jess. Don't get all crazy about it.” She leaned against the console. “Let's just figure out what to do and get it done, before they blow out that door and make this whole scene irrelevant. You got a plan?” She looked pointedly at Jess.

Jess felt her shoulders hunching defensively and she stood and paced a little, ending up next to the big screen. She studied it, her mind completely blank until she realized she was going to have to turn around and say something because they were all waiting for her to.

She was tired. She was hurting. Her lungs were aching and she had no idea what the hell to do except just go run into central ops shooting or …

Or what?

Slowly she turned and looked at Kurok. “There any way into the security hall except the blue corridor?”

Doctor Dan exhaled a little. “Yes there is.” He said. “But I'm not sure what that gets you. Operations hall is closer to central than security is.”

“There's a rig being held in Security we might be able to use to get past them.”

“Wait.” Jason held a hand up. “You're not talking about that brain thing? The one that splatted Devon?”

Jess nodded.

“What is it?” Kurok asked.

A loud, hollow thump sounded on the other side of the wall. “Okay, we're out of time.” Jess said. “Let's get to security sector. We might be able to pick up some allies there, depends on how far they penetrated in the maze.” She got off the platform and headed for the inside corridor.

Dev instantly trotted after her, carefully stepping around the silent, slumped bio alts scattered around the room. She caught up to Jess as the rest of them also started moving, and had a brief moment to catch her partner's hand and squeeze it.

Jess looked back at her.

“I don't want you to give up to them.” Dev said, quietly. “Or if you do, take me with you.”

The pale blue eyes watching her suddenly warmed, and softened, just before the rest of the group reached them. She winked at Dev, then she waited for Doctor Dan to come up to the door, and then she gestured him forward. “After you.”

Kurok pushed the inside door open and passed through it, and they all followed, leaving behind the room full of silent figures and scattering of dead ones.

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It was dark, and cold, and the walls were covered in condensation. Jess was standing at the end of a long, damp corridor with her hands braced on either side of a small doorway.

The rest of the group were stretched out along the hall on the other side of her, waiting in silence, for the return of Dan Kurok.

“Where the hell is he?” Jason uttered, speaking over Dev's head to Jess. “He cross us too?”

“No.” Jess didn't wait for Dev's reaction. “He's square.” She didn't even sound angry about the question. “If he's taking his time, maybe that's a good sign. He got further.”

Jason leaned back against the wall then he slowly let himself slide down it, coming to rest with his forearms on his knees. “Okay, maybe.” He sighed. “Fuck, I'm tired.”

Jess pushed off and thumped against the opposite wall, deciding to join him in sitting. “Park it, Devvie. We might as well take a break for a minute.”

Dev sat down next to her, wrapping her arms around her knees. “It's difficult to wait.” She said. “I hope Doctor Dan is okay.”

Jess squirmed over a bit, until her shoulder was pressed against Dev's. “He knows where he's going.” She assured her partner. “I knew Bain had some back channels, behind ops and that office he used, but they were locked down.”

Everyone had settled down and now that she was sitting, Jess hoped Kurok would take a few minutes more as it would at least give her a chance to come up with some kind of plan once he did come back.

Dev exhaled softly and the sound, then, distracting her and making Jess turn and focus on her. “Hey.”

The bio alt returned her gaze. “Hello.”

“You okay?” Jess asked, in a barely audible mutter.

Dev didn't answer for a moment, then she cleared her throat. “I think so.”

“Think so?” Jess asked. “That thing in the room bug you?”

Dev's pale brows twitched.

“The mine messing up the..” Jess paused. “Everyone in there getting blasted?”

“That bothered me, yes.” Dev finally said. “It felt very incorrect, when that happened.” She leaned closer to Jess. “I feel like I hurt them.”

“Mm.” Jess grunted softly. “Why'd you open the door?” She asked, in a mild tone. “Back there? They were safe in there.”

Dev stared at her in silence for a bit. “You were being attacked.” She said finally. “You were in danger – they would have made you dead.”

Jess nodded. “That's right.” She said. “You put me above them. I bet you never thought for a second before you opened up that hatch.”

“I didn't” The bio alt murmured. “That's incorrect, isn't it?”

“No. It's absolutely correct.” Jess put her head against Dev's. “There's an us and a them, Dev. Us is you and me, and them is everyone else. Hope you don't want to change that.”

Dev sat there breathing for a few moments. “Are you saying it's correct that I would want you to be safe, even though that meant all those sets, and everyone else were made dead?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Dev stared at her in total absorption.

“Really.” Jess responded, with a faint smile.

“I don't think that's what they intended with my programming.” The bio alt ventured.

“But?”

Dev frowned. “What but? Is this one of those ass things again?”

Jess started to shake, and she lifted one hand to cover her face.

Her partner sighed after a moment of this. “It's true though.” She said, a touch mournfully. “I valued your safety more than I did theirs, or even mine.” She acknowledged. “So I guess whether it's correct or not is sort of a non question.”

Jess shifted a little. “I would have done the same thing, Dev.” She said, quietly. “So don't sweat it. We don't really have the time or space to worry about it now anyway.”

Dev thought about that, pondering if she was, in fact worried. She decided she was really too tired to be worried and just wished the whole thing was over. She could talk to Doctor Dan about it afterward, surely he would be able to tell her what the truth of it was.

Then, between one breath and the next, the lights went off and they were plunged into total darkness.

Jess surged to her feet and the rest of them followed, as she found the door opening by touch and without pause backed a step and kicked out at it, impacting the panel with a sodden crack.

“Hope that wasn't your leg.” Jason commented.

Jess kicked the door again and this time it flew inward, and she followed it, all in such pitch darkness not even a shadow showed. “Let's gol” She called over her shoulder.

Dev scrambled after her partner, holding one hand out ahead of her to prevent her from crashing into anything. The only thing she could hear was the scuffling of their motion and the rasp of Jess's skin against the wall ahead of her. “Jess?”

“Sh.” Jess ducked past something unseen and reached back to grab hold of her hand. “This is behind Bain's office.” She said. “Let's get through it and go take centops.”

“Sounds good.” April said. “No sense hanging around in here.”

“No sense worrying about scan either.” Jason said. “Let's just kick the ass of anything we find.” The sound of him drawing his blaster and setting it was loud against the rock walls, and then the small space they were in was filled with a lot more noise just like it.

Dev just stayed by Jess as she started forward, unlocking a door just in front of them and swinging it open. She paused and listened, then she turned on her hand light and shone it around, picking out the staid interior of the office Bain had used when he'd been in the citadel.

Empty, and dark. They moved across it and went to the door, where a lifetime ago Jess had talked to Bain about her promotion, reaching the door just as thunderous explosions rocked the walls around them.

“Oh, that's not good.” Elaine sighed.

Jess paused at the door and waited for them to join her, then she unlocked her blaster and raised her other hand, pausing, then letting it fall.

Jason moved past her in silence, bumping the front door to the office opening and passing through with April and Mike right behind him. Elaine stayed next to Jess, and the techs stuck together and brought up the rear as they all emerged into the outer hall.

Here, there should have been security guards, but nothing living was there and they moved on through the outer chamber and then through the main hall door into the sector corridor. Far off they could hear more explosions, and very faintly, shouting.

Jess and Elaine kept up a watch as they moved quickly through the hall, coming around the curve and into the main space where the air was already getting stuffy. “Handlers off.” Jess commented. “Dev, run your box, see what's coming at us.”

Dev and the rest of the techs already had their scanners out and going, the screens reflecting in ghostly silver and outlining their faces. “There are life forms heading in this direction. “ Dev said. “They are moving fast.”

“Not as fast as we are.” Jess urged them forward and they caught up to the rest of the agents, as they came around the circular wall that pointed them into the operations center. The big door was dark and open, and they went through and then stopped.

It smelled of blood, and burned flesh. Jess shone her light around and went still, seeing mostly destruction all around them. “Shit.”

“Unsalvagable.” Jason remarked. “Let's move on.”

“Let's move on.” Jess repeated, turning and leading the way out of the room. “Sounds like they're running. You figure the bay?”

“Yep.”

“Let's go.” Jess took the lead now and they broke into a run, heading down the hall and down ramp towards the carrier bay, as the sounds of fighting grew louder.

A moment later the corridor was filled with fast moving bodies and Jess felt her senses tingling, as she swung her blaster around and targeted the first of them. “Ware!”

“Got em!” Jason let off the first blast, and then ducked as one came back at him, and then the hall was full of blaster fire, lighting up the shadows as they bounced off the rock walls.

“Down!” Jess yelled at the techs, before she nailed a bad guy in the jaw with her elbow and took him down, using his body as a shield as a long yellow beam nearly blew him apart.

April was hugging the corner of the wall and aiming past it, letting out long bursts and then drawing back as fire hit the wall next to her. The enemy they were firing at were wearing full armor, and their bulky, hardened figures were deflecting the blasts as they poured forward.

Jess got down behind the dead soldier and propped her gun up on his hip, ignoring the blood and burned plastic all around her. “Dev! You down!”

A hand touched her thigh and she nearly hit the roof, stifling a squeak as she only just stopped herself from whipping around and clobbering her partner. “Grahba... oh good.” She wrenched around and fired, catching one of the enemy in mid leap about to land on her. The blast shoved

him sideways and she ducked and felt the impact on her shoulders, but she shoved backwards and sent him against the wall.

“Clear!” Mike's voice rang out, and Jess grabbed Dev by the arm and hauled her up as they started down the hall again. There were three bodies on the floor and Jason and Elaine were shooting over the rest of their heads as another three of the enemy were retreating before them, firing as they went.

Jess studied the pattern, then she stopped and ducked behind the curve of the wall. “Hold up!”

The team flattened themselves against the wall.

Jess saw the flicker as the enemy paused and waited. Then she turned and faced Jason who had ended up behind her. “They're drawing us.” She watched him nod. “Wanna step in it?”

He shrugged. “Choices?”

“Bad, none.” She let out a low whistle and shouldered her blaster. “Let's speed it up. Techs, stay down.”

Dev obediently crouched and felt the warmth as Brent and Chester came up next to her. She could see Doug dimly across the hall, and then there was rapid motion as Jess led the agents across the hall and into the opening where two corridors met, lighting everything up with blaster fire.

“This sucks.” Brent said, succinctly. “Want this shit to be over.”

“Yes.” Dev agreed. 'This is definitely non optimal.” She watched anxiously as the agents disappeared from her view and then loud noises happened, bright flashes coming from around the bend of the corridor.

“Don't sound good.” Chester noted.

Dev had her scanner out and she watched the wiremap, shifting a little so Chester and Brent could see it. 'Isn't there something we can do to help?” She asked, finding nothing readily at hand in her programming. When it came to ground battle, firefights, the agents were the ones who took the lead and the techs were supposed to, at best keep their heads down and stay out of trouble.

Well. “Let's go in there.” Dev got up and pointed to a half open hatch. “That's the cafeteria, isn't it?”

“What's left of it. “ But Brent moved past her and they piled into the room, Chester getting his light on and flashing it around as the took cover from the stray bolts coming down the hall.

The room, though dark, was relatively undamaged and Brent went over to the wall panels to see what he could make of them.

“Not much we can do.” Doug had his head inched around the half open door, watching. “No guns, no guts no glory.”

Brent snorted. Tucker came over and sat down next to him, resting his elbows on his knees.

It seemed wrong. Dev kept her eyes on the wiremap, on the figure she knew was Jess moving through the halls, the outline almost obliterated by the energy flares from the blasters.

She saw Jess's outline jerk suddenly, and impact against the wall.

She felt strangely lightheaded. “Brent.” She turned and offered the scanner. “Could you hold onto this please?”

“Sure.” He took the instrument. “Dropped mine out on the... where ya going?”

Dev slipped through the open door and started down the hall, heading around the corner and through the next crossing, picking up speed as she approached the long series of archways that led to the shuttle bay.

She could smell smoke and burned electronics, and as she cleared the next entry she saw the battle, the enemy behind the blast doors and the agents pinned down in front of them, unable to go any further.

Jess was curled up near an overturned cabinet and as Dev headed for her she sensed a surge of energy coming at her and dove for the floor. “Look out!”

From behind her. The hall was filling with enemy, blasters raised.

Dev rolled for the far wall as she saw the agents start to turn and she slammed into the hard surface, as a bolt hit the rock right over her head.

A hand grabbed her arm and she was pulled along the floor, blaster fire almost singing her shoulder as she found herself hard against the wall, Jess's tall body in front of her.

Jess was yelling. The agents were firing, the enemy was firing back. Dev heard someone cough loudly, then Jess called out Jason's name.

There was no answer.

She felt everything slow down a bit, as the thought occurred to her that they were in very big danger, and it was likely that very soon they were going to be made dead.

Dev knew what that was. She hoped it would be fast, and that it wouldn't hurt, too much. She felt Jess press against her and she reached out to take hold of her partner, very glad she'd at least made a connection with someone, and got to understand what that love thing was.

She was very glad she'd gotten to know Jess. Gotten to do good work, and be as close to a natural born as one of her kind could be.

She'd gotten her mark, after all.

A loud, crackling boom filled her consciousness and she tucked her head along Jess's side, feeling her partner shift suddenly and turn to cover her, wrapping her arms around Dev and pushing her against the wall as a flow of energy passed over and through them, a flaring edge of pain that sent her to the edge of consciousness.

Then a thumping sound, and a blast of air replaced it, and the darkness blew out, replaced with piercing haloed lights that made stark beams through the smoke now visible in the hall.

Jess released her and turned, sweeping up her blaster in a deadly motion only to swing it's muzzle up as she got up om her knees and swiveled around.

The enemy were on the ground, bodies contorted. The archways were lit with a familiar blue glow and the overhead lights had all come on along with the air handlers. “Someone got the systems back on.” Jess said, finally, rising to her feet. “Status?”

“Okay.” April got up from the ground, finally looking stunned and a bit overwhelmed. “Mike?”

“Ow.” Mike was sitting with his back against the wall, cradling his right arm with his left. “Broke something.”

Jess headed over to where Elaine was crouched over Jason. “April, go get the techs.” She circled Jason's sprawled legs and knelt down on the far side of his body. “Take one to the head?”

“Yeah.” Elaine exhaled. “If med's down, he's toast.” She regarded the long, dark burn that scored half his face, and the charred remains of one ear. “Stupid bastard. I told him to duck.”

Jess turned and regarded the rest of the space. She went to the comms panel on the wall and keyed it, hearing a soft crackle in return, but no response. “Tac.” She uttered into it. “Any comms, respond.”

She waited, then repeated the message.

Another long silence, then rather than from the comms, they heard a response coming from the cross hallway just before the shuttle bay.

“Not much to say.” Dan Kurok limped into view, his eyes flicking over them with something like relief. “Took you long enough to get them down here.” He sat down on a box, looking completely exhausted. “This is the only area with any grid I could bring up.” He blinked mildly. “Once I'd taken everything down that is.”

“That was you?” Elaine studied him.

A faint, very wry smile appeared on Doctor Dan's face.

“Thought they were leading us on.” Jess looked up as the techs came into view following April. “Let's rig a carry, get Jason to med.” She eyed the hall. “If this sector's got power, that one might too.”

“Marginal.” Kurok said. “This was the last of them, I think. They got comms as I got into the back halls and they took off, left a squadron behind to clean up.” He studied the bodies on the floor. “Hope that's all of them. There's not much in the way of protection left here.” His eyes lifted to Jess's. “And they will be back.”

“What about people?” Elaine asked. “Anyone else from the teams here?”

Kurok just looked at her.

'Shit.” She shook her head.

“Maybe Bock was right.” April commented. “He said it was over. We were just prolonging it.”

Jess watched them rigging a sling, then she walked back over to where Dev was seated on the ground, extending a hand down to her. “He was right.” She hoisted her partner to her feet. “But it doesn't matter because we don't stop just because it's a lost cause.” She studied the bio alt. “You okay, Devvie?”

What, really could she say to that? “Yes.” Dev looked around at the dissipating smoke, and the bodies on the ground, and her battered colleagues, and Doctor Dan. “Seeing as I thought they were going to make us dead.”

“Not yet.” Jess sighed. “Maybe soon.”

“I see.”

“Let's see how hard we can make it for them.”

**

It did seem a lost cause. Dev was on her knees, her head inside a wall panel as she studied the readouts on her retrieved scanner. There was so much damage everywhere, it seemed very difficult to know where to start with fixing it.

“Crap.” Brent was in the next panel. “This is bullshit.”

Dev construed that to mean Brent agreed with her assessment, and she made a small noise of assent. “The batteries are being drained at 10 percent per standard hour. Then there will be no power available.”

“We can suck off the carriers for a few hours.” Chester suggested. “But that's it.”

“That's it.” Brent agreed, touching the comm set on his head. “Tuck, you there?”

Dev continued her evaluation, trying not to think of the long corridor they were next to that led eventually to her quarters, and rest. There seemed to be no end in sight to the trouble, and she'd reduced her wishing to a simple one for some water and maybe even a packet of those seaweed crackers Jess hated so much.

The power generation systems were off line, that being the crux of the issue. Without them, the citadel had to run on what power was in the batteries, and that was draining rapidly. “How were they operating before? The systems were up when we were downstairs.”

“Someone had the security systems turned off.” Brent said, darkly. “Whatever jacktard let them in, prob. Hope they're carbon char somewhere.”

Dev pulled her head out of the cabinet and looked at him. “You mean, someone here was on their side?”

“Sure.” Brent said. “Knew there was a stinker left here. Let them in the first time, when they bombed the bay.” He tapped his comms again. “Tuck? What's up in med?”

Worried about Jason. Dev could see the tense lines in his face, and she knew a moment of understanding there, that despite the gruff words and attitude, there was caring there for his partner who had looked very damaged to Dev before they'd taken him away.

Doctor Dan had gone back downstairs to bring up the downed sets, and Jess had started inspecting the facility to see what harm had been done to it, apparently having taking no damage herself in the fight.

“Okay thanks.” Brent said into comms, crouching back down and going back to studying the panel. “They got power to med.”

“Damn good news.” Chester said. “They can splint up Mike's arm, too.”

The comm set in Dev's ear rustled and she turned her attention from her scanner. “Ack?”

“Hey Dev.” Jess's voice burbled through. “Your buddy got some help up and going and we cleared out centops. Bring the wrenchers up here – got better access.”

“Ack.” Dev stood up. “Jess said we should go to the operations center.” She told the other techs. “They have made it more optimal.”

“And they've got chairs.” Doug climbed down out of a service hatchway. “No damn connections here anyway, just service trunks.” He said. “Two of the big power transfer banks got fried. This is a mess.”

“Yes.” Dev closed her scanner and secured the panel. “But at least no one is trying to make us dead at the moment, and we have good work to do.”

“You bios' talk funny.” Doug said, as they headed down the hall towards centops. “You know that?”

“We talk funny?” Dev eyed him. “We don't spend most of our time talking about excrement and posterior body parts at least.” She protested. “I had to load a custom dictionary into my scanner just to know what all of you are saying most of the time.”

Doug eyed her, trying to hold back a smile. Brent didn't bother, snickering under his breath as they moved through the central hall and past the now active scan gate into ops.

“Hey, what was that with you giving me your box and taking off before?” Brent asked, suddenly. “You looking to get fried on purpose?”

“No.” Dev admitted as they approached central systems. “I was concerned that Jess was in danger.” She glanced up as the emergency lighting overhead flickered a little. “So I wanted to see if I could help in any way.”

They reached the ops door and therefore the conversation stopped, as they entered and found Jess and April inside.

The ops center had taken some considerable damage. Two of the console banks were burned and dark, and there were blaster scores on the walls. But the emergency lighting was on and two more of the banks had some limited screens active and the room was cleared of any bodies.

“Ah, the wrenchers are here.” Jess looked up from a large piece of plas she had spread out on the console top. “What's the status?”

'Batts are crap.” Brent said. “Got maybe three hours left.”

Jess nodded. “That's what the scan said here too.” She indicated one of the two working consoles. “We need to get the exchangers up. We don't get power going we might as well just get in the buses and go fishing.”

“Yah.” Brent sat down at one of the working stations. “Nothing's working down there.”

“Want me to take Doug and see what the status of the intakes are?” April asked. “Might as well move the carrier into the big bay anyhow.”

Jess nodded. “Do a fly around and get a comp scan while you're at it. We need to get at least enough cycles to get scan and met up.”

April nodded and headed for the door, with Doug following her obediently.

“Lift's cycling from downstairs.” Brent commented. “Getting biologic readings.. looks like the Doc got things going down there.” He studied the screen. “We should get scan relayed in here until we can get power up those buckheads could be sweeping down on us and we'd never know it.”

“I have our carrier configured to relay that.” Dev spoke up briefly. “So far there is nothing approaching and the weather seems all right.” She took a seat and started connecting her portable scan to the console. “I will send it in here so everyone can see it.”

“That's my driver.” Jess put a hand on Dev's back and gave it a little friendly scratch with her fingertips. “There were less bodies in here than I thought there would be. Only two.” She changed the subject. “We took them to processing, and after Elaine finishes with Jason and Mike in med, she's going to do a foray to see if there are more – there's a lot of people missing.”

“Maybe they got out?” Brent suggested. “Could be they were trying to evac when they were getting crunched.”

“Well, if we don't find bodies, and there's nothing floating ashore, that's a possible.” Jess turned as there were footsteps in the hall, and then let her hand drop to her blaster as the doorway was filled. “Ah. You.”

“Ah, me.” Dan Kurok agreed. “I have brought all the bio alt sets up, and instructed them to start repair, or restoral, whatever they are capable of.” He said. “They told me someone should check the carrier bay out, as they thought some might be trapped in there.”

He sat down in one of the watch chairs and leaned back, his pale eyes reflecting the emergency lighting despite their bloodshot nature. “Home sweet home, eh?”

Jess returned a wry grin to him, then keyed comms. “April, ack?”

“Ack.” April's voice came back, with the sound of wind behind it. “We're moving across the external fascia.”

“When you're done recon, inspect the carrier bay. Word is people might be in there.”

“Bodies might be in there too.” April said. “My guess is they dropped some nasty in the top there, big place, all you'd need is gravity.”

“Find out and report.” Jess said. “We'll be working on the tie lines in here.”

“Ack.”

“So, they were on batts the whole time?” Brent looked a touch confused. “I don't get it. When we got here it was like they had no idea we were coming, except that hatch on the north side.”

“They were on batteries.” Kurok confirmed. “This place has big ones. I had quite a bit of trouble getting them shut completely down.” He looked at his hands, and then flexed them. “No way to get the systems they were using to watch for everyone off except for that.”

“So they had scan?”

“They had, I think, very limited internal wire plots.” He said. “I got the sense, when I was sneaking around trying not to get shot that whatever the plan was originally there wasn't much left before we got here.” He looked thoughtful.

“Common problem.” Jess sighed. “All right, I”m going to go down to the intake cavern” She glanced at Dev, who immediately stood up and set her scanner down on the console. “We'll be back.”

They walked out into the dimly lit corridor and Dev felt glad they were now by themselves and it was quiet. A motion flickered in and out of her peripheral vision, and she recognized one of the BeeAyes carrying a box away from the cafeteria. “I'm glad Doctor Dan made them all right.”

Jess nodded, her face quiet and pensive. “Know what I feel like doing?”

The question opened up a lot of possibilities. “I'm afraid I don't.” Dev finally answered.

“Wish I could go to my quarters, take a shower, eat two sets of rations, and sleep for two days.” Jess said. “This is so fucked up I don't see an end to it.”

“Mm.” Dev nodded a little. “I would like all that, and also, to lay in bed with you.”

Jess managed a smile at that. “Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Yeah, that would be nice.” Jess admitted. “Damn I”m tired.” She draped her arm over Dev's shoulders as they walked through the unnaturally silent halls. “Y'know, I just don't get what was going on here. They come here, supposedly to get me, but then they take off, and leave a watch squad who can't even tell when they're being infiltrated by us?”

Dev shook her head. “I don't understand most of this either.”

“I mean, what the hell?” Jess went on. “You know?”

“No, I don't know. What's hell?” Dev noticed they were passing one of the dispensers in the hall. “Can we get a drink?”

“Sure.” Jess detoured over to the alcove and bumped the door open, removing a container and handing it to Dev, then taking one for herself. The residual cooling in the casing had kept the temperature relatively down, and she popped open the drink and took a sip while she stood there thinking.

They were still in the secure area. The halls were barren, and dingy looking in the emergency lighting, and it made her feel grim just looking around. Down one hallway was the long winding corridor down to the intake cavern, and cross angles to it was the short branch that led to her quarters.

Their quarters.

The other direction was to the developmental tech area and... Jess turned, as something out of place caught her eye. She set the container down and drew her blaster. “Stay here.” She told Dev, then started down the side hall towards a half open door that had no business being accessed.

It was an unmarked door and there was silence beyond it. Jess cautiously pushed it open with the muzzle of her blaster and waited, ears cocked, as the rough crunch of the manual opening faded. After a moment she glided around the edge of the door way and into the room, hitting the preamp on the blaster and lighting up the room in pale blue wash.

Then she replaced that with the glare of her hand light and holstered the gun, letting out a long, aggravated sigh. “Dev!” She called out. “C'mere.” She keyed her comm set as she heard her pilot's light footsteps approaching and half turned as the bio alt entered. “See if you can get some lighting on in here wouldja?”

'Yes.” Dev turned on her own hand light and explored the room, finding a control console across from where Jess was. “It appears this facility isn't used?” She sat down and keyed in a command. “It's empty.”

“That would be the problem.” Jess tapped her comm set again. “Centops, Tac 1, Ack?”

“Centops.” Brent answered. “Go-head.”

“I'm in sector blue thirty.” Jess said. “Looks like they borrowed a few things.”

“Ack.” Brent answered. “Relay?”

“Ack.” Jess responded. “We'll pick it up later. Proceeding.”

“Ack. Relay and mark.” Brent said, clicking off.

Dev had succeeding in getting the low level illumination on, and now she turned and regarded the empty room. “What is this space?” She asked. “I don't' think you showed it to me before.”

“No.” Jess said. “Let's get walking and I'll tell you about it.” She waited for Dev to join her and they headed down the hall again. “That room.. it's a complex there's more than one space in there – it's where all the black ops stuff ends up.”

Dev nodded gravely. “It seemed quite dark.”

Jess turned her head and regarded her partner. 'Was that a joke?”

Dev shrugged.

'Anyway, the biggest thing we had in there was a new weapons rig that you kind of plugged into.” Jess explained as they got to the access hallway. “It's gone. Few other things are too but that one.. “ She shook her head. “Hard to say if it's more dangerous to us or them.”

“Like that thing they made.” Dev observed. “That was dangerous to them, wasn't it?”

Jess thought about that as they walked down the steep passageway into the cavern. “Yeah.” She said, after a bit. “But this was... well, if they figure out how to make it work all those fights you saw us in? Us against them in the hall? It would give them an advantage.”

Dev could feel the cold, wet air against her and she pondered as she followed Jess closely. “They wear more things than you do.” She said, eventually. “Is that to protect them?”

Jess worked the airlock into the final cavern. “Yeah. Our plasmas are more intense than theirs, and they don't.. they don't train agents like we do.” She led the way into the rock pathway. “They care about living. It's what makes us crazy to them.” She paused, regarding the huge space. “We're harder kills because we don't care.”

Dev's brows creased. “So this thing will make them not care?” She hazarded.

Jess produced a brief, grim smile. “It wires your guns into your head. You fire at the speed of thought.” She put her hands on the rock, her fingertips twitching. “I let them rig me into it once.” She turned her head and looked at Dev. “You never want to stop shooting. I nearly took out the test chamber.”

Her pilot frowned. “I don't' think I understand that.” She said, in an apologetic tone. “Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?”

Jess shook her head and pointed down to the board storage area. “It's not stable. Next guy who tested it fried himself. They ended up giving him a mercy kill.”

The waves were thundering in from under the rock wall, and the spray coated them as they reached the platform and looked out over the fractious water. Unlike the previous time, when the intake tunnels were in work and the water was swirling in a powerful, predictable way, now the waves were smashing against everything, breaking hard against the rocks and sending explosions of water halfway up to the ceiling of the cavern.

It seemed wild and frenzied. Jess leaned back against the rock wall, and folded her arms over her chest. “What is going on here, Dev? That's the question.”

'Well.” Dev copied her pose, glad to be still and quiet for a bit. “I was thinking about that when we were on the carrier on the way back here, and one thing that seemed interesting to me was those people on the other side are really focused on you.”

“On me.” Jess repeated, in a doubtful tone. “Why me?”

“That's what I was wondering.” Her partner admitted. “They got that man Joshua to do bad things and caused you difficulties. Then the man Bricker tried to use me to make it less difficult, and after that, the man Bain got you not to leave. Then they paid the captain to do bad things. Then they were trying to get us on that market island, and they chased us and when we got back, we found out they took those people and Doctor Dan and wanted you in return for them.”

“Hm. Yeah.” Jess agreed. “I thought it was because of the Gibraltar run but you know what? It started before that.” She frowned. “It started with Joshua, but turn an agent, and go through all that just to put me on ice? Why?” She unfolded her arms and paced a little. “I”m a good agent, I've got a pretty decent record, done a bunch of missions but nothing more or less than someone like Jason, or Elaine, or hell, even Sandy had done.”

“I see.”

“That's why they were all pissed when they bumped me to senior, by the way.” Jess produced a self deprecating smile. “I wasn't about to turn it down, but I really hadn't earned it. Shoulda been probably Elaine.” She crossed her arms again. “But I guess Bain had his reasons.”

“Doctor Dan told me I could trust you, and the main Bain.” Dev said, unexpectedly. “So maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe there are things we don't know.” She paused. “That happened a lot with us in the creche. They would do things a lot and you never really knew why because they didn't tell you everything.”

“Mm.” Jess looked thoughtful. “Doesn't really matter now I guess.” She studied the cavern. “The raceways down there look clear. If they're all right on the outside we can try a restart after we check the transfer stations.”

“What will happen then?”

“We get power.” Jess started trudging back up the ramp. “We can bring systems up, and talk to home base, and figure out what the hell we're doing to do when those bastards come back here... “ She paused, and looked back at Dev. “But they'd have done that already, right? Send word to HQ about all this?”

“The man Bock seemed to think that was a bad idea.” Dev joined her. “Remember he said, that they would think bad things about us if we did that?”

“He just didn't want us to communicate. He tried to get them to kill us, remember?” Jess frowned. “Of course they'd tell the top – they killed two bases. We need help.”

But as she said it, she felt that pang in her gut that meant a warning. She remembered something that Bain had said, so long ago now that it felt like someone else's lifetime. “But there's no point in worrying about that right now I guess. Let's just get things up and running here so at least we can... “She paused, in thought.

“Have a meal.” Dev supplied a conclusion for her. “It has been a while.” She added, mournfully.

Jess chuckled, and shook her head. “How about we stop and get some of those damn awful crackers?” She suggested. “I hate them but at least they're something and they never spoil.”

“Excellent idea.”

**

“Centops, Tac 2.”

Jess got her comms in place. “Centops, Ack.” She took a swallow of kack to clear the seaweed crackers from her throat. “Go ahead April.”

“External intakes look okay, no obstructions seen.” April said. “But we just dropped into the bay and got shot at. Think we need some backup from inside.”

“Ack.” Jess got up. “Will check.”

“Jess.” Dev looked up from her console. “A Kaytee says the doors to the bay are secured from the inside. They just reported.” She selected a cracker and put it in her mouth, munching quietly. “I have asked them to put on comm where they can.”

“And a Kaytee is?” Jess inquired, sitting back down.

“One of the pilots.” Dev supplied, listening to her comms. “A PeeEff also says they have found the cut in the transmission lines and are reviewing it.”

“Where is that?” Brent asked. “I”ll go have a look too.”

Dev turned her head and looked at him. “Level six, west service corridor B.”

Brent got up and headed for the door, which was now properly secured and scan protected, and opened after he passed the gateway. “Let you know.” He tossed back before the hatch shut.

Jess studied the marginal wiremap. “Dev, you got any way to patch comms to the service bay? Let me talk in there?”

“I will try.” Dev hunted through the systems she had access to. “There are a lot of things very suboptimal.” She reported. “I think whatever the disruption was on level six also removed service for scan and comms.” She tapped further. “I can possibly activate any vessel comms and relay.”

“There are carriers left in there intact?” Jess asked, going over to peer over Dev's shoulder. “Oh, okay. I see. The transports are still in there.”

“Yes.”

“Give it a try.” Jess studied the wiremap intently.

Dev carefully patched the comms on the board through an emergency relay, and then to the service craft left in the bay. “It's done.”

“Attention.” Jess watched the relays trigger, a faint trickle of communication. “Attention, this is centops, reg centops, Drake eleven on comm.” She waited a moment. “Ntac, respond.”

“Centops, Tac 2. Relaying external.” Doug's voice echoed softly in Dev's ear. “Scan shows motion inside, sending vid copy.”

“Ack.” Dev answered, studying the vid. Doug had his carrier up on the lip of the escarpment, just barely at the edge of the opening, but she could see the destruction even from there. “Oh.”

Jess leaned against her. “Oh, crap.” She murmured. “Look the hell at that.”

The entire top hatch was disrupted, the metal edges peeled back and gaping, one whole side lying over draped down the side of the cliff. It was as though some huge force had exploded from within, forcing the hatch up and out of it's seating deep in the rock.

A crackle. “Drake!” A voice came through comms. “Ntac, sendit.”

“Wants validation.” Jess said. “Don' blame him. I could be anyone up here saying I'm me.”

'That sounded like Cliff.” Dev said, in a low tone. “Should I talk to him?”

“Hang on.” Jess put her hand on Dev's shoulder. “”Meet in my neighbor's bunk to pick up your shells.” She enunciated quietly into the comms. All the code in the world was good, but sometimes, there were personal bits that were worth more. “Ack?”

There was a long silence. Then the sound of breathing. “Ack.” Cliff's voice sounded, even on ratty comms, profoundly relieved. “Topside?”

“Friendly.” Jess said.

“Tell them to come. Lot of cleanup needed here.” Clint's voice now sounded exhausted. “Inside hatch's warped. Can't unseal.”

“Ack.” Jess said. “Standby. Tac 2, copy?”

“Tac 2 moving.” April said. “Rolling vid.”

Jess settled down in the chair next to Dev as the grainy vid resolved, a soft rumble of thunder in the background adding appropriate soundtrack to the view of destruction below.

**

Dev adjusted the landing jets on her carrier as she carefully lowered it into the carrier bay, tilting it forward and holding in pattern as she lit up the work area underneath her.

The destruction was extensive. She could see three recon craft hard against one wall, blackened and scorched but at least in one piece. They were they ones with active comm she had tied into.

Everything else was.. Dev shook her head. It was hard to recognized the service bay, everything was charred and blackened, the only clear space two landing pads on the far side of the space. April and Doug had landed on one of them, and they were examining the destruction while she stayed in the air giving them light.

At least six carriers were blown apart in blasted bits, all with the typical pattern they'd seen in the North station. Dev was glad she was still in the air, since her scanner was indicating to her lumps and chunks of what was, once, people.

People she might have known.

Her comms buzzed softly. “Centops, BR270006.”

“Ack.” Dev answered.

“Go ahead and land on pad 24, Dev. We're about to start up the intakes.”

“Ack.” Dev shifted the jets sideways and moved over April's carrier, lowering the craft slowly until it landed on it's skids with a soft bump. She secured the systems and put everything on standby, then she released her restraints and got up. After a brief hesitation, she pulled on the jacket she'd

gotten in Quebec city, and fastened it, then she steeled herself and went to the hatch, triggering it open.

It didn't actually smell as bad as she'd expected it to, and she walked down the ramp to the platform and stood there for a moment, looking around.

The faint sound of light rain coming in from the ruined roof hatch pattered around her, and the soft echoes of April's speech and the dull thunk of Doug trying to get the inside hatch open.

It was incorrect, and unpleasant, and Dev sighed as she climbed down off the platform and headed over to where Clint and April were standing. She'd gotten halfway there when she felt, rather than heard, a vibration through her boots, and saw the other two look up and around. "Man, I missed that sound." Clint looked relieved, managing a brief smile as Dev arrived next to them. "Hey, Dev."

"Hello. " Dev responded. "I'm sorry there's so much unpleasantness here." She told him, sincerely. "But I"m glad you didn't get damaged."

Clint blushed visibly. "Glad you didn't get offed either." He said. "I figured if anyone would pull through, it'd be you guys."

"Was that the generators coming back online?" April asked. "That rumbling?"

"Not yet, they have to run the water through for a few minutes before it builds up the turbines." Clint said. "But that vibration means they got the intakes going." He looked past April. "It's not as bad as it looks."

April gave him a skeptical look.

"The bodies are mostly theirs." Clint looked her right in the eye, then turned to Dev. "You were right about those cards. We couldn't do much about it though. They came in a blew out the roof with that new thing.. focused the lighting on it someone said."

"Yes, something like that." April agreed. "So, did they all just leave out of here or what?"

"Got a comms, long range." Clint said. "We knew something was going on, saw all the batts go off line, but we couldn't get through to anyone." He studied April. "We didn't think any of the teams would really come back here." He sat down on the edge of a service console. "Figured they'd just tank the place."

"Thank you for making the sets safe." Dev spoke up, after an awkward pause. "That was excellent of you."

Clint managed another slight smile. "They're all right." He said. "Didn't want them to get snuffed."

Abruptly, the overhead lights flickered on, what was left of them, and all around them the clicks and pops of returning power was causing boards to flash and signal lamps to come on. That was followed by a sodden crack, and they all turned to see the inner hatch slowly, peeling open.

"Good job, Doug." April started over to where he was just stepping back. "So what do we do to secure this place? We got anything we can do about that hole in the roof?"

Doug dusted his hands off and stood aside as they joined him, and the open hatch started to admit slightly grubby, jump suited figures in, all with faintly illuminated collars. "C'mon in, people."

A Kaytee slipped in and spotted Clint. "Chief." He looked as relieved as he was able to. "May we help?"

"Sure." Clint waved them in. "Let's start cleaning up I guess."

The Kaytee turned to Dev. "Is it optimal?" He asked. "May we do this?"

Dev had her hands in her jacket pockets, and she straightened a bit as they all turned to look at her. She was surprised and a little disconcerted at the question, understanding almost belatedly that the bio alt was waiting for her permission to proceed. "I think that would be excellent, Kaytee." She responded after a brief pause. "We have a lot of work to get things correct."

The Kaytee looked relieved. "Yes." He said, touching the comm set in his ear, with something like pride. "A lot of good work to do." He half turned and whispered into the comms, and then started

towards the service bay, as more bodies started to slip into past the half open door, pausing to look around at the destruction before moving inside.

'They put them on comms?" Cliff asked, looking at Dev. "And hey, you in charge of them now?"

"Me?" Dev blinked at him. "I don't believe I am in charge of anything." She objected. "Jess had me talk to these sets, I am just familiar to them." She didn't see the point in revealing the internal status consideration of bio alts. There was already enough discomfort around and she didn't want to add to it.

"Only staff left here." April added, briefly. "Made sense to cable them up."

"Right." Cliff pushed himself to his feet. "Hope someone shunts some power to the chow hall. I'm hungry."

"Me too." Doug came over, dusting his hands off "Hey, that's a slick jacket, rocket lady."

"Thank you." Dev decided the thought of something more to eat than crackers, even if it was a cold fish roll, was excellent. "We should go see if that's ready. I'm sure the people in the central operations room could use some food as well."

"Lead on." Doug said. "Not much else we can do here until they're ready for us to lift out debris."

Dev regarded them all with a sense of bemusement. Then she merely shook her head and threaded her way across the rubble on the floor and slid through the hatch, glad to leave the discomfort of the destroyed facility behind her.

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"Okay, that's more like it." Jess studied the ops board, now pulsing with restored power.

"Yes." Doctor Dan agreed. "Nice to have eyes and ears again." He scanned the screen. "Met isn't incredibly awful."

No, it wasn't. Jess started up the ops routines, and sent the restart sequences to comms and scan. All around her she could hear the faint, but perceptible hum of power and though they were still deep in the crapper, it made her feel a lot better.

"Got the divert to batts in." Brent commented from the next board. "Recharging."

"See if you can get some techs up to start pulling those boards." Jess indicated the two fried subsystems. "I've only got remedial weapons on this one."

"Ack." Brent went to comms, the paused, and glanced at Doctor Dan.

"Right." Kurok slid into a seat next to him and put a comm set in his ear. "They'd probably listen to you but they'll listen to me faster."

"Or Dev." Brent commented.

Doctor Dan's lips tensed into a faint smile, and he half nodded. "Attention, this is Doctor Dan." He said in the comms. "I would like a team of PeeKays and TeeBees to come to the operations center, and bring everything needed to rebuild centops stations P15, and P212, quickly."

The comms crackled immediately, soft, eager voices answering him. "Thank you." Kurok said, and clicked off comms. Then he leaned on the console and sighed. "Hasn't been the best week of my life, tell you that."

Jess was about to comment on that when the door opened, and Dev and Doug entered, their arms filled with ration bags. "Ah" She found herself smiling. "Now it's perfect in here."

Dev came over to where she was seated and put down her burden. "We thought it would be a good idea to have a meal." She explained. "The machines are not yet restarted, but we found these in the preparation storage area."

"Don't have to ask me twice." Brent came over and claimed a ration, then retreated back to his seat.

Dev handed over a ration to Doctor Dan, then sat down next to Jess with her own. "Clint thinks it is possible they have a mesh screen that can be attached to the bay roof to help cover it."

Jess had opened her ration and was scarfing a fish roll. She chewed, then paused, and swallowed. “Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.” Jess lifted the roll.

“Welcome.” Dev glanced at her, then grinned a little turning her fish roll around to find a place to bite into it. Now that the air handlers were back on, it was less damp and chilly, and she was starting to feel more comfortable, almost like she was ready to unfasten her jacket, in fact.

“That looks sexy on you.” Jess commented.

Dev paused in mid chew and looked at her in surprise.

'The jacket.” Jess clarified. “I thought it did when you got it, but now I really think so.” She was keeping her voice low, but not whispering.

“Um.” Dev swallowed hastily. “Thanks, I like it.” She added. “It's comfortable.. I was cold when I got off the carrier but it's getting warmer now.”

“Yeah, environ's coming back up.” Jess scooted her chair closer, setting aside her worries for a short time out. “Kind of cool to just talk about stuff for a few minutes, huh?” She rested her elbow on the console and her head on her hand.

Dev put her rations down and pulled a bit of cloth from one of her pockets, standing up unexpectedly and using the cloth to clean off Jess's dusty, bruised face. “You appear to need rest.”

Jess had her eyes closed, and there was a faint smile on her face. “Do you know how long it's been since someone wiped my face off for me?”

“No, I don't.” Her partner answered promptly. “Was it a long time?”

“Very.”

“Do we know what tasks we want to accomplish now?” Dev asked. “Or do we have time to take a rest?”

“Good question.”

Jess felt the gentle brush of Dev's fingers against her skin and thought about how good it would feel to just do something as normal as go back to her quarters, get washed up, and take a nap in her bed. It felt like it had been months since she'd done that, though she knew it hadn't actually been all that long.

It was ridiculous, but she just wanted to do one mundane shift. Wake up and go to ops, get a met report, scan the overnight squirts.. Jess opened her eyes and looked around at the half destroyed room, at fried consoles now being worked over by bio alts, and at the scorched places on the floor she'd scraped up what she assumed were colleagues remains from.

“No sign of anyone on the long range.” Brent spoke up. “Nice to have that back. Storm's moving past too, looks like we'll have some clear for a while.”

Jess reached out with her free hand and circled Dev's leg with it, just savoring the simplicity of the contact and acknowledging how good it felt when Dev rested her forearm on her shoulder and they just spent a few quiet minutes being together.

Dev moved, circling around Jess and standing behind her, putting her hands on her shoulders and starting to knead them. “I looked this up in comp.” She said. “Let me know if I do it wrong.”

It was nearing second watch, outside, Jess knew, the skies would be darkening into dusk. “Brent, we get the sit report off to HQ?”

“Yup.” Brent grunted, his mouth full of mushroom cake. “Sent it, but nothing back yet.”

Jess leaned back and let her head rest against Dev's body. “Put out a low band signal out, see if anyone's in hiding.” She said. “Not enough wreckage here for everyone.”

“Will do.”

The door opened again and Elaine entered, coming around the console to take a seat next to Jess. “Med's fully synced. I got Jase in the tank, he's holding his own.” She exhaled. “Nice to get systems back. How's met?”

“Quiet.” Brent said. “Glad Jase's all right.”

“Yeah, me too.” Elaine nodded. “Arias's got a formcast on his arm, he went off to work down in the pit.” She glanced at Dev, who was still standing behind Jess, her hands working the agent's neck. “Oh that's nice. Didn't know they programmed them for that.”

“They don't.” Dev answered, before Jess could straighten up. “I looked it up in comp.” She could feel the tension suddenly wind into Jess's body, though she didn't move, all the muscles in her arms and shoulders coiled under her fingers and she stopped trying to squeeze them since there didn't seem to be any point to it. “It is nice.”

Doctor Dan had been quietly watching. Now he stood up. “I'm going to go get a wash and a hot cup of something. Based on the last scan metrics, we're clear for a couple hours all around.” He said. “Might as well take advantage of it.” He gave them all a meaningful look. “Right?”

“Agreed.” Elaine nodded. “Not sure how the hell we managed to get this all done, but here we are. You tell the west coasters?”

Jess nodded. “Brent sent a squirt. Maybe they'll send someone up from Picchu before the next front rolls in. Without met, I don't think they'll come at us.”

“I'll take watch then.” Elaine said. “Go on and chill Jess. You've had a longer run than we did.”

Thus held out, Jess was unable to keep herself from accepting the offer. “Okay.” She stood up and clapped Dev on the back. “Let's go get that shower you wanted, Devvie. Buzz me if anything shakes, E.”

“You know it.” Elaine took over the console, pulling over an unopened ration and settling in.

“I'll stick.” Brent said. “Got scans running.”

Jess lifted a hand and they left ops, walking the short distance to the entrance to Jess's quarters while Doctor Dan went in the other direction.”Have a good rest.” She tossed back over her shoulder at him.

“You too.” He gave them both one of his gentle smiles. “Dev, we should talk later, after we all get some sleep.”

Dev just nodded, before they parted and went to the entryway to their space.

Jess touched the lock pad and the door opened, the lights inside perking up as they walked inside. “Ahh. Home sweet home.” She remarked, walking in a few steps and stopping, letting her senses scan the inside of the room.

The air handlers had been on long enough to clear the damp chill from the room, and a slow inspection allowed Jess to relax as she noted the telltales that confirmed no one had entered in her absence.

Not sure why they would – even with the enemy rampaging around the citadel her personal quarters could not have come up on the list of interesting places, given that there was nothing in them that she treasured or even probably much cared about.

Her eyes fell on the trunks that had come from her father, and she paused, reviewing that supposition.

“I”m going to go get in the wet thing.” Dev ambled on towards the door separating their quarters.

“Mind if I join you?” Jess asked, after a pause.

Dev paused at the door and looked back at her. “Why would I mind that?” She asked, in a puzzled tone. “The space is somewhat small for both of us but it should be sufficient.”

“Just asking.” Jess sighed. “My brain's exhausted like the rest of me.” She undid the catches on her jumpsuit top as she followed Dev into her space, not entirely sure why the thought of just using her own facility was making her uncomfortable. Brain crick maybe?

Maybe.

Dev's space was emptier than hers. There wasn't any clutter around, and the only thing sitting on her work desk was the square, somewhat worn shape of the book she'd left behind. “Gotta get you some knick nacks, Devvie.'

Dev paused and turned to look at her. Then she sighed and trudged towards the comp screen only to be pulled gently to a halt as Jess intercepted her. “I don't know what a knick is, much less a nack.”

“Just things you keep, reminds you of stuff.” Jess turned her and prodded her towards the shower.

“Oh. Like that little oil thing you got me at the market.” Dev nodded. “Yes, I have that in my space up there.” She pointed to the relaxation area.

They entered the wet space and Dev was very glad to turn on the water, feeling the mist hit her face as it spattered against the rock wall. It felt very good to step under it, and feel the warmth hit her skin, a relief from the persistent damp cold.

Jess eased in behind her and Dev heard her let out an almost silent sigh. She turned to face her partner, seeing her leaning back against the rock with her eyes closed, droplets from the shower dotting her skin. “Jess?”

“Mm?” Dark lashes fluttered and lifted, as Jess opened her eyes to peer back at her.

Dev studied her gravely. “You seem.. um..”

“Damaged? Incorrect?” Jess ventured.

“Upset.” Dev concluded. “Are you mad about something?”

Her partner regarded her for a moment. “I”m here naked with you in a shower. How mad could I possibly be about that?” She asked, then smiled. “I'm not mad, or upset. I'm just freaked out about what we just went through and I don't really know where to go from here.”

“Do we need to go anywhere?” Dev asked. “I think I like it here.” She was enjoying the beat of the water against her back and she offered Jess some soap. “We did good work here, correct?”

“Well.” Jess took the soap but instead of using it on herself, she started scrubbing Dev with it. “If you mean, is it good we're back in control of the citadel, and the bad guys have run off, sure.” She observed. “If you mean, is it good that they saved all the bios, and not all the carriers blew up, and we got power running again, sure.”

Dev shyly took a handful of the soap and started washing her partner's skin. There were a lot of bruises under the surface of it, and one long scratch down the inside of her arm. “I see.”

“I just don't know what to expect next.” Jess clarified. “Are they going to come back again with the met weapon? They going to try to do something with the stuff they stole from here? We can prepare at some level but then – how did they get in the first time? Even with the power off, the batts would have kept them out. I just don't get it. I don't understand now what they're after.”

“Besides you.”

“Dev, I don't think it's me.” Jess shook her head. “I don't buy it. I'm not that important. I think they're using me as an excuse.”

Dev didn't really understand that. “An excuse for what?”

But her partner shook her head again. “That's what I don't know. I don't' know how far this goes.” She moved closer and lowered her voice. “I don't know what I can trust.” She cradled Dev's face in her hands. “Except this. Except you.”

It felt quite overwhelming. Dev understood she had no programming for this. The feeling went past any instruction or class, and touched a deeper and more primitive part of who she was. She took a breath. “That makes me so happy.”

“Happy?” Jess's forehead touched hers.

“Yes.” Dev whispered. “I want to be a part of you.”

Jess's eyes opened wider, in a moment of unguarded wonder. “Really?”

“Absolutely really.”

Jess circled her with both arms and pulled her close. She closed her eyes as she felt the pressure return, and as she stepped under the force of the shower it felt like it was washing her clean.

All the vague sense of failure dissipated. She was able to shift all the accomplishments they'd achieved in the recent past into perspective, having this one touchstone cement into place. It was odd – she'd never needed anything personal at all and now she felt like this change had become important as..

“Jess.” Dev spoke up. “I think it's possible I might fall asleep right here. I cannot breathe in the water like you can, so I think we should finish before that happens.”

Jess started chuckling. “Yeah. Thanks for reminding me .I need to get a anti dose into me before that little stunt gets me into med.” She pulled back and tilted her head, giving Dev a kiss on the lips. “I want to be a part of you too.”

It was good. Dev enjoyed the kiss and felt a jolt of happiness inside. It was very good.

And on top of it, she sensed there was sex practice in her very near future.

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There was, in fact, a lot of good things in her very near future, but not quite sex practice yet. Dev was dry, clean, in fresh sleep clothing and she had a cup of hot seaweed tea sweetened with some of the honey they'd brought back from their last mission, watching curiously as Jess applied an inhaler to her nose and mouth, taking deep breaths from it.

She, too, was in the brief sleep clothes and as Dev watched she flexed her toes a little as she sucked in another lungful.

Somehow, she stopped thinking about what was going on elsewhere in the citadel. The world had shrunk in a way, down to the room they were in, and the two of them, alone.

“Is that a medicine?” Dev asked, after a while of silence.

Jess nodded. She pulled the mask off her face and cleared her throat. “It's an antibiotic vapor.” She stated. “Kills anything I might have picked up sucking in all that salt water.” She paused, and regarded Dev soberly. “What do you think about that?”

“I think it's amazing.” Dev said promptly. “If you mean how you breathe water. That's the most amazing thing I have seen yet downside.”

“Hm.” Jess took another few breaths, then lowered the breather again. “Part of my sordid family history.” She glanced at Dev. “My mother, in one of her crazier moods, decided she'd toss the genetic dice and paid off some crackpot she found to tweak her eggs.”

Dev's brows contracted. “Excuse me?”

“Kind of like what they do for you, up there.” Jess examined the inhaler, finding it empty. She set it aside. “He switched a few things around and when I was born, the result was this.” She indicated her chest. “They thought I had a birth defect at first. Were going to terminate me.”

Dev blinked hard. “Excuse me?” She said again, a little louder.

“We've got no resources for people who can't contribute, Dev.” Jess said, in a mild tone. “They don't keep defective babies.” She took a sip of her own tea. “Where was I.. oh yes, my internal arrangements. Anyway, what I ended up with was a kind of feathery cups around all the air tubes in my lungs and when I put water in them, they filter out the oxygen and deliver it into my bloodstream.”

This time Dev merely shook her head slightly.

“Huge breakthrough. Mom had all sorts of plans for me.” Jess said. “Then of course I tested in.” She indicated the citadel walls around her, and produced an ironic smile. “She never got over that. My father just laughed his ass off because she'd done it without asking him.”

Dev sipped her tea in silence for a while. “I've taken some of the biologic programming.” She said eventually. “That was very dangerous to attempt.”

“Sure.” Jess agreed. “She was nuts. I could have come out with two heads and ripped her apart in the process.”

Dev's face scrunched.

“Anyway, it's borderline useful, as you saw. I don't do it often.” Jess sighed. “Hurts like hell, and there's this to contend with after.” She lifted the inhaler. “But I gotta tell ya, it was worth it seeing your face. “ She chuckled. “Your eyes nearly came out of your head.”

“I was very surprised.” Dev agreed. “So was Doctor Dan.”

“Hard to say if I'd pass it or not.” Jess examined her hand idly. “We've been adapting for a while out there.” She held the hand up and spread her fingers. “Got a little bit of webbing already, and my skin repels the cold water. Common over at the Bay.”

Dev put her cup down and moved closer, taking Jess's hand and examining it. There were scars along the back, and there, between each finger, a rounded bit of skin where on her own hands there was none. “Wow.” She looked up at Jess. “They're so careful about making changes up in the creche, and here it's just happening.”

“The ability to adapt is what kept humanity alive.” Jess said. “So many species couldn't and died.”

The bio alt curled her fingers around Jess's and looked at her. “You're amazing.”

Jess grinned unexpectedly. “Nice for you to say that, instead of saying I'm a freak. In school they thought I was.”

Dev looked thoughtful. “Yes, I know what that feels like.” She said. “I felt like that in the creche, because I was the only instance of my set.” She reflected. “It's sort of like the same thing.”

Jess was about to protest, and then the words penetrated and she thought about them instead. “That's exactly what that feels like” She murmured. “I always felt like I was different. Even in school where everyone there was supposed to be different – I never felt like I belonged.”

“Because of this?” Dev touched her hand.

“Because of everything.” Jess answered. “I just always felt.. “ She glanced off across the room. “I never felt like I fit in. Even when I was tested, and accepted into the corps, and went through the training. There was just something there that never felt all the way right.”

“Like something was missing.”

“Maybe.”

“I thought maybe my weird feeling would go away once I had a contract.” Dev said, mildly. “And it did.'

“It did?”

She nodded. “I felt like this was my place.”

Jess got up and put the inhaler on her workspace, then came back and sat down next to Dev, leaning forward and letting her elbows rest on her knees. “Maybe they programmed you for that.”

“Oh, they did.” Dev immediately nodded. “They gave me programming about this place, and a lot of the tech in it, but it wasn't something in my head that thought that, it was something in here.” She touched her stomach. “It was a bit like... “ She let out a relieved sigh. “Ah.. like that.”

Jess thought back to her arrival at the citadel and tried to remember what that had felt like. Had she been glad to be there? Had it been a welcome, or just another set of challenges?

Had it ever been home? Had her home ever been home? Jess shook her head and lifted her hands, wiggling her fingers “Want to go to bed?”

“Yes.” Dev set her cup down. “I would like that very much.”

Jess turned and studied the latest readouts from ops. They were still very quiet, just standard entries from Elaine, and a few tech notes from Brent. Weather was stable.

With a slight grunt she stood and waited for Dev to join her, then they walked over the bed in her quarters and settled onto it, the lights in the room dimming obediently as they sensed the pressure

on the soft surface. “Damn that feels good.” Jess stretched out and felt her body relax. “Comfortable as that chair is, it ain't' like sleeping.”

“No.” Dev curled up next to her and reached out to touch Jess's arm, fitting her fingers around it in a gentle clasp. 'This is nice.”

Jess rolled onto her side and smiled. “Want to do something nicer?”

“Yes I do.” Dev took Jess's hand and kissed it, feeling the skin warm under her lips. “But if we're supposed to rest, shouldn't we?”

“No.” Jess leaned over and kissed her on the lips. “We should do what we want to do cause you never know what's gonna happen next.”

Dev was more than glad to defer to her partner's wisdom in that regard. Her body was already appreciating the touch, sensation growing and making her both want to touch Jess back, and for that all to continue.

The lights dimmed further, and only the slight glow from the screens on Jess's workspace and the trim around the walls was visible, casting them both into shadows. Dev felt the fabric of her light shirt being pulled up and then Jess's touch was exploring her skin and the pleasant sensation increased.

She touched Jess back, and heard a soft sound come from her. That was interesting. She repeated the motion, suspecting she was pleasing her partner and also making her feel good as well.

She wanted that, even more than she wanted to feel good herself. Jess had seemed sad to her, despite her demurral, and she wanted to see if she could make her feel happy.

So she called up all the things she'd learned about sex, and set to work applying them, touching and tasting and listening for those little noises, feeling Jess's breathing get faster as she moved closer and their bodies pressed together.

Lying down, the fact that Jess was so much taller than she was didn't matter, Dev was glad to discover. She felt Jess's arms curl around her as she continued her exploration, moving down her partner's body with a sense of pleasant curiosity.

She slid her hand down and found Jess's shorts already gone, and realized her own were too. She wondered for a moment when that had happened, then forgot about it as a touch caressed her inner thigh and her breathing caught from it, a surge of desire flooding through her and making her press her head against Jess's stomach.

Her body felt warm, for the first time in days. She even felt a little sweat breaking out, as she returned the touch and then went further, trying to remember what it was that Jess liked her to do as she felt her partner's body shift and tense under her, a low growl rumbling from her throat.

Ah yes, she remembered the motion and the touch, and the position that was just like....

Jess's body started to convulse, the grip on on Dev tightening as she kept up the rhythm until she could hear gasping, then she relaxed the pressure, gentling and slowing the motion as Jess slowly relaxed, rocking them both lightly in an embrace.

Dev was pleased. She thought she'd done the right things. “Was that okay?”

Jess laughed silently, her body jerking with it. “Never got programming for that, really?”

“No.” Dev fitted her body against Jess's with a feeling of contentment. “Not at all.”

“Fuck.” Jess slid her hands along Dev's slightly sweat dampened sides. “You could get paid to do that.”

Dev enjoyed the touch, especially when Jess started gently teasing motions of her own. “I can't get paid for anything, actually.” She remarked. “But I'd rather not do it with anyone but you.”

“Ah, is that so?” Jess's attentions got a little more intense.

“Yes.” Dev whispered, her body starting to hum with pleasure. She welcomed the heat as Jess pressed against her and wondered how she could have even thought getting rest would be better than this.

Really!

Jess lay quietly, on the very edge of sleep. Her body was sensitized yet sated, knowing a sense of inner peace so rare as to almost not to be trusted.

Almost.

Dev was curled up next to her, pale head burrowed into one of Jess's shoulders, and one arm flung over her, the steady warmth of her breath tickling the bare skin.

It felt so good. So good, and so very unusual for her. There never had been the feeling she had right now, not ever before when she'd shared a bed with someone.

She'd never felt this relaxed, this at peace with herself.

Even knowing it wouldn't last, that a minute from now, or an hour, or even if she was lucky a handful of hours she'd be back in the maelstrom and facing death, or worse couldn't stop her from savoring this feeling of peace, and contentment, and yes, of happiness.

Didn't matter. Jess wiggled her toes and let her thoughts slip, savoring now the feeling of sleep taking her over, tucked under the covers in her own bed, with her own...

What, really, was Dev? Her partner? Yes. Her lover? Jess smiled briefly. Well yes, apparently so. Her friend? She thought about that word, tasting it cautiously on the back of her tongue. Yes, maybe Dev was that too. If they both survived, it would be interesting to discover what they ended up being.

Dev belonged to Interforce though. Jess frowned. They'd paid for it, and like all the rest of the bios in the citadel, her pilot was property of the corps and had no say in her future.

Maybe they could last long enough for Jess to retire, and then.. She remembered, abruptly, what her brother had revealed at Drake's Bay. Jess's eyes opened and she looked up into the darkness of her quarters. If she retired, and went civ... could she pay off Dev's contract and bring her the Bay?'

She'd have all the resources of the Bay behind her now, wouldn't she?

Dev stirred in her sleep and nestled closer, the dim reflection from her collar catching Jess's eye. If she did buy her contract, could they take that off? Would Dev want to have it off, if it meant no more programming for her?

Hm. Jess shook her head and firmly closed her eyes. Time enough to think of that once they got out of the mess they were in now. No sense in counting your shrimps before you brought the basket up, right?

Right.

At last, she let sleep take her, resolved to get as much rest as fate would let her.

**

Hands grabbed her and she twisted, pulling against straps that kept her flat on her back, wrenching her arms to pull them free to fight.

It was dark. It was loud. She could hear screams and explosions. Nearby there was laughter, and then she felt the hot agony as a knife plunged into her and her back arched as she tried to move away from it.

An ankle came free, and she twisted more violently, lifting her knee up and kicking out against the hands holding her down. A body slammed down over her and she let out a deep growl, her eyes flickering shut and then open as the rage built, bringing clean energy to her.

A yell of alarm, and she convulsed, throwing the body off her and breaking a strap holding her wrist, and now she was half free. She slammed her fist into a moving head and grabbed a hold with her fingers, feeling one sink into an eye socket as she used the body as as shield to intercept the energy beams she sensed coming at her.

The body fell over and she used the momentum to pull her up and against the straps, feeling the strain and then the heavy snap as the leather parted and she was on her feet.

“She's loose!”

Yes. Jess let the rage take her. The pain in her back faded, and she slammed against the nearest body, knocking them back and revealing, for a split second the handle of a blaster that she got her fingers on and yanked from it's holster.

“Look out!”

She was caught up in the dream this time, it's vivid starkness playing out but the waves of horror she'd felt before in it wasn't there. This time she could feel her heart pounding, and her skin flushing, and instead of feeling terror, she understood she was the genesis of it.

It was an exhilarating sense of freedom, startling and new and in the foggy way of dreams she knew a moment of wonder as she went with the newness of it, fading back into the action and surging forward.

Hands grabbed her and she spun them off, letting her mind slide down into that space where everything went black and white and she went from captive to hunter, turning and spinning as she pulled the blaster into her body and then unlocked it, recognizing the keys as one of her own.

Josh's blaster. She brought it up and ducked a thrown arm, swiveling in the other direction as she let out a long blast of energy, cutting through bodies and consoles as people dove in all directions away from her.

Then she saw the doorway open, and fill with armored bodies and she kept on going with the blaster, getting the guards in the face in a swath before she got all the way around and saw Josh.

Just long enough to see his eyes widen before she blew his head apart in a splatter of bone and blood.

No thought, just instinct, her legs propelling her body up into the air as return fire lit the space she'd been in and she twisted and kept firing, the blaster growing hot in her hands.

Stark and clear and raw, as she threw herself into the battle and lost all regard for her own safety, aware of a rush of energy that sent her back up into the air and into a twisting turn that had blaster fire shooting to every side of her but somehow missing a hit, and the delicious sensation of tumbling in mid air as she returned the shots with pinpoint accuracy.

Then there were dead bodies all around, not the least of which Josh's, and she was getting her balance enough to start for the door.

And then her peripheral vision caught a motion and she turned and aimed as a black sheet of glass slid closed giving her just one brief glimpse of a profile before it was gone, and the wall sealed with a blue tinted edge as she stared at it, frozen in a moment of time.

A voice whispered in her ear. Jess felt the dream slowly fade, with her in frozen stasis, the shock of realization moderating to a knowledge of her true surroundings as she opened her eyes to find Dev gazing at her in total, absorbed concern.

“Dev.”

Dev looked around, then back at her. “Yes? Are you all right? You were moving around and I thought you were dreaming.”

Jess took a few breaths, as her body came down from the battle high. “I was.” She murmured. “I was having that same bad dream but.. “

“You weren't yelling this time.” Dev settled back down next to her. “It didn't seem dangerous to interrupt you.”

“No, I...” Jess paused to think. “It wasn't the same. Ended weird.” She admitted. “Or maybe.. I don't know if I.. maybe it was me that was different this time. I wasn't.. “ She paused briefly. “I wasn't scared. Something changed.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Dev queried.

“I think its a good thing.” Her partner said. “I think I remembered something. Maybe.”

She checked the chrono and then relaxed again, putting an arm around Dev and letting her eyes drift closed. “We can worry about it in the morning.”

“Okay.”

“Along with everything else. “

**

The soft chime of first watch sounding woke her up. Jess glanced at the chrono in some startlement, then blinked the sleep out of her eyes as she propped herself up in bed.

No dreams this time. Just a long space of delicious oblivion, almost as normal as it once had been to wake up here.

A slight sound nearly made her bound out of it, then she belatedly recognized Dev's form as the bio alt entered from her own quarters and came over to the bed, a steaming cup in her hands. “Hello.” She offered Jess the cup. “Would you like some tea?”

“Sure.” Jess pulled her legs up crossed under her and took the cup. “Been up long?”

“About a half hour.” Dev said. “I checked with operations, and things are still nominal, so I thought it would be all right to let you rest a while longer.”

Jess sipped her seaweed tea and observed her tech over the rim of her cup. “You feel better today?”

Dev smiled. “I do.” She admitted. “Do you?”

Jess considered that. “Yeah.” She said. “My back's a little sore still. But okay aside from that.” She stretched her body out a little and realized it was true. “Let me go check in.” She got up and went to the workspace, carrying the tea with her. She sat down and ran her hands through her hair, then started to key up the screens.

“Jess?”

“Huh?” She glanced up to find Dev approaching, a bit of her discarded clothing in one hand. “What's that for?”

“If you're going to go on vid comms, you might consider putting a shirt on.” Dev suggested. “I know if I was on the other end of the transmission it would be very distracting.”

Jess glanced down, then grinned. “Ah, they're used to my ugly old carcass.” She took the shirt Dev was offering her anyway, and put it on, then triggered comms. “Ops?”

Dev went over to the other screen and tapped something into it, reviewing the results intently.

The vid cleared after a moment and Jess was looking at April “Morning.” She greeted the rookie agent. “How's life?”

April was in a fresh jumpsuit, and looked alert and rested. “Good morning.” She returned the greeting. “Elaine and Brent are off shift. Jason is stable in med, and Mike is getting the bay recommissioned.”

“Thanks.” Jess nodded. “How's met?”

“Line of storms is building, expected overhead plus four.” April responded crisply. “Mike said they got a screen up over the bay, should stand up to the rain.”

“Right.” Jess felt a sense of the inevitable brush over her. “Plus one, in the recon chamber. Let's put the plan down. Let everyone know.”

“Ack.” April responded immediately. “Plus one.”

Jess closed comms and leaned her elbows on the desk, regarding Dev with a bemused expression. “I guess it's time to go be in charge, Devvie.” She pushed herself to her feet. “Let's get ourselves in order and get some grub, and go do what we do.”

“Jess?”

“Hm?”

Dev came over and touched her side. “You do not have an ugly old carcass.” She stated. “Not if the comp dictionary gave me back the correct reference.”

Jess smiled at her. “Ah, you're a sweet talker, you are.” She affectionately cupped Dev's face in her hands. “C'mon, Devvie. I'm a wreck.”

Dev shook her head, her eyes watching Jess's intently. “You're the most beautiful person I've ever known.”

Jess felt the blush, and she blinked a little, finding herself surprisingly tongue tied. “Um.” She cleared her throat gently. “I don't think anyone ever said anything like that to me before.”

“Really?” Dev straightened up as Jess tilted her head down and they kissed. “I don't know why not.” She gave her partner a hug. “But I'm glad I got to say it.”

Jess smiled, staring across her quarters as she returned the hug, rocking them both back and forth. “Me too.” She finally said. “Meeee too.”

**

The ops status room was familiar and not, patched walls combining with the well remembered long table shifting Jess's perceptions as she circled the latter and paused at the head of it, resting her hand on the big chair there before tugging it out and settling into it.

She motioned Dev to the monitoring console up a step on a platform at the back of the room, and the bio alt had just seated herself and started tapping the tablets when the door opened and the rest of the agents and techs filed in.

She was in a fresh jumpsuit, with her insignia on the collar, and given what had happened, she knew that in fact, as well as in theory she was in charge here. There simply was no one else, and even if there had been she'd have taken it.

“Okay.” Jess started talking once everyone had sat down. “So we have a marginally functioning base here.”

“Marginally.” Brent nodded in agreement. “One thing we do got now is power. Batts are all topped up and we charged all the carriers while we were at it.”

“Good.” Jess said. “We've got a storm front coming over in three hours. Anyone want to give me odds we'll get a wave of boom with it?”

“No odds.” Elaine still had the look of recent sleep about her. She'd woken up and insisted on attending the meeting. “Fuckers'll be back – unless they already have what they came for.”

“The weapons rig?” Tucker asked. “Good luck to em with it. Hope it fries them like it did the last poor asshole who put it on.”

“Maybe they'll figure out how to use it. You almost did.” Elaine looked over at Jess. “I heard them talking after you tried it.”

“Not almost, I did.” Jess shrugged “Wasn't particularly hard. You just want to kill everything in your path and it helps you do it. They were more scared of me in that thing than I was of it.”

The other agents studied her thoughtfully. “So.” Elaine mused. “Did they want it and you separately, did they want to prevent you from using it, or did they figure to make you an offer you couldn't refuse?”

Instead of immediately scoffing at the idea, Jess considered it. “Good question. What do you think. Dev?”

Dev looked up from the console. “What do I think?” She repeated the question. “I don't have enough information to have an opinion.”

“That never stops us, kid.” Elaine addressed her directly. “Here, opinions are like assholes and breasts. Everyone has at least one.”

Dev blinked at her.

Jess chuckled dryly. “If I had to bet, I would bet they just wanted to fry me for Gibraltar, and they took the rig because they found it accidentally. They sure as hell haven't made me an offer - they've been way too busy trying to shoot me for that.”

Elaine exhaled. “Maybe it would have been better if they had. Maybe you could have brought us with you. This looks pretty dead end to me here, Jess. That would have at the least, got us inside there.”

“If they didn't kill us.” Jess remarked. ”No way they'd trust me no matter what the offer was.”

Mike and April remained quiet, their eyes shifting from one to the other. Their techs were sitting quietly also, in chairs on the far side of the room near where Dev was busy again at her console.

“Hmph.” Elaine shrugged. “Still a dead end here.”

“Might be dead end.” Jess confirmed. “Based on this stuff.. “ She indicated the plas damage reports with a thumb. “We can probably get the outer guns up, and some of the shields, but if they come full at us, that won't last long.” She pondered the plas. “We'll get some of them though. I'll make sure they have some regrets before they tank us.”

“Storm"ll skew that too.” Brent was sitting at the table with them, not with the rest of the techs. He had that faint air of slight discomfort of someone not sure of their place. “Scanner's can't tell the diff between plasma fire and incoming lightning. We could end up firing at clouds.”

“That's not correct.”

Everyone turned to look at Dev in surprise. The bio alt had swung around again and was looking back at them.

“The spectrum is different, according to this comp.” Dev pointed at the console. “It's point four three five out of phase.” Her voice was quiet, but confident. “That is tunable.”

The room went silent for a minute.

“Lemme see.” Brent got up and mounted the step up to the console, pausing behind Dev and peering at the screen.

“Dev rigged her comp to find fish schools at depth.” Jess commented. “So she's probably right.”

Brent glanced over his shoulder. “Didn't say she wasn't.”

“Anyway.” Jess returned her attention to the rest of the group. “We'll operate under the assumption we'll be attacked when the storm hits. Let's get whatever defenses we've got up, and shunt power to them so we don't just let the roll over us. Then if they penetrate, and come in again, we'll draw them to a central point.”

Elaine nodded. “Logical place would be centops.”

“Sure.” Jess agreed. “But we would have to leave a trail of broken doors to it through the heart of the citadel. Likely?” She watched her fellow agent lift a hand and let it drop. “We keep them as close to the perimeter as we can. If they hit the carrier bay focus them into maintenance level six, and if they get into the shuttle bay use security main.”

“That makes sense.” April spoke up. “So the deal is we leave breached entries to both spots?” She said. “And boobytrap em?”

Jess nodded. “You and Mike take care of that.” She said. “The rest of us will work on the defensive systems unless Dev's already done that.” She eyed her partner.

“Not quite yet.” Dev admitted. Brent was now seated next to her pouring over the data on the screens and leaning on his elbows as his eyes flicked over the readouts intently. She went back to working on the screen, as Mike and April and their partners stood and headed out leaving Elaine behind at the table.

“So we make a valiant last stand or hope HQ sends support?” Elaine asked, propping her chin on her fist. “I'm okay with that, by the way. Worse ways to go.”

“Jess.” Dev interrupted gently. “I am getting biologic readings in what is listed as a storage facility.”

Jess got up and came over to see, Elaine circling the table to join them. “What is.. oh.” She leaned on the back of the seat Dev was in. “No ident?”

“Scan is not working well in that location.” Her partner apologized. “It's just showing bio.” She paused. “And it's not some of us.”

“Us?” Jess eyed her.

“Biological Alternatives.” Her partner clarified. “We have these.” She touched her neck, as if reminding Jess. “They do read on scan.”

“Don't forget you're more us.” Jess indicated herself and Elaine. “Maybe I can talk to your buddy and see what we can do about that necklace.”

Dev's eyes went a little rounder, and she tilted her head as she focused intently on Jess. “What?”

“Later.” Jess glanced at Elaine. “Let's go find out what that target is.” She said. “Dev, you two stay here and get as much working as you can in weapons and defense.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “But Jess, please take care.”

Jess paused and regarded her, a faint smile crossing her face. “I will.” She lifted a hand in a wave and headed out the door, Elaine ambling after her, not without giving Dev a long, considering look.

Dev stood up. “I think the systems in the operations room are more functional.” She said. “Would you like to move back there to work on this task?”

Brent stood. “Sure. Why not?” He led the way down the step and out of the room. “So you and Jess hook up?” He asked her, as they walked along the corridor.

“Yes.” Dev had taken care to look the term up the last time Jess had used it.

“Didn't think that was reg.” Brent commented. “Guess it don't matter much now though.”

“Yes, it is not correct for bio alts.” Dev agreed. “But I was told it was all right because of the job I am assigned to.” She touched the pad on the door to the operations room and it opened obediently for her. “However I think you are correct in saying at this time, it does not seem important to worry about.”

“Sucks.” Brent grunted agreement. “But I'm glad you guys hooked up.” He volunteered suddenly, surprising Dev. “Been good for Jess.”

Dev sat down slowly at one of the big consoles, and put her hands on the pads, but she didn't start keying anything. “What does that mean?” She finally asked, turning to look at Brent who had settled across from her.

He looked back at her, looking a little startled. “Huh?”

“That thing you said.” Dev persisted. “About it being good for Jess?”

“Oh.” Brent hunched over the inputs. “Nothin.”

Dev waited, but there seemed to be no other response forthcoming, so she shook her head and went back to the screens, calling up all the schematics of the citadel and studying them.

It seemed likely to her that regardless of what they restored there was all kinds of incorrectness heading their way. However, she had a job to do so she started several diagnostics running, and brought up a power schema and leaned on her elbows to look at the multi-levels of tracings, glancing to another screen to look at the power levels now available through the complex.

It was a little like the carrier, really, only on a much bigger scale with a lot more power vectors. In her craft, she had batteries, and the engines, now she was seeing energy being created by the hydro turbines at the base of the cliff, storing power in giant holding cells and then down-stepping the current into distributed stations scattered all over the facility.

Complex, but she had programming for it. Or, at least, she had enough general programming so that she could figure out what to do from there since she didn't really have the true specifics on these systems as she hadn't been expected to manage them.

Well, that could sort of be applied to a lot of things she'd ended up doing here, couldn't it? Dev started to balance the power across the systems. Especially with Jess. She hadn't gotten any programming at all about that.

Had she?

Dev leaned on her elbows and stared at the screen, not really seeing the results of the scan as she pondered how she felt about her partner. What she knew of her. Whether she'd been keyed to recognize her, and programmed to be loyal to her.

She thought about the first moment she'd seen Jess, sitting on the bench, outside the entrance to the citadel, looking so sad, and so defeated, and felt all over again the startled leap of her heart as something in her wanted to go and touch this person, and find out why she looked so lost.

Was it programming?

Dev decided she didn't think so. She didn't want to think that what she felt for Jess had been programmed into her. She wanted that to be real and like a natural born, and not be...

“Hey.” Brent said. “She's hot, huh?”

Dev watched her own reflection in the display as her brows contracted over her eyes. She turned her head and peered at Brent in bewilderment. “Excuse me?”

Brent blinked. “Jess. She's hot, huh?” He repeated.

Hot. “Um.” Dev was now quite distracted. “In my experience I've found her very pleasantly warm, actually.” She said, slowly. “Is there a purpose to the question?”

Brent grunted and shook his head, then went back to his console, tapping into the pad with stolid deliberation. “Fuckin' A.”

Dev pinched the bridge of her nose and went back to her scan, shaking her own head in silence.

**

Jess was aware of Elaine's eyes on her as they stalked the corridors, ignoring the bio alts heading in the opposite direction. “You figure it's some of us hiding?”

“Maybe.” The other agent said. “So tell me. What's that thing like in bed?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You mean Dev?”

“Yes. The jelly bag brain.” Elaine responded. “Your little moch mech tech toy.”

Jess glanced at her. “You trying to piss me off on purpose?” She asked, in a mild tone.

The next moment she was in side corridor, and Elaine had her blaster pressed against her ribs. “Yes I am.” The other agent said. “Because I don't know who this Jess Drake is and I have to wonder if they didn't get to you after all because the Jess I know would have shot me for saying that.”

Jess felt a sense of shock and belated awareness of danger. She looked intently at Elaine's face. “You want me to shoot you?” She queried. “You don't think we've got enough trouble here without you and I scrapping it out? Really?”

“They get you, Jess?” Elaine stared right back at her. “Let me end it. You don't want that on you, not with your history.”

Jess felt the tension start to build in her. 'They didn't get me.” She replied. “Maybe I'm just tired.”

“Bullshit.”

“Maybe being able to trust my partner made a difference.”

“Bullshit.”

“Maybe I just got a thing for her.”

“Really?” Elaine unlocked the blaster. “I don't think so. I think they bought you and now we're just the remnants being turned over to those bastards.”

Jess's fingertips twitched. “Don't be stupid.”

“I'm not. You've been acting like a space case civ since you got back. Either they got you, or you're on something. Either way, you ain't' running me.”

The motion surprised both of them but Elaine more, as the weapon smacked against the far wall and then she was on the ground, bent over Jess's knee, fingers gripping her throat like a vise, inches from having her back broken.

She could feel it. Feel the strain, and the strength that held her motionless with respectable ease.

“No body bought me.” Jess's voice held a familiar rasp. “And the last thing I took was a bio pack inhaler since I had to breathe water out there saving everyone's ass.”

Elaine looked up and saw the ice veneer on those pale eyes and in that moment she relaxed completely, holding her hands up in surrender, palms exposed. “Now that's more like it.”

Jess relaxed her fingers. “Just because I'm not a fucking maniac all the time doesn't mean I turned.” She said. “That's a bullshit thing to say.”

“You're different.” Elaine stated. “Look what it took to get you to do this.”

Was she? “I am tired.” Jess straightened up and pulled Elaine up to her feet. “And Dev's made a difference but not what you think.” From an objective view, she didn't even resent Elaine's attack. She might have done it herself if they swapped positions.

She had been acting a little weird. A little soft, maybe, distracted by the focus on these new and strange emotions she'd been experiencing. Still, no call to shove a gun up her nose.

Elaine went over and retrieved her blaster, safeing it and shoving it into her side mount holster. “So you're not screwing with her? I don't believe it. You can't tell me those vibes are fake.”

“C'mon.” Jess led the way back through the cross-corridor and into the main, walking with long, impatient strides. “Our sleeping arrangements are really none of your fucking business.”

Elaine kept up with her. “What's the big deal? I sleep with Jason, and with Tucker, and everyone knows it. We all knew you weren't bunking with Josh, but you've never been shy about that.”

“Dev's different.”

The shorter agent rolled her eyes. “No shit.”

“Not like that.” Jess felt suddenly uncomfortable. “She's just a nice kid.”

They started down the slanted path to the storage bays, tucked at the base of the cliff where the stone held the chill all the time. “She's technically off limits.” Elaine suddenly said. “Not that I figure that would stop you.”

“Didn't stop her.” Jess felt a faint flush color her cheeks and was glad of the gloom of the corridor. “She's pretty close to being one of us.”

“Wishful thinking?”

Jess shook her head. “You saw the comp vid. Dev's got a mind of her own.”

They walked in silence for a minute. “She's not a regular bio anyway, that's true.” Elaine said, finally. “Got some smarts and I think she's stuck on you.”

They reached the end of the hall and Jess cycled the lock, palming the patch at the door and standing back as the stone lined steel ground open. It exposed a man lock, and they entered, waiting for the door behind them to completely close before they triggered the next one.

The sound of the hatch opening echoed loudly, and as they stepped through, they both went quiet, and still, as the panel slid shut behind them and closed with a grinding snick.

Inside the big cavern were irregularly shaped storage capsules, originally part of the rock structure but sealed off with heavy plas and doors that were firmly shut. Jess drew her blaster and unlocked it, making no effort to muffle the sound. She let the echo of that fade too, and then she moved forward into the space.

Elaine followed, moving a shoulder's width to her left, and shifting her blaster to her right hand. She touched the comms set and lowered her voice. “Ops, ack.”

“Ops.” Brent's voice answered.

“Target?”

“Stand by.”

They moved further into the cavern and approached the first set of storage alcoves. Jess let her head swivel to the left, and then the right, straining her ears for any signs of life. The fact that no one had come to greet them made her now expect intruders and not refugees from the base, and she felt a sense of impatient anger rising.

Her own comms tickled her ear. “Jess?” Dev's warm, slightly burring voice whispered. “Go.” Jess grunted.

“Comp sweep.” Her partner said. “Comms set to loop.”

Jess stopped walking. “Repeat?”

“Comms set to loop.” Dev said again. “Admin lock, top sec.”

“What?” Elaine drifted over, watching her.

Jess turned and started back to the hatch. “Let's go.” She rapped out. “Dev, break it.”

“Ack.” The bio alt responded readily. “In work.”

They got to the door and Jess hit the pad, turning and putting her back to the wall as she swept the area in front of them. “Seems like something got hung up in comms.” She told Elaine. “Got the feeling we're being drawn here.”

Elaine didn't question it. She ducked into the hatch as it opened and turned in a circle with her blaster drawn, moving in pattern with Jess as they retreated behind the closing door.

The rumbling blast sent them back against the inner door, but the outer held, and as the inner keyed open they tumbled out and started back for ops at a run.

“Day is full of suckage.” Elaine remarked. “Tell ya what.”

“Getting worse every minute.” Jess powered up the ramp towards the main operations corridor, as alarms started to blare and lights rapidly morphed from white to red. “And it's starting to really, really piss me off.”

**

Dev focused intently on the screen, her fingers tapping lightly on the input surface as she ignored the sounds and vibrations of the room around her.

A piece of debris flew by her and she ducked, pressing her hands flat against the pad and then straightening, surprised to see the screen go blank, then show a process in progress. She looked down at her hands, then quickly looked around the room, hoping whatever it was she'd done wasn't too disruptive.

The door burst open and Jess appeared, outlined in raging red light with Elaine behind her. “What's up?”

“Somethin blew up in the cave.” Brent responded. “Plas based, but our sig.”

Jess hauled up short. “Ours?”

The tech nodded. “Key frequency defense plus four.” He added. “Like maybe they thought you were the bad guys.”

“Huh.” Jess circled the console Dev was at and safe'd her gun. “El, secure med, and get everyone under cover.” She said. “Can we get comms to the cavern? Bitch if they're some of us making a last stand.”

“No.” Dev sorted through the requests. “Comms is cut to that whole sector, and most of scan.” She indicated the boards. “This junction here appears damaged.”

The door opened again and Jess's hand went to her blaster, then paused as Dan Kurok's familiar outline appeared. “Ah. You.”

“Ah, me.” Kurok agreed. He had a toolkit strapped around his body and if no one had known better, he'd have been taken for any other tech in the corps. “I think we've got incoming.” He slid into a seat next to Brent and pulled a pad over. “Ahead of the storm.”

“Scan's clear.” Brent objected.

Dev pulled over a pad of her own and called up the link to her own carrier, parked on it's pad in the damaged carrier bay. She accessed it's systems and studied the output, keying in and starting a scan from it's position. Then she blinked. “Jess...”

Jess's shoulder bumped hers as the agent leaned closer and her head turned as her eyes tracked to the reading Dev's finger was pointing to.

Dev heard the hitch in her partners' breathing and felt her straighten up as the door opened yet again and April bolted in, blaster in hand. “Someone was bringing the grid down.” The young agent's voice was breathless yet crisp. “I blew out a body in a cabinet but didn't stop to pick the pieces up.”

“Brent, lock everything down.” Jess said. “Go to emergency code two, and seal everything you can.”

“Ack.” Brent went to work.

“No time to draw them elsewhere.” Jess slammed a hand against the console. “Fuck I”m tired of not knowing what the hell is going on.”

Dev was speaking into her comms. “Yes, please move clear.” She was triggering beam level protections in the carrier bay, watching the power re-balance as Brent sealed the access. She paused, then switched over to a second set of comm syncs. “Kaytee, Kaytee. Ops.”

“Here.” The soft voice answered.

“There is danger.” Dev said. “Incorrect persons are in the facility, doing damage.” She looked up, sensing eyes, to find Doctor Dan regarding her from the next console. “Please make yourselves safe.”

“We will take care.” The Kaytee responded. “May we make the incorrectness stop if it is possible?”

Dev looked at Doctor Dan. After a very brief moment, he nodded. “Yes.” Dev said, into the comms. “Doctor Dan says that is permitted.”

“We understand.” The Kaytee said, and the comms clicked off. Dev took a breath and released it, then she shifted her attention to her carrier scan. “Jess, there are craft coming towards this facility.” She said. “Systems are now stable.” She added, as she felt Jess's hand touch her shoulder, fingers warm and powerful as they squeezed gently.

“All right, let's seal everything we can, and make it..” Jess stopped speaking as the inner door to ops opened, the one that led to the technical spaces. She turned to face the door, drawing her weapon as it filled with large, armored bodies.

“Ah ah.” A tall, gaunt figure eased past them. “No shooting, Agent Drake. These fellows have no sense of humor.” Alexander Bain had his own blaster firmly in his grip, though the muzzle was pointed at the ceiling.

The armored bodies had long blasters cradled in their arms, the security insignia of Interforce silver and bold on their chests. There were six of them, and they spread out to cover the agents in the room.

Jess left her free hand on Dev's shoulder but shifted slightly so her body was between the guns and her partner. “Glad we bothered to clear the shuttle bay for you.” She kept Bain in view, the security agents in her peripheral vision.

“Alex.” Dan Kurok stood up and faced him. “Whats' going on?”

“Ah, that's the question isn't it?” Bain paused behind the damaged master console at the top of the stepped rise. “As Agent Drake noted, I appreciated the effort to allow my cruiser to land. Fortunately it will also allow me to leave, once my business here is finished. Pity you interrupted that.” He glanced at April.

“You were taking the power down?” April asked hesitantly. “But..”

“Yes. This facility has become.. hm.. let's say a pawn in a much larger struggle. A down payment, as it were.” Bain studied them. “This will make an excellent forward base.”

Jess felt a sense of shock as the words penetrated, matching up with the faint, instinct driven suspicions that had started to bubble up in her. “For them.”

“Certainly.” Bain agreed, in a mild voice. “You should have listened to Mr Bock, Drake. He was telling you the truth, about it being over. It is. “ He checked a chrono strapped to his wrist. “In perhaps an hour, the West coast facilities will be finding that out as well.”

“You sold out.” Kurok walked forward, ignoring the gun muzzles swinging in his direction.

“Oh, come now, DJ.” Bain waved his free hand. “You know better than anyone how fluid sides can be.” He leaned against the chair behind the console. “I thought perhaps you realized what was in the wind when you volunteered to be captured. Didn't figure you'd be back so soon.” He produced a chilly smile. “Didn't offer enough?”

Kurok's posture shifted, just slightly, just enough to make Jess's nape hairs prickle. “They didn't offer me a dime, Alex.” He answered softly. “But then I didn't go for that. “

Bain eyed him. “You went for Tagaron.”

Kurok smiled faintly.

“You always were a sentimental idiot.” Bain shook his head. “After all this time? I hope you left him intact.”

Doctor Dan's smile broadened, but showed no real humor at all. “I didn't mention it at the time.” He glanced at Jess. “But that's why they were chasing me. I'm afraid I didn't.” He looked back at Bain. “So now what, Alex? They just come in and take over?”

“Yes.” Bain said. “A foothold on this coast, then the rest. I”m afraid I wasn't able to get the rest of our leadership on board with my plan, but no matter. It's just a little more time.”

“So that's why you've been blocking comms, and why Bock did.” Jess spoke up, calmly. “You didn't want them to know.”

“Of course not. “ Bain agreed. “And indeed, you proved yourself to be the one consistently inconsistent obstacle in this entire affair, Agent Drake. You never did what I expected.”

“Not even when you had Josh try to take me out?” Jess said.

“Indeed.” Bain tilted his head in her direction. “And you can see, I couldn't allow you to leave the force after that, Drake. You're far too dangerous.” He cleared his throat. “Stephen would have shot you, of course. You never would have gotten to the harvesters, not with Drake's Bay coming into your control. Too much resistance there.”

“I”m not an easy kill.” Jess remarked, in a quiet voice.

“Certainly not.” Bain said.

Dev just sat there listening. There was so much going on that was wrong. She could see how angry Doctor Dan was, and she could feel the tension in Jess's body, and the shock of the agents and techs in the room was almost palpable.

This was very very bad.

This was betrayal, like the betrayal Jess had suffered, when her partner had damaged her in that other place. She could see it in Jess's posture, and in Doctor Dan's expression, and in the look of fury in Aprils' eyes.

“So.” Bain said. “I will ask you all to go into the recreation facility, where we will seal the doors. Then I'm sure our friends will find something entertaining to do with you. Terribly sorry about it all.” He said. “Nothing personal, you understand. I appreciate all of your talents, I just cannot afford them at this time.. ah ah, none of that.” He pointed his finger at April. “My dear, this suit I'm wearing will send that blast right back at you and I would hate to damage the equipment here. “

April slowly let her hand fall away from her gun, glaring at Bain with seething intensity.

The security agents pointed their blasters at them. “Put your weapons on the table.” The nearest one to Jess barked. “Or I'll blow your arm off.”

Jess stared steadily at him, leaving her hand on her blaster, her nostrils flaring slightly as she stood quite still in the silence. “Sure you want to leave me behind?” She met Bain's eyes directly. “I might just kill them all.”

Bain's ice gray eyes narrowed a trifle.

“You said yourself I was too dangerous.” Jess said. “You feel safer with those six bozos or with me?” She ignored the looks of startled outrage from her erstwhile team. “Maybe I want to go with you.”

Dev felt a completely different kind of shock. Was Jess really doing what it appeared?

Would she go with the man Bain?

Would she leave them all behind?

Will she leave me behind?

There was a momentary silence. Then Bain broke it. “Drake you do interest me.” He said, with a faint almost rueful smile. “Do you really expect me to believe you'd turn your back on this place, these people, your history, and change sides? Come now. I know better. I knew your father, didn't I?”

Jess remained calm, breathing easily. “So what has this ever offered to me? I was going to be mustered out until you showed up. “ She took a step forward, putting a bit of distance between herself and Dev. “This place? These people? My family'd be glad to see the last of me. You know what I am. You want to waste that?”

“I see.” Bain looked thoughtful. “Hm. Ah, you might have a point there, Drake. It seems to me you act more for your interests than anyone else.”

Jess smiled. “I'm not my father.”

“That's for sure.” Kurok spoke up, briefly, and crisply.

Jess ignored him. Ignored the look she knew she was getting from Dev, who was smart enough to realize what she was saying and know her own betrayal.

It was what it was.

Dev felt a wave of unhappiness flow over her. She looked down at the console, not wanting to meet any of the other eyes in the room.

“I owe you more than I do Interforce.” Jess continued. “No matter how you did it or why.”

Something that might have been a faint charmed smile appeared on Bain's face. “Hm.” He checked his chrono again. “Put your weapon down, Drake, and I might consider it.”

Jess pulled her blaster out and tossed it to one side without hesitation. She kept her back to the rest of the room, not daring to look at any of them.

Especially not Dev. She could almost sense the horror and confusion from her, and the steaming fury from Kurok standing just to her right.

That, at least, she understood at a deep, gut level, and taking one very short peek at his face, Jess suddenly knew at her very core exactly what or more specifically who his loyalty was anchored to and finally she had a personal understanding of why.

But she was out of choices. Turn her back on those security rifles and she'd be dead.

“Well then.” Bain said, after a long pause. “The rest of you, to the door. I would just shorten your distress but certain machinery in this facility is not worth risking blaster fire.” He waved them forward. “It appears Agent Drake and I have something to talk about.”

Jess was nearest the door. She kept her eyes shifted as the rest of them slowly started moving, walking past her as Bain came down and stood at her side. “I”m not often surprised, Drake.” He said, conversationally. “Quite an interesting sensation.”

“Yes, sir.” Jess murmured softly.

Dev came past her, trying to catch her eye. But Jess refused to meet it, only just keeping from biting the inside of her lip as her peripheral vision caught Kurok's hand coming to rest on her partner's shoulder and the faint, soft intake of Dev's breath.

There was a pain there, she hadn't expected. Jess drew a breath in and pushed past it, focusing on what she knew she had to do.

Then, April was the last to come past her. Now Jess lifted her head and met her fellow agent's glance for one very long moment, as April shifted her direction just slightly as she moved around a chair, her face a stolid, stony mask.

“I will have to rearrange some things. Find a place for you.” Bain was saying. “I'm sure your new colleagues will be.. hm.. even more surprised than I was.”

“I”m sure they will.” Jess's heart started to pound. “But I've never really been predictable, they tell me.”

Bain chuckled. “Something that might well prove to my advantage. Hm?”

“Maybe.” She felt the blood rush to her skin as her senses sharpened and she dislocated her thinking brain from her instincts as April came up even with her and she let second thoughts and regrets go. The energy flooded through her and her hand shot out, fingers closing around the knife hilt at April's hip. “”Or not. Like now, for instance.”

She drew and spun and slammed her hand and arm as hard as she could into Bain, feeling the grinding shock as the blade in her hand penetrated his light armored jumpsuit and cut through him, as a blast of energy hit her and filled her world with fire.

She let out a roar and yanked the knife back out, then plunged it back into his body again, the hardened blade cutting through his energy suit and sending a keening scream up into the air.

She heard Kurok shout, and Dev yell her name and a scramble behind her but all that mattered was feeling the hot blood on her hands and feeling the jerking of Bain's body as he gasped in her grip.

She hit the wall and took Bain's body with her, feeling something hit him as she yanked the blaster out of his hand and spun again, letting instinct drive her as she fired back towards the guards and dropped to her knees to avoid the returning fire.

She could smell blood, and she was lifting her blaster to fire again when something hit her and blew her back against the wall again, knocking her into darkness as she felt the world fade away, the sound of her own name echoing weirdly at volume following her.

**

Pain woke her. Even breathing hurt. Jess felt something shift under her, relatively soft and yielding as it cradled her body and she forced one eye half open to see what was going on.

A scanner pulled back out of her view and was replaced by Dan Kurok's face, a spattering of blood staining his cheek as he gazed at her. “You were wrong.” He said, glancing at the scanner. “You are most precisely and exactly your father.” He shook his head. “Pair of idiots, the both of you.”

Jess managed a faint smile as she tilted her head up a little, to find Dev looking back at her, since she was the owner and operator of the surface Jess was laying on. Her partner looked totally and completely freaked out, and she could see from the look of her eyes that she'd been crying.

And still was, apparently, as a tear emerged and rolled down her cheek. “Sorry.” Jess managed to croak at her. “I land on ya or somethin?”

Dev answered by hugging her, which hurt, and didn't, all at once.

“Sixty minutes to arrival.” Brent's voice echoed softly.

“Guns six and eight are up.” April replied. “If they come in east we can maybe get one or two of them.”

Jess could hear the sounds fading in and out. She tried moving a hand, then stopped immediately when a bolt of pain resulted. She thought she heard the door open, and the sound of a bio alt speaking, but all of it was being overshadowed by the thump of Dev's heartbeat under her ear.

“Bain?” She muttered.

“Extremely dead.” Kurok answered her, gently pressing something against Jess's upper arm. “Don't try moving. You blew out your neural net.” He continued. “Don't be surprised if you smell blue and pink for a while.”

“Ok.” Jess was happy to comply. “They still comin?”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan replied. “Your crazed dramatics merely delayed our collective splatting by perhaps an hour.” He gently lifted Jess's other eyelid and peered at the exposed pupil. “Three of them blasted you right after you hit him.”

“Ugh.”

“Mm.” He grunted. “Thought we lost you early there for a minute.” He released the eyelid. “But you are, in fact, a damned hard kill, Jesslyn Drake.”

“Fucker.” Jess managed to get out. “Died too slow. Wish I”d had time to make small pieces out of 'im.”

“Damn you Alex.” Kurok sighed. “I should have realized something wasn't right.” He admitted. “Idiots upside didn't let me talk to Bricker when he came. He knew something.” He rested his hand on his knee. “I never thought he'd... “ He paused, and shook his head. “Now asking us makes sense.”

Dev released one hand and touched his knuckles, but remained silent.

“Bricker needed someone Bain couldn't touch.” Jess whispered in agreement. “Finally saw one of my nightmares out last night. Remembered to the end. Saw him there. Watching Josh try to take us out”

“Alex?”

Jess nodded. “Think he wanted to take over the cit easy.” She whispered. “Just have em hand it over. Thought he had everyone's number.”

Kurok exhaled. “But he believed you wouldn't turn.” He said, in a quiet, serious tone. “And like an idiot I told him Dev wouldn't either, so the two of you had to go.”

Jess nodded. “Somethin like that.” She burred softly. “Harder he tried to see us croaked better we got at escaping it.” She managed a brief smile. “Didn't put it all together in time.”

“No.” Kurok sighed again. “And our past together blinded me.”

“He blocked comms. Dev found it.” Jess closed her eyes. “Then I knew for sure.”

Kurok glanced past her. “Yes.” He said. “Sorry I was only half right about the trusting thing, Dev.”

Dev sniffled a little. “I saw his vehicle land. I thought that was a good thing.”

Doctor Dan sighed. “That was the half wrong. I told you it was okay to trust him.”

“Sorry I made you think you were all wrong.” Jess felt the gentle hold on her tighten. “Had to get him close.” She felt exhausted by the small effort of speaking. “Least I'll croak knowing I got that bastard first.”

Kurok patted her hip very gently. “Rest.” He said. “Take care of her, Dev. Let me go see if there's any havoc I can help with.” He stood up and hitched the scanner to his tool kit, moving over to take a seat at one of the battered consoles.

There was a quiet moment, then April got up and came over to them, crouching down next to Jess and resting her fingertips on the steel floor. “That was ace.” She told Jess bluntly. “Glad you used my blade for it. Most blood honor it's ever seen.”

Jess managed another small grin. “Glad you got my sig.”

April shook her head a little. “Tried to make my head believe you were turning and it just wouldn't go.” She replied. “Not when you refused to look at any of us.”

Jess was quiet for a moment. “Specially her.” She moved her head a tiny bit towards Dev.

“Specially her.” April agreed. “So now we go down in flames. But that's okay, you know?” She said. “It's right.” She touched Jess's hand, then stood up and went back to the console, sitting back down and getting on comms.

So now, at last, Jess shifted enough so she could look up at Dev, who was seated against the wall with both arms wrapped around her. The bio alt looked as though she'd been through a full speed carrier wreck and as she looked back, what she was feeling was open and very evident on her face.

Oh. Jess felt.. well, she wasn't sure what she was feeling, but it was very warm, and very powerful and it was making it hard to breathe. “Hey Devvie.” She uttered. “You're not too mad at me are ya?”

“No.” Dev said, after a brief pause. “I just though they made you dead, and I was.. “ She stopped and took a few breaths. “I didn't want that.”

Jess was glad she was lying still. It felt good just to be able to stop, and think, and say what she wanted to say. “In about sixty minutes we're probably both going to be made dead.” She said. “But I'm real, real glad I got to know you.”

Dev just nodded back.

“My dad once said.. “ Jess half smiled. “You'll know what love is because its the only thing that hurts as much as it feels good.” She nodded a little. “He was right. But it's good.”

“It's good.” Dev repeated softly. “I'm glad you didn't really want to go with the bad guys, Jess. I would have missed you so much.”

Unexpectedly, Jess felt tears sting her own eyes, as she felt Dev hug her close, and the pressure of her head pressing against the side of her own. It unlocked something inside her that she really couldn't quantify, but whatever it was made her want to get up and move around and be a part of what was going on the room.

She didn't want this to end. “Gimme a hand up.” She told Dev. “Let's go see if we can help.”

“Doctor Dan said for you to rest.” Dev objected, even though she helped Jess sit up anyway. She waited, watching her partner work to catch her breath, before she stood up and carefully held on to her arm as Jess rose with her.

The pain was really overwhelming. Jess just stood there breathing for a moment, holding onto Dev so she wouldn't just fall right back down. Every nerve in her body felt like it was being smacked with a round head hammer and it was all she could do to lock her knees in place to remain upright.

After a minute she looked around. There were a pile of bodies, the guards and Bain, in one corner on the lower level and the walls and one of the working consoles had deep, angry black scores on them from the firefight. Near her the wall surface was covered in dried blood, and she could smell the copper scent now as her senses settled.

Mike Arias was seated next to April, his arm in a plas casing, and Brent next to him had a bandage on his head. Tucker and Elaine were on the second console, he with a black eye, and she with half the hair on her head burned off and a scorch mark covered in a bandage across the side of her face.

Elaine briefly looked up from her screen and gave Jess a wry smile. Then she went back to her inputs. No real need for her to say anything, apparently.

Jess managed the few steps over and took a seat at the end of the desk, resting her elbows on the steel surface as Dev sat down next to her. She looked at the screen output, her eyes focusing on the incoming scan, showing a dozen ships pretty much nearly on top of them.

Doctor Dan came over and sat down on the other side of her, just as the outer door opened and one of the Kaytees entered, looking around at them. “Over here, Kaytee.” Kurok lifted a hand. “I”m going to send them back downstairs.” He told Jess, as the bio alt headed towards them. “Maybe they'll get lucky.”

Jess turned and looked at Dev, who was looking right back at her. “Don't suppose you want to go with them, huh?”

“No.” Dev answered straightforwardly. “I would not.”

Jess nodded, and looked back at the screen. “Then let's just go out doing what we do.”

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Dev studied the oncoming vessels, forcing her mind to focus on the problem at hand and not on the horrible thing she'd just been through.

Everything seemed mixed up and upside down. Jess had been right – she had no real idea now who to trust except for Jess herself, and for a moment even that had been in doubt.

She felt her eyes sting again, remembering that. An awful feeling that haunted her even when she told herself that all Jess had been doing was acting.

Doing her job. Making the man Bain believe she was joining him, to get him to let his guard down.

And yet still it hurt. Dev looked up as a warm touch covered the back of her hand, and found Jess regarding her, bloodshot eyes blinking slowly in evident discomfort. “Would you like a drink?” She asked.

“Yeah, but not the kind they have in here.” Jess admitted, with a faint grin. “Hey you okay? You still look freaked out.”

Dev shifted her gaze briefly, then returned it. “I really though they made you dead.” She indicated the security guard. “And that really bothered me.” She felt Jess's grip on her tighten. “And I thought you were going to leave me here and it made me feel so lost.” She added. “I think I want to throw up.”

Jess's eyes widened, apparently getting more of an answer than she'd expected. “Ah.” She murmured. “I'd never have left you, Devvie.” She lowered her voice. “Honest.”

Dev managed a smile in return.

“Dying, on the other hand.” Her partner gave her a wry grimace. “I”m pretty good at that.”

Dev exhaled. “Yes.” She answered, briefly. “Jess, the bad guys are almost here. “ She changed the subject.

“I know.” Jess chafed the back of her hand with the edge of her thumb. “It sucks right now.”

“I wish we could just go have a snack on the ledge and watch the water.” Dev whispered. 'I don't want to be dead, and I really don't want you to be.”

Jess leaned back in her seat and gazed around the room. The citadel was as ready as it was going to be and most of her colleagues were just quietly resting where they were, eyes focused on the displays. Kurok had his head cradled in his hands and for a moment, for her, the world went still.

That happened, sometimes. Jess was never sure if it was a real thing, or just something her mind conjured up to give her a chance to think for a minute.

Sometimes a good idea came. Sometimes in that quiet moment, there was clarity and facts that had been running around in the back of her head presented themselves in the form of a solution to whatever problem she had.

But no. Jess exhaled, and the world rushed on again. There was no magic solution for this. The armored carriers would come in and attack them, they would do their best to defend the citadel for as long as they could, and then, if they penetrated it would come down to a hand to hand in the corridor.

“Short range scan has them.” Brent commented. “Standing by to bring up the guns.”

“Bring them up.” Jess ordered. “Wish I could help you aim em, but I've got the reflexes of my dead aunt right now.” She stared at the comp screen, ignoring the pain. “Dev, send a broadband out, all alert, any endpoint.”

“Yes.” Dev settled her ear cups and exhaled. “Base 10, Base 10, all call.” She spoke clearly. “Inbound hostile, alert prime. Take cover.” She put it on replay and scanned her screen again. The call beam spread out neatly from the citadel, and she could see faint echoes back, passive acks that were scattered across the landscape.

“Thanks.” Jess said. “Now send out a broadcast internally. Tell all the non coms to take cover, and seal themselves out of operational areas.”

The door opened, and Doug entered, carrying spare rifles slung over his shoulders, and a sack full of mines. He set the mines on the console near April and a moment later, Chester came in similarly laden.

Dev spoke quietly into the internal comms, repeating Jess's message, and now the techs set up the long blasters near their agents, as the agents settled into the weapons rigs, fitting their hands into the ceiling mounted triggers relatively the same as the ones in the carriers.

There was a set above the seat Jess was in, but she didn't even attempt to pull them down, watching her fingertips twitching as waves of pain rippled through her body. She doubted she could lift her arms above her head, and the shot Kurok had given her was only slowly returning her nerves to a normal state.

There would be no fighting for her, not in time today anyway. “Dev?”

“Yes?”

“Listen.” Jess leaned carefully over towards her. “If they end up shooting this place to pieces, I ain't going to be able to do much about it.”

Dev considered this. “I see.”

“Stick over there with Doug and those guys.” Jess said. “They might do better.”

The bio alt adjusted an ear cup and folded her hands on the console. 'I think I would rather stay here, next to you.” She responded. “If that's all right.”

“If that's all right.” Her partner sighed. “You want to get killed? Probably by my skull coming off my neck and breaking yours?”

Dev looked up, her expression suddenly as open as Jess had ever seen it. In an instant, unexpectedly, the woman sitting next to her was no longer a bio alt, no longer even a tech. She was just this person Jess found herself really caring for.

“Yeah.” Dev said. “I want to share whatever happens to you. I don't care what that is.” She spoke the words carefully, as though considering each one with great care. “No matter what the programming says”

“It says otherwise?”

Dev nodded. “We're supposed to value our lives.” She agreed. “Since we do have value. People pay highly for us.”

Jess carefully propped her chin up on her fist. “You're nuts.”

“Yes. I have come to that conclusion also. I have gone far outside the programming for what I'm doing.” The bio alt said, in a mournful tone. “That is, I suppose, nuts, if the definition I looked up about that is correct, and you are not referring to an ancient plant once consumed as a snack.”

“Me too.” Jess reached over and took her hand, bringing it over and placing a kiss on the back of her knuckles. “Stay here by me, Devvie. Been such a long time since anyone's given a shit if I lived or died I might as well enjoy it.”

Her partner looked a bit happier. She smiled a trifle and went back to her screens, providing the voice, as it were, of the citadel. “This is central ops.” She murmured into her comm. “Yes, it's' Dev.”

Usually, that was Elaine's job, or sometimes it had been Sandy's. Jess had almost never been tapped for the duty, and people had told her it was because her voice made everyone nervous.

That had always been okay by her. She hated the sound of her own amplified yap.

“Six minutes, mark.” Brent said. “Coming into range. Comm blackout.”

“Shunting power to the guns.” Doug had settled into his station and had a comm set on. “We've got plenty of juice, at least.”

“Front side battery is up.” Tucker reported. “Generators are tapped to full.”

Jess looked up to find a full, comprehensive display in front of her. She glanced at Dev, who was busy with her own screens, and blinked her eyes a few times to get them to focus. “Unless they open up when they're in range, hold off.” She said. “Let them get right in our faces.”

“They'll see the power grid up.” Elaine said.

“Maybe they'll figure Bain left it that way.” Jess responded. “They sending out any comms?” She asked Dev, who shook her pale head. “He would have told them to come right in, soon as he landed in the shuttle bay.”

“Funny we didn't pick that up on scan.” Elaine shifted to look over at her. “Just how many layers does the scum go down here, Jess?”

Jess sighed, understanding the comment. “Dev caught his speeder in the bay, on our carrier's scan. I just didn't have time to investigate it before we were in the weeds.” She caught sight of Kurok, settling into a tech station, and keying it on. “Hey doc, how'd his boat slip in behind scan?”

“Keyed reflector.” Doctor Dan responded, almost absently. “He's .. well, he was, top sec. The idea was, he might have to come into a facility that had been turned.”

“Irony's a little crunchy.” Elaine remarked.

“Yes. Well.” Kurok rubbed his eyes. “What can I tell you? It's old technology. They had it when I was still active.”

The rest of the agents were now listening intently. “You were a tech, huh?” Elaine asked, after a brief pause.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan looked up at her, seeing the doubt. “Agent Drake'll vouch for me. I think she probably has a picture of me in diapers or something like that.” He said, the tiniest bit of a twinkle entering his pale eyes. “Not that we really have much time for that sort of thing, and anyway if I wanted to blow this place up or shoot someone I would have done so already.”

“Three minutes.” Brent backed up the statement.

“He's fine.” Jess remarked, returning Elaine's inquisitive stare. “Just concentrate on aiming. We're not going to have much space to miss in.”

Keyed reflector. Dev turned that term over in her head, feeling it tickle some programming, deep down. She nudged it back and forth, and tried to call up what it evoked, but it remained elusive, just out of her mental grasp. Keyed reflector. That meant, she reasoned, something that would... maybe.. “Doctor Dan.”

Kurok looked over. “Yes, Dev?”

“If they could do that for the man Bain's vehicle, making scan ignore it, couldn't the bad guys do the same thing with our guns and their vehicles? Make them reflect the beams?”

“Well.” Kurok answered thoughtfully. “They could, if they had the frequencies, Dev. Those change... or at least they did, regularly.” He adjusted his screen. “Here they come.”

“In range.” Brent said, calmly. “Freq's changed last week.” He added. “They did it cause that guy said to.” He pointed at Bain's body. “Weren't scheduled for another ten days... just remembered that.” He added, somewhat defensively. “I'd just come on shift and heard some guys saying it in the mess.. they thought it was a good idea to change em.”

Everyone's eyes shifted to the dead body, then they all looked over at Jess, who'd straightened in her seat. “Change them now.” She said, without hesitation. “Hurry.”

The techs dove at their inputs and started tapping, while Jess and Elaine pulled the scan to their own stations. “Faster.” Jess said, seeing the line of destroyers now on visual, close enough for the outboard cams to resolve them.

“The codes are locked, Jess.” Dev's head lifted. “We can't change them.”

“Fuck.” Brent added a half second later as he came to the same conclusion.

Jess got up and almost ended up on the ground as she grabbed for the edge of the console when her body seized up. “Fucker!” She got over to Dev's chair and looked at her screen, seeing the admin lockout, and the request for creds that had denied her partner access. “Gimme.”

Dev slid out of the way and gave her access, as she watched her partner tap painfully on the screen.

“They're spooling up.” Tucker said. “We're gonna take it right in the kisser. If they've got our codes it'll cut through the shields like water.”

Jess cursed and got the last few letters of her own creds in and entered them. “Let's see if we can't hoist his ugly dead ass on it's own petard.” She said. “He upgraded my access.”

“Probably was going to lay the blame of everything on you if it went sour.” Elaine suggested. “Your login over everything.”

“Yeah, rogue agent.” Jess muttered. “We'd all be dead. Who'd dispute it.”

The damn screen seemed like it took an eon and longer, the pulsing white dot in the center expanding and contracting as though it were breathing and she heard the yell of alarm from Brent just as it finally, finally disappeared and obediently presented schematics to her. “Go!” She awkwardly hopped out of the way as Dev got her hands on the controls and her fingertips raced over the smooth surface.

The lights flickered, and she heard a far off rumble.

“Direct hit.” Kurok stated. “They're aiming for the turbine entrance.”

“Dev?” Jess uttered.

The bio alt finished her work and lifted her head. “I don't really know what I just did, and I have no idea if it will work but you can try it.”

A humming boom sounded, and then several more, as Elaine, Mike and April let loose with the perimeter guns, then a crackling roar vibrated the rock around them and knocked loose a few bits of shale.

“Shields are responding.” Brent remarked. “Fucking nice timing, yo.”

Jess managed to sit back down without falling, and rested her elbows on the console, waiting for the flashing bolts to fade from her vision. “Just keep shooting.”

She could hear the repeated booms, an almost subliminal rumbling that was power being fed to the big outside guns, and released as the other agents aimed and fired. It was strange not to be joining them, but it was far easier to sit as still as she could and just watch the action on the screen.

“Jess.”

“Uh?” Jess rotated her head slightly to look at her partner. “Hey good work.” She added, belatedly. “Thanks for keeping us from being vaporized. You rock.”

“Yes, I'm glad it was effective.” Dev said. “May I continue to work with your identity?”

“Sure. I'll discipline myself later. You can help.” Jess managed a half grin.

Dev returned the grin, then went back to work.

Jess gave up watching the screen and watched her partner instead. She could see the bio alt's pale eyes flickering over the data, and she was inputting steadily, a look of impossibly cute determination on her face.

“Got one.” Mike said. “Didn't expect the beam to take him. Could tell by how he was flying.” He looked over at Jess. “Good call.”

Jess lifted a hand and pointed her finger at Dev. “Rock star.”

“Very well done, Dev.” Doctor Dan said. “They've figured it out. Splitting apart and heading for the other side of the ridge, unfortunately.”

“Want us to take the buses out and hunt them?” April asked. “We've got nothing for guns in the back.”

“How many're left?” Jess asked.

“Ten.” Brent said. “Two're heading for the carrier bay now.”

“Tell them to take cover.” Jess told Dev. “You're not going to make it to the bay in time.” She said. “Arm your carriers to implode and wait on my mark.”

Mike's eyes opened wide, but Elaine nodded. “You're going to blow the bay?”

“I'm going to blow them if they land in it.” Jess corrected. “Got any better ideas?” She eyed her fellow senior agent, who gave a short, decisive shake of her head. “No? Okay then.”

“No.” Elaine swung her triggers around and let loose with a long blast, tracing an arc of fire across the front of the citadel and catching the very tail end of one of the enemy. “After that rig your buddy there did? I'm all in.”

“That one just clipped the cliff and went down.” Doctor Dan was busy with scan. “Nice shot.”

“Thanks.. uh.. doc.” Elaine swung the screen around and continued hunting. “Rookie watch out there. You got the end guns.”

“Got it.” Mike had the tip of his tongue sticking out from between his teeth and bore down, focusing so hard on his comp he nearly bashed his forehead into it. “Bastard!

“Clipped him.” April picked up the arc and leaned back as the enemy swerved and went for zenith, tracer fire chasing him up the the ridge. “The rest of them are out of line, Jess.”

“Yeah.” Jess sighed. “Dev, you tell them to get out of the pit?”

“Yes.” Dev nodded. “I spoke with Clint.” She added. “He's in some discomfort, but he agreed to take himself and the others to safety.”

“Carriers are rigged.” Elaine said. “If we blow them, we're stuck here.”

Jess nodded. “We're stuck here anyway. We have comp inside?”

Tucker sent the image he had of the carrier bay to the big screen, showing a grainy view of the inside of the huge space, wisps of off gassing emitting from the four carriers, and machinery in it's half reconstructed position. There were still a few moving figures in view, and Clint's distinctive one, waving an arm at a half dozen bio alt techs who all had bundles and packs of tools in their grip as they bolted for the hatchway.

“They can't seal that hatch.” April said, suddenly. “If they get in there and we don't blow them, they're inside.”

“That's what these are for.” Elaine pointed at the long guns. “Soon as we're done here, we'll get those all warmed up.”

A flash caught their eye, and the temporary covering to the bay blew out in all directions, sending metal fragments raining down into the bay.

“Clear!” Dev yelped into the comms. “There is danger! Take cover!”

A moment later the bay was lit with landing lights and six destroyers came in fast, all wing and angled body in stark contrast to the stolid carriers hunched on their pads.

“Where's the other two?” Mike asked. “I don't see them on scan.”

Dev scrambled to get comp on the back side, and widened her scan, pulling in the signal from her own carrier for as long as she figured she'd get it. “No sign.”

Jess felt a jolt of alarm. “The back door.” She said. “If they've got Bain's keys that might be one of them.”

“It is.” Kurok stood up. “One you like to accompany me? I don't much care for surprises.”

April stood and joined him. “Doug, stay here and help blow things up.” She picked up a long blaster and energized it. “Let's go, Doc. I'm in the mood to kill people.”

Doctor Dan paused and looked at Jess, one pale eyebrow lifting in question. Jess waved her hand at him, and was glad to restrict her reaction to that as she slowly put her arm back down.

“They're down.” Brent said. “Light the trigger?”

Jess looked back at the screen and saw the hatches opening, judging the distances. “Blow the two nearest them.” She instructed, shading her eyes just in time as Brent lit off the explosives, setting off the emergency destruct systems on the two carriers designed to keep them from ending up in enemy hands.

The screen whited out. Seconds later, the ripple of the blast transmitted through the rock followed by a scream of sound that cut off abruptly as Brent slammed a control. “Got em.” He grunted.

Dev touched her ear bud and listened intently. She could hear booms and thumps, and then, high pitched screaming that was human and not mechanical. The white hot engine systems of the two carriers were scorching the interior of the bay with super thermal heat, and she hoped hard that Clint, and the other sets had gotten out.

Another signal and she tuned it. “Dev! It's April! Send h..” She turned. “Jess, April is in distress.”

“Uh oh.” Jess said. “Get those blasters ready, kids.” She managed to get to her feet and headed towards the far wall, where the guns were leaning. “Check scan.”

“Scan's down.” Brent said, suddenly. “We're dark to the wall.”

“Shit.” Tucker got up and went to an emergency station .”I'll see what I can get on the manuals.”

Jess picked up a blaster and cradled it against her arm. “Dev, c'mon over here and take cover behind the console. There rest of you techs too.” She took a slow, deep breath, shoving the jangling pain in every nerve ending down and bracing herself against the rock surface.

“No sense blowing the others.” Elaine got up and picked up one of the longer guns, coming over and putting the bulk of the main console between herself and the door, bracing the blaster against the top of the stations and un-safing it. “I can hear shots.”

Jess could hear them too. “Sounds like a lot of them.” She said. “They must have popped that back hatch wide open.”

“Probably loaded most of the troops in the ones that hit that, and only skeleton in the bay.” Elaine said, regretfully. “We guessed wrong.”

“Yeah.” Jess looked up as the lights changed, from the standard emergency stations to stark red, and the alerts started to go off on every board she could see.

“Ops compromised.” A harsh voice sounded. Bricker's, Jess realized. “Systems deact, standby for lock out.”

The systems would lock themselves and then destruct. Jess exhaled, and got the blaster in position, sensing, and then feeling Dev slip in behind her. “Been fun, Devvie.”

Dev put a hand on her hip, the touch warm and comforting all out of proportion to the motion. “We all hope we get to do good work and make our contracts happy.” She said. “I did both.”

Jess smiled wryly. “You sure did.”

“And I got to be in love.” Dev continued. “I think every single set in the creche would wish they were me.”

Jess turned her head and regarded Dev. “You glad you're you?”

Dev stretched up and gave her a kiss on the lips. “Yes.”

And so. Jess felt the discomfort fade, and her disappointment with their failure ease off and her mind steadied and eased as she stopped trying to force the future and let her decisions fall where they might. The time for questions was over, and now, it just was what it was.

“We fought the good fight.” Elaine commented, peering down her blaster's spine. “Time to pay, Jesslyn.”

“Time to pay, El.” Jess drew in a breath and got her hands on the triggers, as she heard the thump of boots in the hall, and the crackle of power slamming the outside of the hatch. “Just keep shooting.”

“We will.” Tucker had a blaster. So did Brent, and Doug, and they joined the agents shoulder to shoulder as the hatch buckled and slammed inward to the floor.

The room lit white and blue with fire.

**

“Keep down!” Jess yelled back over her shoulder, as she aimed and took a shot at the edge of an armored shoulder she spotted outside the door.

The room was full of smoke, and the red lights made it dark and hard to see anything. The first wave had come flying it shooting, and now a half dozen armored forms were piled in the front part of the room, their legs blocking the hatch open and giving their comrades a shot into the ops center.

No way out. Jess could see shadows flickering on the far wall, and then a second later a mine flew in. “Shit!”

Tucker leaped over the console and booted the mine back out the way it came, getting just behind cover before it exploded and filled the entry with golden fire that rippled out and flowed towards them.

Jess turned and dove for the ground, taking Dev with her as the force flowed up over the console and over their heads. “Watch for them behind it!”

“On it!” Mike said. “Bastards!”

Jess looked up to make sure the plasma had dissipated, then she got back up and leveled her blaster, letting off a long burst as one of the enemy came right at them, clearly expecting them to be stunned. She trained her sights on his face plate and watched it heat to white hot, as he hauled up and tried to turn back out of the way.

Too late. His head exploded inside his armor and he dropped, reeling backwards as two more came in, skidding to a halt when they saw the body heading towards them and turning to retreat as two beams hit them from Mike and Elaine's guns.

Another mine. Another ducking, but this time the energy ripped through the bottom of the consoles and Tucker went down in jerking agony, his blaster flying from his hands and nearly hitting Dev in the head.

Brent heaved one of their own mines out the door and they ducked as the booming roar filled the space.

“We should just charge them. They'll just pick us off.” Elaine got over by Jess. “If we're going to die, might as well do it fast, Jess. We can't hold out forever.”

“Hang on a little longer.” Jess half stood and got off a shot, hoping her knees would hold her. She felt Dev grab and steady her and got wedged into place against the console, forcing her body to behave. “Any idea how long we've been fighting? How long till that storm was due over?”"

“It will be soon.” Dev replied “We've been doing this for almost forty five minutes.”

“Why?” Elaine asked “What the hell does a storm do for us? They're the ones who have the damn magic mushrooms Jess – we don't, and even if we did, it does nothing for us here in the kill zone. “

Fifteen minutes. Jess exhaled. “Okay.” She let the gun rest on the console and blinked the sweat from her eyes. “Elaine, take these guys out the back, down Bain's hallways. I'll cover you.”

Elaine looked at her. “Cover us?”

Mike threw another mine out, and ducked. “Ware!”

“Look.” Jess got her head down as plasma rippled through the room. “I can barely stand up. I'm not going to be able to keep up with you all.” She uttered. “Get the hell out, and just go.”

Dev crouched quietly behind her partner, listening. The consoles were all dead, locked out by the security systems and there was nothing else she could do except keep Jess company.

She could see Elaine's face as she looked at Jess, surprising emotion tensing the muscles there.

“Jess, we can't leave you here.” Elaine finally said. “Screw it.”

“You can.” Jess lifted her head. “Everyone listen up.” She raised her voice. “On ten, head out the back with Elaine on point. I'll cover.”

There was a moment of silence, then Mike cleared his throat. “If it's all the same to you, senior, I'd rather stay.”

“Ack” Brent went back to the bag of mines, arming another one and handing it over to him.”

“Ack.” Doug echoed, looking up and over from where he was kneeling next to Tucker. “I'll answer ack for him too.”

Jess's eyes flicked around the room, and then paused on Elaine's face, before she turned and regarded Dev. “Can I at least get you to listen to me?”

Dev gazed steadily back at her. “Please don't ask me to leave you.” She replied, simply. “I really don't want to.”

Jess sighed. “You're all insane.” She turned and put her hands back on the blaster. “All right. Just take as many of them with us as we can I guess.”

Her voice sounded indifferent, but Dev, who was just in the right spot, could see her eyes blink, and the faint flash of tears as they escaped and landed on the metal surface of the useless station.

She wasn't sure she understood what that meant. But she knew it was a strong feeling.

Elaine got in next to her and propped her blaster up on the edge of the console, sighting down it. “Y'know, I always figured I”d go like this.” She let off a blast, as a dark figure flickered past the entrance. “Never thought I'd make it to retire, or you either.”

“Yeah.” Jess muttered.

Elaine leaned forward so she could see Dev. “And you... “ She grinned briefly. “You're all right, NM-Dev-1.”

Dev smiled back.

“Specially if you hooked this one good.” Elaine nudged Jess's arm, then returned her attention to the doorway, and six bodies inbound. “Here we go.... for the corps!” The last words were a bellow and in an rush of energy the yell was picked up and carried forward, as the six enemy soldiers came right at them, dodging the blaster fire and returning it with their own.

Jess just kept firing, the blaster rifle thumping against her chest as she let off quick bursts, going from one target to another to another as the air itself started to burn, white fire and dark shadows taking the color out of everything as the red lights themselves died and the shots became a continuous thunder.

One of the enemy dodged past Doug's rolling body and leaped over the console right at Jess. She released the blaster rifle and drew her sidearm, continuing to fire as he came flying through the air and slammed into her, a hit she had no way of avoiding.

The pain ramped with unexpected ferocity and she felt her back hit the wall as he landed on her, hand already raised with the butt of his gun slamming down at her.

She couldn't budge her torso, but she got the blaster in between them and squeezed the trigger, the muzzle shoved hard against his belly as she felt him cough.

His hand swerved as he went for her hands instead of her head and then he was hit from the side by a small, fair haired figure that got a shoulder under him and heaved him off against the wall as Jess rolled clear.

The man bounced off the wall and reached out to grab Jess, but he was yanked away and slammed against the floor and then his arm was pulled behind him as that same, slight, fair figure

landed on his back and removed his shoulder from it's socket, surprising a startled yell of pain from him.

Jess started to get up, then something impacted her hard and sent her flying to slam against the wall herself, and she drew and breath and got her hands up in time for her vision to clear and see the big armored figure in front of her raise it's gun and the pre-aim splashed on her face.

Then it was gone because a body was blocking it, half kneeling, half sprawled across her with it's arms raised in a protective spread merely meant to assure the coming blast would tank the both of them.

A moments hesitation on his part, some ancient animal brain instinct that held his finger for just a breath.

Just long enough for Jess to get one arm around her protector and one hand on her fallen blaster and to reach around and aim herself and force her hand to contract on the trigger and her wrist to withstand the recoil as the blast took the weapon right out of the enemy's hands.

Her boot hooked his, and her other one slammed out and caught him in the groin and then he was being blown backwards as two other blaster beams hit his body.

And then, for a long moment, it was quiet.

White emergency lights were blinking on and off, and the room was full of smoke and the smell of burned flesh and blood. There was no sound from the outside hallway, where they could see blinking lights as well.

Then a roar of sound shuddered through the wall and they could hear the crackle of comm, and the sound of battle language that wasn't theirs, and the sweet, sweet note of panic that meant maybe, somehow something had swung their way.

Motion now, and running boots, and the next thing they saw was a crowd of bodies in pursuit yelling loudly and carrying shadowy pieces of gear, their necks flashing with faintly colored tracing around their necks.

Jess blinked. “Bios!” She let her body thump back against the wall and felt Dev do the same, as her partner started shaking. “What the hell???”

A roar then came from the other side of the hall, and the next moment there was a huge pile up, blasters going everywhere, and the eerie cascade of power arcs energizing as the fight passed them by, leaving the corridor outside clear.

Somehow, Jess got to her feet, carrying Dev with her and they surged forward, past the consoles, stepping on the enemy bodies and joining the other agents and techs at the doorway as they bolted outside.

And then the stopped. The huge central corridor meet point was filled with rapidly falling enemy, with hand blaster fire coming from the hallway leading down to the caverns and power arcs being fired from the technical gear carried by the bio alts on the other.

“Holy shit.” Elaine grunted, holding a bleeding gash on her side.

Then one jump-suited figure dodged to the front, and yelled out in that same, unfamiliar battle language, a powerful and commanding tone that cut through all the noise as the figure swept their arm up and the arcs died down.

There were only two of the enemy left, and they dropped their guns, and lifted their hands, staggering back against the wall and slamming their backs against the rock surface.

And then it was briefly quiet again.

Jess forced herself forward, nudging her way through the crowd of bio alts who turned their heads, then parted quickly when they saw who it was. She emerged at the front of them, and stopped next to Dan Kurok, who was battered and covered in grime.

April limped forward from across the lines, leaving a crowd of support staff in varicolored jump suits behind her.

“Next time.” Dan Kurok finally said, spitting out a little blood. “I'm going to pretend I didn't see the memo.”

“Fuck yah.” April agreed, lifting a shaking hand to touch a blast on the side of her head. “They definitely didn't go over this in battle school.”

Jess put a hand on both of their shoulders. “Nice timing. Thanks for saving our asses.”

“Thank you, for drawing the attention of every god damned one of them to ops and leaving the halls clear for us.” Doctor Dan said. “Wheres. ah.”

Dev had followed Jess through the crowd of her fellow sets, and now was standing quietly next to her, just behind the three of them, with Elaine, and Brent, and Doug after her.

Clint emerged from the group of armed workers, and walked over to join them. “Crappy day.” He was holding one arm close to his body. “Now what?”

They were all silent briefly then everyone looked at Jess.

Jess looked around at the smoke filled, body filled, stale air filled space. Then she sighed and looked at Kurok. “Think you can get the systems started back up?”

Doctor Dan shrugged. “Oh, why not? At this rate I woudln't judge anything impossible.” He looked up as a loud rumble sounded, shuddering through the halls. “Let's just hope the rest of their fleet isn't in that storm.”

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The one undamaged place was the mess hall. Jess was more than glad to be sprawled in one of the chairs in the back, as bio alts and citadel techs mingled and worked on temporary rigs set up on tables and counters everywhere.

“Got the batts back online at least.” Clint had taken a seat next to her, looking exhausted. “Air handlers are cycling.”

“I hear.” Jess responded quietly. “If anyone can get the mains back, it'll be the doc.”

“Who is he, Jess?” Clint asked, keeping his voice low. “I heard him talk their talk in the hall.”

It was hard to even muster up the energy to respond. Kurok had given her another shot of something, and that had started the pain fading but Jess knew she was almost at her limits. “He was my father's first partner.” She answered. “He was an ops tech. One of us.”

“Oh.” Clint looked surprised. “Really?”

Jess nodded. “My dad could talk their battle talk too.” She added, not really sure if that was true, but not really caring.

“Right yeah.” The mech senior nodded. “And hey, he made Dev, right?”

“He made Dev.” Jess agreed. “And he sure did a bang up job there.” She looked up as her partner came over, putting down a cup of water next to her hand and taking the seat next to her with one of her own. “How ya doing, Devvie?”

“I”m really tired.” Dev responded in a soft, husky voice.

“Well, seeing as you were beating up guys five times your size and throwing me around like a rag doll I'm not surprised.” Jess rested her chin on her hand. “Can we talk sometime about how techs aren't supposed to step in front of a blaster pointed at their agent?”

Dev took a sip from her cup and swallowed it.

“You did that, Dev?” Clint asked. “Wow.”

“She did that.”

The outer door slid open and April and Mike entered, steering their way through the busy crowd back to where Jess was seated.

“I'll go finish trying to work on the security systems.” Dev got up and eased past them as they came over. “Excuse me.”

The two agents sat down. “We got all the trash taken out.” Mike said. “Had the bios bring up those donkey carts they use and hauled the bodies out and dumped em.”

“Got the prisoners locked up in the storage facilities.” April reported. “So Kurok says now he might be able to get the comp out of unlock since we have only friendly chips inside.”

“How's the weather outside?”

“Sucks.” Mike said. “Raining like crazy. Flooding in the carrier bay, what's left of it.” His jumpsuit was wet. “I got into my carrier though, and ran scan. Nothing in range.”

“Good.”

“Your rig's in one piece too.” Mike added. “I think if they get comp back up, Dev had it tied in.”

“She did.” Jess agreed. “But without comp we don't know how much scan and comm got sent back to the otherside and I..” She paused, as the lights flickered overhead, morphing from white, to red, then back to a blue tinged daylight that meant normal, whatever that really meant anymore. “Ah.”

Clint got up. “Mains are back.” He looked relieved. “Let me start getting things ramped.”

“Thanks Clint.” Jess commented, blinking a little in the new illumination. Behind her, she heard the mech in the mess systems start a low buzzing, and the working teams looked around, visibly brighting at the returning power.

“Sure, Jess.” Clint blushed a little, then hurried off.

April inspected the bandage on her arm. “Seems like ten years since we showed up here.” She commented. “Glad to see the doc got systems back. He's pretty wicked good. I was watching him on that comp.”

“Well. I guess that's where Dev gets it from.” Jess said, after a moment. “Figure he used his genotype.”

“That's kinda weird.” Mike said, after a bit of an awkward pause.

Jess shrugged. “Is what it is.” She looked past them to the door, which had opened, and admitted Elaine. “Whats up?”

“Comp came up, ten seconds after that comms did and there's a full sec broadcast coming in to your sig.” Elaine said. “Urgent repeat.”

With a sigh, Jess pushed herself to her feet, glad, at least, that standing no longer felt like she was having knives poked into her from all angles. “Could be good, could be bad.” She said. “Let's go find out.”

They walked back to central ops, and as she entered, Jess spotted Dev working at one of the consoles. Her partner looked up as she came in, and as their eyes met Jess almost forgot completely what she'd come for. She angled her steps to the side and went to Dev's workbench instead of the main comms board. “Hey.”

“They have a message for you.” Dev offered up at once.

“I have a message for you.” Jess ignored the rest of the room, and put her hand up against Dev's cheek. “That is, you look really stressed. What's up?”

“Jess” Elaine called over.

“Hang on.” Jess lifted a hand in her direction with out turning around. “Devvie?”

Dev's expression altered, and she smiled faintly. “I'm okay.” She told Jess. “Just a bit overwhelmed by all the stuff that happened, I guess.”

“Hang in there, Dev.” Jess stroked her cheek with the edge of her thumb. “Just hang in there, and maybe we'll get to sit down and talk about it soon. Okay?”

“Yes.” Dev's smile broadened a little. “Now you should take your call, Jess. I think it's important.”

“Not as important to me as you are” Jess knew the whole room was listening, and found herself not caring at all. “Try and chill.” Now, finally she turned and walked over to the big comms station and sat down next to Elaine, tucking a set of ear buds in her ears and extending her hand to the scan pad.

“That's fucked up.” Elaine commented. “But you know, at this point I don't care.”

“Yeah, me either.” Jess smiled briefly and put her hand flat on the pad, feeling the tickle as it validated her, and the embedded chips beneath her skin. She looked up as the screen lit and tried not to blink, as the scan beam hit her eyes for a brief instant.

Then the screen cleared, and she heard the static and phasing of the looped message.

“HQ HQ HQ.” The metallic, male voice echoed softly in her ears. “Drake J, standby.”

“Ack” Jess answered quietly. “Drake, J on comm.”

Then the line switched, and she heard the rumble of carrier engines and the screen lit to reveal a male face looking back at her, older and scarred, with thick, wavy gray hair. “Drake.”

“Yes.” Jess responded. “Jesslyn Drake, senior agent, Base 10.”

He nodded. “We got a high density squirt detailing an attack by force. Validate.” He ordered. “Benson Alters on comm.”

Jess remembered him, from school. “Yes sir, I remember you from in flight tactics class.” She commented. “The squirt was valid. Details in person.”

The man relaxed just a trifle. “Ack.” He said, to both her spoken and unspoken words. “Due local approx two. Clear entrance?”

Jess shook her head visibly so he could see it.

“Ack.” He responded. “Please keep this channel open. Report as needed.”

“Ack.” Jess, at last, felt a sense of relief. “Will do.”

The visible image disappeared, but the waveform remained, and she keyed it to overhead comms sending the soft sound of the open carrier into the room. “Open sig.” She announced. “We've got fleet inbound.”

The sounds of utter relief around her matched her internal feelings exactly. “Apparently a message from here finally got through.” She said. “So whoever made that happen, I love you.”

After a brief pause, everyone looked at Dev, who looked up in surprise, a visible blush appearing on her face. “Um.” She cleared her throat. “With everything else that happened I am not sure I did that.”

“Did I say you did?” Jess's brows arched slightly.

Dev blushed more deeply.

“Now, if I was a betting woman... “ Elaine drawled. “And I checked the logs, I bet we'd find someone's creds on that message in here.”

Doctor Dan looked up from a console he had his head completely inserted into. “Please don't make Dev pass out.” He said. “She's had a tough day.” He got up from the floor and sat down. “And I think that was the best news we could have hoped for.”

“Got that right.” Jess sighed. “Maybe this is closer to over.”

“Let me make sure everyone's on PTT.” Elaine was busy with her board. “Full power's back, and the non coms are getting the rest of daily operations up.”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan said. “My advice now is, we all get some rest before the cavalry gets here, and starts asking questions. They'll be on scan and keep off any other funny business here.” He glanced at Jess. “You might want to take a trip down to med.”

Questions. Yes. Jess recalled all the things they'd been through, and how that was all going to look to HQ. “Let's hope they believe us.” She stood up. “Let's go, Dev. “

Obediently Dev left her work and joined Jess at the door, dusting her hands off as they left ops, and walked together down the hall. “Are we going to med?”

“Yeah.” Jess said. “I need another shot, and you've got a bump on your head.”

“I do. It hurts.” The bio alt agreed. “Is it over now, Jess? Did we win?”

Jess walked along in silence for a few moments, then she nodded. “For now, I think it is.” She allowed. “And I think we survived more than we won. But I'll take it.”

Dev reached out and took her hand, closing her fingers around Jess's. “Me too.”

**

Jess paused to dust a bit of debris off her sleeve, before she presented herself to the intelligence room, holding her hand to the plate and feeling the tickle of scan as it read her.

The cavalry had, in fact arrived. A dozen carriers and six big transports, carrying enough troops to handle an invasion force, which is what they'd apparently been expecting. Hard to say, really, who had been the more surprised when the most they had to do was post patrols and find places to park since the carrier bay was half in pieces.

The door opened, and she entered, giving the three men at the end of the table a nod before she settled herself in the end chair facing them.

“Agent Drake.” Bensen Alters leaned on his elbows. “Thanks for coming to talk with us. I know it's been a long couple of days for you.”

“It has.” Jess said, resting her own elbows on the table. Her nerves had finally returned to normal and she'd gotten enough med to function at least until this part was over. She was tired, and wanted her bed, and she suspected that showed.

“You doing all right, Drake? I saw you logged into med earlier.”

Jess nodded. “Got caught by three deflected blasters.” She said. “Rang my brain out.”

She'd been the first they'd called, as she'd figured. She was the senior agent in charge, after all, regardless even of the other position Bain had dangled in front of her. Now, having to face these men, she was glad she hadn't officially accepted it.

Alters cleared his throat. “This is John Bezette, and Jason Elk.” He introduced the other two. “Fleet captains.”

“Agent.” Elk nodded at her. “Your father and I went to the academy together.”

Jess nodded back. “Pretty much everyone in the corps has gone to something or other with some part of my family.” She admitted wryly. “I have yet to meet a long termer who doesn't have no shit I was there stories about one or the other of us.”

Elk smiled briefly, lifting a hand in acknowledgment.

“When we got your message, there were many who found it very hard to believe.” Alters said. “In fact, quite a few people thought it was a trick, aimed at luring us in to a trap.”

“I can imagine that.” Jess agreed. “Especially if that was the first you were hearing of problems out here.”

Alters nodded. “Exactly.”

Elk looked around. “Based on what we can see here, that message got out just in time.”

Jess nodded again. “Not really sure where to start.” She said. “But I guess I should begin with advising you that Alexander Bain is dead.”

The three men exchanged glances.

“I killed him.” Jess continued, after a brief pause. “When he informed us that he intended to turn over this facility into enemy hands, and that he was working on their behalf to overturn not only this organization, but all of Atlantia.” She folded her hands. “There were five witnesses to that aside from myself, including Doctor Kurok, from LifeForce.”

Elk sighed. “Well, that's news.” He glanced at Alters. “Carlsen was right. He's going to be insufferable.”

Alters stood up. “What I am about to say is probably going to surprise you, Drake.” He said. “But you've done us a great service. Aside from responding to your SOS, my task here was to find Alex.” He looked profoundly relieved. “I'm damn glad he's dead. I wouldn't have known where to start asking him questions.”

Jess was, in fact, quite surprised to hear that. “You knew about his game?” She asked, cautiously.

Alters glanced at the two captains. “Just before your note came in we finished beating off an attack on the west coast facilities.” He said, quietly. “Now I understand what part that had to play in it. They draw us there, by the time we recover, they have a firm beachhead here.”

“Except they don't.” Jess remarked. “Somehow, we stopped them.”

“Somehow.” Elk smiled grimly.

“He killed Bricker.” She mentioned. “Bain, I mean.”

They stared at Jess. “John Bricker's dead?” Elk asked, after a startled pause.

Jess nodded. “First day Bain got here. Said he..” She shrugged. “Who the hell would question the old man? We all just took it for granted that he was trusted. Ops was sending notifies back to base, had no idea comm was looped and locked.”

Alters nodded. “Bricker was his nephew.” He saw Jess nod. “He told you that?” He watched her nod again. “We knew there was a leak here. He said he knew who it was.”

“Apparently he did. Intimately.” Jess responded dryly. “Bricker knew something too. He wanted to bring in techs from what he knew was an untainted source.”

“The bio alts.” Alters nodded. “That must have spooked Alex. According to the shuttle's records, he arrived on the same transport the test case did.”

“He certainly did.” Jess considered what a personal mixed blessing that had turned out to be. “Surprised the hell out of everyone but then, I was glad to see him.”

'Were you? Oh yes.” Alters looked at a bit of plas in his hands. “He reinstated you.. promoted you.. several times.” He looked up at Jess. “Definitely favored you.”

“Until I knifed him.” She smiled grimly. “He wasn't too happy with that, probably.”

Elk studied her. “If it all went bad, he was going to make you the leak.” He stated. “You had top creds here. His way out if it fell through.”

“Occurred to me.” Jess agreed quietly. “But we didn't much care about consequences at that point. Just dying right.”

Alters regarded the plas. “What was his game, really? What could they offer him that he didn't have on our side? He was the old man.”

“Mm” Jess nodded.

“He had power, status, his place in Picchu... unlimted resources. Unlimited access to contraband if he wanted it.. I don't get it.” Alters shook his head. “Why this? Why now?”

'Wish I knew.” Jess said. “What Bock told me... was that we'd already lost. That I was just postponing the inevitible.” She said, slowly. “Last couple times I was over there, they had more resources, seemed like they were doing better.”

“But how much of that was because he was undermining this side of our territory?” Elk countered.

“Hmph. True.” Alters said. “We'll have to dig in and find out what the deal is.”

“Lot of people were lost here.” Bezette spoke up for the first time, in a soft, slightly husky tone.

“Too many.” Jess said. “Far too damn many.”

“But it would have been far more if you hadn't come back, Agent.” Alters rebutted gently. “Tell you what. Let us review the centops security monitor feed, and then we can talk about what happens next.”

Jess nodded, and stood. “Fine.” She said. “I'll be in my quarters if you want me.” She headed for the door.

“Drake.” Alters called out.

Jess stopped, and paused at the door, her hand on the sill.

“What do you think now, about that whole bio alt thing?” The commander asked. “Seems like a crazy idea to us.”

Finally, Jess smiled a real smile back at them. “Best thing that ever happened to me.” She stated bluntly. “Bricker was right. You won't ever get something like me from that, but I wouldn't trade my tech for any other on the planet.” She hit the door latch and went through it, leaving them three men behind.

“Huh.” Elk mused. “Didn't expect that answer.” He glanced at Alters. “Want to have a talk with this thing while the comp is spooling?”

“I do.” Alters said, in a musing tone. “I really do.”

**

Dev entered the room with Doctor Dan at her heels, his hand planted firmly on her shoulder. She paused on seeing the three men sitting there, then she went to the table and sat down.

“I think we just intended to see Tech NM-Dev-1.” Alters said, mildly.

“I never paid attention to anyone else's intentions before. I'm not aiming to start now.” Doctor Dan took a seat next to Dev and folded his hands. “Dev can speak for herself, but if you think you're going throw an interrogation at her, you've got me to deal with.”

“Oh we do?” Alters stared at him in fascination. “And you are...?”

“Ah.” Doctor Dan leaned back and hiked one knee up, circling it with his hands. “Currently? Daniel J. Kurok, Chief geneticist and senior administrator of LifeForce, Bio station 2.”

“Ah.” Alters nodded and sat down, as though that explained Kurok's presence. “You made her.”

“I did.” Kurok agreed. “But more to the point, I”m legally responsible for Dev.”

“I'm sure you have all your legalities in place, Doctor, but this is really an Interforce matter.” Elk said, politely.

“Ah.” Kurok mimicked Alters earlier grunt. “Well in that case, consider me DJ Kurok, senior tech, Field class 32.” He smiled at them. “Alex was kind enough to recommission me, to make traveling the halls easier. I didn't think he expected the eventual outcome of that.” He pointed at his collar. “So these aren't fake. I earned them the hard way.”

The three officers stared at him for a moment in silence. “Well.” Alters finally said. “I guess you can stay then, since it's likely we're not going to make you leave.”

Doctor Dan smiled his gentle smile at them. “Brilliant answer. Carry on.”

Dev had been sitting quietly, listening to it all. She found herself extremely glad to have her mentor at her side, and it was very interesting to hear him speak about both of his identities. “Thanks, Doctor Dan.”

He patted her hand. “Now, go on. Ask away.” He instructed Alters. “I assume you haven't seen the sec vid yet or we probably would not be bothering with this session.”

“It's spooling.” Elk agreed. “We really just wanted to talk to her about her experience here.”

Dev folded her hands. “I have had an excellent experience here.” She stated. “I've gotten to do a great deal of work, and I think my participation has been a positive one.” She cleared her throat. “Where would you like me to start?”

The three officers exchanged looks again. “Well.” Alters cleared his own throat. “How about at the beginning?”

**

“Holy shit.” Elk turned and looked at Alters as the door closed behind their erstwhile interviewees. “Is she for real?”

“Can't wait to see those vids.” Alters had his chin resting on his fist. “She's a lot smarter than I thought she'd be. That's a serious brain in there.”

“No kidding.” Bezette mused. “I saw the original vids from the Gibraltar run. I thought it was a joke, you know? Someone screwed around with the recorder, but then we got the intel from the other side on the blowout. That kid can fly.”

“So Drake pegged it.” Alters chuckled. “Bricker was right. But can they duplicate that? She's a developmental, that doc said. A one off.”

“Guessing he can.” Elk said. “He knows what it takes better than anyone does. Better than any of us, anyway.” He shook his head. “DJ Kurok. Who'd have guessed? Never did know what happened to him after he mustered out.”

“You knew him back then?” Alters asked, curiously.

Elk shook his head. “Not so much. He was Justin Drake's tech. Justy raved about him. Never had another partner like him, from what he said, before he retired. Always thought there was a story there. Justy wasn't emotional about much but he always was about DJ.”

“He came from the other side.” Bezette spoke up. “That was the big deal about him – he got swiped as a juv in a capture in the dev station over there. They brought him over, someone had the big idea to see if he could be turned, put him in psych, they figured he might do for field school.”

“What?” Alters said. “From the other side? Were they nuts?”

“Nope, that's why they paired him with Justin.” Elk nodded. “Family bleeds Interforce colors, you know? Someone in psych told me there was no such thing as un-turnable but Drakes were the closest thing to it. Solid as granite to the point of pigheaded blind devotion to the cause.”

“Drake.” Bezette sighed. “Family full of wildcats and wide eyed insanity. Glad they kill on our side though, tell you what.”

“Tell you what.” Alters agreed. “So did Kurok turn out to be trustworthy?”

“Hm.” Elk drummed his thumbs on the table. “Now that I'm remembering all this... I think they weren't ever sure if he totally bought into the force, but what he did buy into was Justin Drake. So maybe it all worked out that way. He was a damn good tech, from what I heard.”

“Justin left a lot of enemies on that side.” Bezette stated. “He knew he had limited time out. Never cared, though. Too bad they got him – heard his shooter got a medal for it.”

“Based on these..” Alters held up the plas. “His kid paid them back for it in typical double Drake fashion.”

**

Jess was lying on her back in her bed, hands folded over her stomach and eyes closed when she heard Dev enter her own quarters next door.

It felt impossibly good to just be relaxing, having someone else be in charge of the chaos for a while. She was mildly curious as to what would end up happening to her, but where once that would have given her a gut ball of anxiety now she felt almost nothing about it.

Would they muster her? Jess doubted it. No matter what the ins and outs of what they'd been through she knew she'd done what she could and the bottom line was, the base was still intact, and still theirs.

So it would be, what it would be. Jess turned her head as the door between their quarters opened, and Dev entered. She came over and sat down on the edge of Jess's bed, and returned her smile. “Hello.”

“Hello, Devvie. You're a sight for sore eyes.”

Dev leaned closer. “Are your eyes sore too?” She asked in a concerned tone. “What does med do for that?”

Jess chuckled. “That's just one of those stupid archaic sayings, Dev. It means I'm glad to see you.” She reached out a hand and touched Dev's leg. “They grill ya?”

Dev eyed her. “You don't really mean cook, right?” She hazarded. “They asked me some questions. But Doctor Dan was there to keep it all straight. He told them they weren't allowed to be mean to me.”

“I like him more and more everyday.” Jess asserted. “They weren't mean to you, were they?”

Dev shook her head. “No. They asked me a lot about things here, and how I did tech, but they were all right.” She studied Jess' face. “I hope they let me stay.”

Anxiety from a completely different direction smacked Jess in the kisser. “Oh...wh. Wait.” She jerked up, propping her weight on her elbows. “What makes you think they won't?”

Dev blinked in some surprise. “Well, they said this was something that the man Bain had approved, and now.. “ She let the words trail off, seeing the alarm in her partner's face. “I think they thought I did good work, Jess.”

“Fuck.” Jess was now sitting bolt upright in bed. “They asked me how I felt about the project before I walked out of there and I told them it was the best thing that ever happened to me.” She ran her hands through her hair. “I didn't think those guys were that dense... let me go talk to..” She paused and looked at Dev, who had captured her fingers and was holding them. “What?”

“Really the best thing?”

Jess took a breath, then paused, caught by that husky whisper. “Um.” She felt a blush heat her cheeks unexpectedly. “Yeah.”

Dev exhaled slowly.

“So let me go talk to them.” Jess rolled up out of the bed and headed for the door, pausing when her comms lit. “Damn it.” She swerved the desk and hit the relay. “Drake.”

“Agent Drake? Alters voice filtered through. “We've done reviewing the vid. Can you come to the debrief room, please.”

Jess exhaled. “Sure” She clicked off. “C'mon. You come with me. We might as well find out our fates together.”

Dev scrambled to stand up and came over to join her willingly. “Will they get upset?”

“Don't care.” Jess took her hand and led her out the door, glad, in a sense that soon she'd know the worst, one way or the other. Dev leaving? Screw that. She'd go with her. Jess was pretty sure she could talk Kurok into taking her to station, if she had to.

It was only minutes walk and they were at the debrief, and she scanned them in. Alters was alone in the room, and he looked up as they entered. “Ah.” He said. “Agent Drake, I didn't expect...”

“This is my partner.” Jess stated, taking a seat and motioning Dev to do the same. “Deal with it.”

Alters studied both of them. Dev was wearing her tech's jumpsuit, with her insignia on the collar, and with the suit fastened all the way up, her collar was covered and invisible and as such, she and Jess looked like any other agent and tech pair he'd ever seen. “Okay.” He agreed mildly. “This won't take long anyhow.”

Jess folded her hands and waited.

'The vids conclusively back up what you told us.” Alters said. “In fact, they overtold the story. You left out a few things.” He added. “I have packaged them up, and squirted them back to HQ for their records and review.” He cleared his throat. “They will have to make the overall decisions on what happens to this base, and North base, in terms of personnel. I think you realize we can't let Alex's administrative appointments stand.”

Jess nodded “I expected that.” She stated.

“On the other hand, my rank does allow me to make field appointments and so, with the concurrence of central HQ, I will confirm you in your senior ranking.” Alters said. “Whether they will eventually appoint you further is out of my hands at this time.”

“I don't want any further appointment.”

Alters looked up from the plas in his hands at her. “At this time, I understand that.”

“At any time.” Jess stated clearly. “I don't want to be advanced in rank. I want to remain a field ops agent.”

“You could change your mind in the future, Drake.” Alters said in a mild tone. “Some of us did y'know.”

“I could.” Jess admitted. “But I probably won't”

“Probably not, if you've bred as true as these records indicate.” He smiled faintly. “But in any case, I have officially updated your records fleetwide to include your senior rank and so, I guess, congratulations are in order.”

“Thanks.” Jess nodded, and stopped, waiting. Since he didn't speak again, she turned her head and regarded Dev, then looked back at him, eyebrows lifting in question.

For a moment he paused, a puzzled expression on his face. Then it cleared. “Ah.” He shuffled the plas. “Doctor Kurok has agreed to pursue the continuance of the biological alternative technical program.” He

looked up at Dev. “Though it surprised the hell out of HQ, and no doubt will continue to confound many in the corps I agree with you in that this is a very valuable project that should be continued.”

Dev sat up a touch straighter, and her eyes brightened, but she remained silent.

Alters leaned forward “There is a matter of your legal contract.” He addressed Dev directly. “We have to sort that out. We can't have you beholden to an outside organization no matter how helpful they are. You understand?”

“Not really.” Dev said. “But as long as I get to stay with Jess I don't care.”

Alters blinked. “Ah.”

“I've got some ideas.” Jess said. “I'll talk to Kurok.”

“Ah.” Alters repeated. “We'll be leaving ten carriers and two destroyers behind.” He said. “HQ is sending cargo planes out with resupply and re-provisioning until you can get things sorted here.” He glanced at the plas again. “So the final thing I have to discuss, Drake, is a legal matter.”

Jess managed to stop internally bouncing with her own happiness long enough to focus on him. “Legal matter? You going to charge me with something?”

“No.” Alters bit off a grin of his own. “I wouldn't know where to start with that, given claims from various foreign agencies so we're going to ignore all that as we usually do. Our legal team in HQ will deal with damage quotes and the rest.”

Jess nodded. “Fine.”

“No, the legal issue is property allotment.” He folded his hands and looked at Jess. “You're not supposed to have any.”

She shrugged .”I don't.”

“You do.” Alters said. “It registered at HQ just prior to all this.” He circled his finger round the room. “You attained majority stake in Drake's Bay homestead.”

Jess blinked. “No I...” She paused. “Oh shit.” The exclamation issued from her as she realized. “My father coded his shares to me but that was only in the event I went civ.”

Alters nodded. “And for 36 minutes, Drake, you did.” He said, “When you processed final exit, until Bain had you rescind your resignation and were reinstated back in you were civ.”

Jess sat back, honestly dumbfounded. “Oh hell.” She finally blurted. “No way.”

“In fact, if Stephen Bock had, as Bain stated, killed you on exit, it would have been an illegal act and we'd have been liable for it.” Alters concluded. “Would have been damn messy, if your estate made a claim.”

Dev merely watched both of them, looking from Alters to her partner, unsure of what, really was going on.

“So what do I have to do?” Jess asked, after a long moment of silence. “My father did that, apparently, to keep the Bay out of the hands of my family .. or.. really my mother.” She said. “She's dead now.”

“We heard that.” Alters said. “I'm not really sure what you do with this. I assume you didn't know it was going to happen?”

Jess shook her head. “Didn't find out until I was at my mother's out-processing it was even in the cards.” She said. “Explains why my brother freaked out though. He must have gotten a notify... “ She paused in sudden realization. “And why he called me at base night after I came back in.”

And why she'd gotten that call, to attend her mother's out-processing. “Probably were waiting for me to say something. Make a claim.” She shook her head. “I had no fucking clue.”

“Huh.” He frowned. “I'll have to ask legal. But until then, you are the controlling shareholder of record.” He eyed her. “You might want to record a will in that case. Until it's sorted.”

Jess shook her head again. “Yeah, okay” She sighed. “What a mess.”

Alters' face twitched. “Pardon me if I don't sympathize.” He held up the stack of plas. “We're going to be sorting **this** mess out for months.” He stood up. “Well, Drake, good luck. Good work.” He added. “I'm sure commendations and rewards will be coming down the pipe after this is all processed.”

Jess dared a glance at her partner. “Got what I wanted.” She said, quietly. “Everything else is gravy.”

Dev grinned. “Me too.”

Alters shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Field ops.” He waved the stack of plas. “Dismissed, people. Go get a beer and a rest. You earned it.”

And finally, Jess felt that sensation of impending disaster ease, as she stood up and thought about just an ordinary night after what seemed like an eternity of standing on the edge of an abyss. “Sounds good. C'mon Dev. Where'd we leave off? Me teaching you to surf, right?”

“Right.” Dev agreed, as they left the debrief chamber and moved back out into the hall. “And you said you could do something with fish.”

“Ah, yes. My cooking skills that I bragged about. Right.”

“And maybe we can take another shower.”

“Sure.”

“And practice that sex thing again.”

Jess laughed, putting her arm around Dev's shoulders as they eased into the slowly growing traffic in the halls, as normal life started coming back around them.

**

It was understandably quiet in the lounge. Everyone was busy getting things back together, and time to relax and drink would be found later, after the biggest portion of the tasks had been completed. So that left the big room silent and mostly darkened, save a few tables in the back that were dimly lit and occupied.

“So.” Elk put down his beer and gazed at the quiet, blond man across from him. “You're going to go back?”

“Yes.” Dan Kurok rested his hands on his stomach, letting out a brief, tired sigh. “I think I've done enough for a while here, eh?” His eyes twinkled gently. “Don't you?”

The carrier squad commander lifted his glass and tipped it slightly in Kurok's direction. “As you say.” He stretched his legs out, glancing around at the room. “Take a while to get back to normal around here. They lost a lot of people, not to mention what happened at North.”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan's face grew somber. “But if you look at it another way, it's a chance at a fresh start here.” He steepled his fingers together. “I get the feeling there was contention even before what happened with tech Joshua.”

Elk grunted.

“Drake's good.” Kurok said, after a brief pause.

“You'd say that, of course.” Elk responded, mildly.

“I would. “ Doctor Dan smiled gently. “But I would even if her father hadn't been my partner.” He exhaled “And a good friend.”

“Happens I agree.” The carrier commander said. “I knew Justin. His kid's better, if those vids are any indication. More driven, more flexible. To have snookered Bain?” He snorted lightly and shook his head. “She took him like a neo.”

“She did.” Kurok smiled more broadly. “Took me, for that matter. Maybe Alex bought her story because he saw my face. I was.. “He shook his head. “She hit every button I had.”

“I saw.” Elk smiled. “And she keyed in that nomad female. Don't ask me how. Didn't say a thing, and that kid just knew. Lot of potential there.”

“Mm.” Doctor Dan sighed. “But the second I saw her start to go, I knew. Same body motion as Justin going for a kill.” He gazed pensively across the room. “Damn I still miss him.”

“I think he missed us.” Elk said. “Damn pity what happened to him. After this, I'm wondering if that wasn't something that didn't just happen. Wasn't just them getting lucky, and getting a bead on him.”

“I sure hope not.” Doctor Dan responded quietly. He picked up his glass and sipped from it. “He was too good for that. There had to be effort behind it.”

Elk studied him. “Wasn't much effort behind the revenge for that, apparently.”

A brief, grim smile appeared on the scientist's face. “They'd forgotten. I hadn't.” He answered. “You should have seen the look on Tagaron's face when he realized. Been a very long time since I broke a neck.” He flexed his hands a little. “Glad I remembered how.”

Elk drummed his fingers on the table, a look of distracted memory on his own face. “Surprised you got a rescue?”

“Oh yes..” Doctor Dan agreed, with a more relaxed grin. “When I heard all the bells going off I thought to myself, well, hang on then, what's all this for one overage wingnut without so much as a table knife running round?” He started chuckling, and Elk joined him. “Of course I”m laughing now, but it was definitely a relief to look out from under a pileup and see those kids causing chaos all around me.”

“Good people.”

“The best.” Kurok said. “Even if I do say so myself seeing as I made one of them.”

“Ah well.” Elk sighed. “We estimate they can put a shuttle in here in about a week. Can you stand being stuck here that long? I can take you back to Rainer Island and get on there if you like.”

“No, a week is fine.” The blond haired man said. “Give me a chance to say farewell to Dev, and see if I can do anything more to help here.”

Elk nodded. “Make more like her, and that's a real opportunity for change, DJ.” He said somberly. “Some real potential there.” He stood up and dusted his hands off. “Then if I can't offer you a ride, I'm going to get my people ready to head back. There's a lot of commotion about this at HQ, and I can only imagine how many meetings I”m going to have to attend over it.”

Doctor Dan waved his hand genially at him. “Safe trip.” He said, watching the man leave, before he dropped his hand to his thigh and exhaled.

Around him he could hear the faint rumbling hum of the power generators, and he took in a breath tinged with the scent of salt, and machine oil and electrons, so peculiar to this place. So different than the station. He let his thumb rub over the fabric of the jumpsuit he was wearing, deep green in color, once as familiar to him as his own skin.

After a moment, the door to the lounge opened, and Jess entered. She paused and looked around, spotting him in the back and heading over towards him.

He had to smile. The tall, lanky frame was so like Justin's, save the differences of sex. Jess had the same way of walking, and the same way of holding her shoulders. He watched her until she came right up next to him then gestured to the seat Elk had recently abandoned. “Hello there.”

“Hi.” Jess sat down. “Scan said you were in here. Thought I'd stop by to see how you were.”

Even the vocal timbre was Justin's. “Oh, just fine thanks. Can I buy you a beer?” He leaned back, feeling a sense of relaxation at her presence. “Getting things back together?”

“As they can be. “ Jess said, looking up and catching the eye of the bio alt server, and nodding at him. “Gonna take a while.”

“Mm.”

Jess held out the package she'd been carrying. “Thought you might like this.” She said “Sea jacket, and some stuff of my dad's they sent me.”

Startled, he reached out and took it without thinking, putting it down on the table. “Thanks.” He said, after a brief pause. “You didn't have to do that.

“No.” Jess agreed, smiling as the bio alt came over and handed her a mug of beer. “Dev likes this, y'know.” She indicated the beverage. “She's a hoot.”

That brought a smile to Doctor Dan's face and distracted him from the package. “I would accuse you of trying to corrupt her but I started that process the night we left the station.” He admitted. “I wanted to make sure she was exposed to a little vice before she got here.”

Jess chuckled. “She's done okay. I took her to Jonton's in Quebec City and introduced her to hopping shrimp.”

“Ahh.” Kurok's eyes lit up a bit. “Now that, I miss. Even given all the product we have on station, I remember those shrimp.” He licked his lips in memory. “And Jonton. Quite a character.”

Jess leaned back in her chair and hiked one boot up over onto her knee. “I hear you're going to make more of her.”

Kurok studied his glass for a moment, then he looked up and met Jess's eyes. “I'm going to design a production set, for operations technical.” He said. “But there'll never be another one of her.”

Jess nodded. “Too much of you in there?” She ventured, seeing a sharpening of those pale eyes. “C'mon doc, look in the mirror.”

A moment of delicate balance, then Kurok smiled, and his expression softened. “For a minute I almost forgot who I was talking to.” He said. “Yes, I contributed a few spirals to Dev. But she's turned out to be her own construct. She's grown so much just in the short time she's been here I hardly recognize her anymore. Her integration went so much further than I had reason to anticpate.”

“Uh huh.”

“So yes, I will create techs for Interforce.” Doctor Dan said. “Who knows? Maybe I'll figure out how to make some of your type too.” His eyes twinkled at her. “I have some Drake DNA up there, somewhere I'm sure and now that I know about those gills of yours I want to have a closer look at it.”

Jess's expressions sobered, though. “Oh, doc.” She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “You don't want to do that.” She exhaled. “After all, what would they do with us then? Give us a shot of trank and out-process us at age six?” She saw his face go still. “We all know what the battery is.”

“Jess.”

“We know.” She shrugged a little. “We know it finds the misfits. The psychos.” Her voice took on a slight huskiness. “The serial killers. The twisted loners. Finds the kids with no conscience and prone to violence.” She looked up and met his eyes. “Finds them and separates them out and gives them to Interforce.”

Kurok exhaled, looking into those calm, resigned blue eyes.

“Hey it gives us structure and discipline.” Jess's tone turned a bit mocking. “Make us feel special, and trusted and noble right up to the point they put a gun to your head at grad and you either go in, or go down” She glanced off into the distance. “When you find out what kind of monster you really are.”

Doctor Dan had put his cup down, and leaned forward towards her, resting his elbows on his knees so his hands were very close to Jess's. “Except they're wrong.”

Her lips twitched. “You know better than that.”

“I do.” He spoke gently. “I know better. I'm a geneticist now, Jess. I study humanity for a living.” He reached out and touched Jess's fingers. “More to the point, I was able to study someone like you at very close quarters for quite some time. Trust me. Your father was no monster, and neither are you.”

Jess reluctantly met his gaze.

“You have too much heart.” He smiled gently. “You care too much, Jess, and you love too easily.” He saw the blush, and closed his hand around hers. “That's the only reason I agreed to leave Dev here. I trust her with you.”

They were both quiet for a bit. “Push comes to shove, they don't want you to have hooks in her.” Jess said, in a serious tone.

“Reasonable.” Doctor Dan admitted. “But I won't transfer her legal status to Interforce.” He stated. “I trust you. Not necessarily them.”

“No, you wouldn't.. and shouldn't.” Jess's eyes took on a glint. “But you might consider transferring her contract to the controlling stakeholder of a long established settlement.”

Kurok studied her warily. “What settlement?” He asked, in a puzzled tone.

“Drake's Bay.”

“Dr..” Doctor Dan leaned forward and stared intently at her. “And the other half of this story is??? I know how they feel about bio alts at the Bay, Jesslyn. I was surprised you took her there.”

“She's my partner.”

Kurok shrugged one shoulder. “Yes, of course.” He admitted. “That would matter but I still don't understand.”

Jess signaled the server. “That'll take another round.” She said. “It's a quirky string of circumstances.” She cleared her throat. “And a delicate piece of timing.”

Kurok laughed gently. “Now I know I”m talking to a Drake.” He shook his head, and set his glass down, folding his arms and waiting. “Quirky is the only kind of circumstance they have.”

**

Dev wiggled her toes in contentment, turning a page of her book as she lay comfortably on the couch in her quarters. She had a cup of hot tea by her elbow, and a pad nearby showing the ops consoles, and it felt very very good to just relax for a while.

She had one of her off duty jumpsuits on, and she'd had herself another shower, and she'd actually gotten a chance to order some resupply on top of it, though she didn't expect to happen until they got all the rest of the citadel sorted out.

The agents and officers who had come from HQ were standing watches, and at the moment she thought he man Alters was the one who was in charge.

Everyone still seemed to be looking to Jess for answers though, and Dev thought that was good, and right, and that Jess was enjoying it. After all, she managed to fend off the whole bunch of bad guys by herself and as April had said, it was a trust thing.

So funny, really since she'd been brought here specifically to address a trust thing, hadn't she?

Dev read a few pages, then she put the book down, and folded her hands on her stomach, gazing quietly at the ceiling of her relaxation area. So much had happened since then.

Doctor Dan had spoken to her. Dev still felt a warm sensation thinking about it, he'd praised her so much she hadn't even known what to say after a bit. She felt like she'd really just tried to do her best with everything, but he seemed to think she'd overrun even the highest expectations he'd had for her programming.

So awesome.

Dev stretched luxuriously and settled back onto her couch, then glanced up at her door as it opened and Jess entered. “Hello, up here.”

“Devvvieieeee!” Jess surprisingly gamboled up the steps and pounced on the couch, nearly bowling both of them off it and onto the floor. “What are you up to?”

Dev goggled wide eyed at her. “Um.” She she looked around “Up to my relaxation space?”

Jess rolled off onto the floor and stretched out on the padded surface, extending her long legs out and crossing them at the ankles. “Just visited Jason. He's gonna be all right.”

“Oh. I'm really glad to hear that.” Dev sat up and regarded her supine partner. “Brent was worried.”

“Yeah me too.” Jess admitted. “Looks like most of the support staff's checked in and most of the bios too. Things are coming back into normal trim.”

“The sets really liked being on comms.” Dev ventured. “And also, helping defend this place. They're really excited about what they did.”

“They and the mechs saved our asses.” Jess agreed. “Maybe we can... “ She paused. “I talked to Alters. We'll see what happens.”

“Excellent.” Dev tucked her legs up under her and rested her elbows on her knees, looking down at Jess. “Maybe you could speak to them? They think you're amazing.”

Jess pointed her thumb at her own chest. “Me?”

Dev looked around the space. “Yes.” She said. “Did you think there was someone else I was referring to?” She watched her partner twiddle her thumbs. “You seem in good spirits.”

“It's been a good day, in the end.” Jess's eyes twinkled gently. “I got what I wanted.”

“Me too.” Dev smiled at her.

The comm crackled over head. “Ops to Drake.”

“Ah, work is never done.” Jess rolled over and punched the commset on Dev's console, tapping in the keys for ops. “Drake here.”

It was April's voice. “Theres an assembly in the mess, requesting your presence.”

“Ah huh.” Jess pondered that. “All right. Be over shortly.”

“Ack.”

Comms clicked off. Jess and Dev regarded each other. “Wonder what that's all about?” Jess sat up. “You better come with me. I might need some asses kicked.”

“Jess.” Dev sounded adorably exasperated. “I would never do that to the people here.”

“Hey they all saw you tossing those janks around.” Jess said. “Maybe we should see if we can build one of those grav gyms here. Ya think?”

“I think you will not like it at all.” Dev said mournfully as they went down the steps and towards the door. “It's difficult.”

“Bet they put up with it if they end up being able to seriously kick ass like that.”

It was comforting to see the halls full of people, and the lights at normal levels. Dev kept up with Jess's long strides as they angled through the central corridors heading for the mess, and she realized that she not only saw more bio alts than she had before they now seemed to be going out of their way to make eye contact with her.

She straightened up a little and reached up to make sure her insignia were adjusted correctly, just as they got to the door to the mess and passed inside.

There were a bunch of people inside. April and Mike, Doug and Chester, wearing a plas bandage and an arm sling, Brent and Tucker, Elaine, all the ops personnel who had been with them on the rescue and the return.

“Hi.” Elaine said, as soon as the door closed, and the low hum of conversation died. “So, Jess, I got bushwhacked and asked about burns.” She got straight to the point. “As in, when can we get them.”

“Ah.” Jess understood now what was up. “I see.” She perched on one of the tables, regarding the small crowd. “So what's the question?”

April cleared her throat. “We'd like to get our first.” She indicated Mike and herself. “And our partners wanted them too.”

“I explained techs don't get them.” Elaine stated. “It's not reg.”

“Well.” Jess folded her arms. “It used to be reg.” She said, in a mild tone. “Back in my dad's day, apparently.”

“His ghost come back and tell you that?” Elaine responded, in an equally mild tone.

“No.” Jess chuckled. “We saw the doc with his shirt off. He's got them.” She said. “And.. matter of fact, Dev's got one too.” She regarded her partner, who had quietly taken a seat at one of the tables. “I think if it's going to be a tradition, it should be one for everyone who thinks it means something, not just agents. Techs do scary things and get hurt too.”

Doug positively beamed at her. Chester pointed at his arm in silence.

“That your call?” Elaine asked. “You're senior.”

They all turned to Jess and waited.

Jess kicked the floor a bit with her boot. “You know.” She said, not looking at anyone, really. “We all took a big hit in the trust department here lately. For a little while, I wasn't sure of anyone. That's a really crappy feeling.”

“Was crappy for us too.” Brent spoke up from the corner. “What Josh did. Colored all of us.” He indicated himself and Tucker. “Everyone looking cross at us, wasn't fair.”

“No, it wasn't.” Elaine agreed. “We knew that.”

“Probably got some people killed.” Tucker said, quietly. “Sure got Sandy killed. I did the recon on her comp spool – she took the stick from Nappy. Didn't trust him flying and it bit them.”

Jess nodded. “I think.. some of what was really going on was a.. and attack from within.” She felt her way with a slight hesitation, the ideas forming unexpectedly. “Separating techs and agents. Making the culture different. Stopping that.” She touched her arm. “Making agents compete.”

“Huh.” Elaine murmured. “Fractured.” She added thoughtfully.

Jess nodded.

“I felt isolated.” Elaine said, suddenly. “Especially after what happened with Josh... but you're right, Jess. It started before that.”

“Right. So.” Jess straightened up. “Well, what we just went through... when we were in there, anyone think about trusting?”

April and Mike looked at each other, then at their techs. “We trusted you.” April answered. “And I don't really have an explanation for that, because we barely knew you, and everything was going to crap.”

“Sometimes, I guess, maybe, you just trust the gut check.” Jess acknowledged. “Like I did with Dev. I had no real reason to believe. It was ridiculous. A tech given the knowledge in a week you all get in years in field school. “ She looked at her partner. “But something in me said, yeah, okay. This is all right.” She reached over and ruffled Dev's hair. “And Dev went all in.”

Dev cleared her throat, slightly embarrassed by the intense attention.

“So anyway” Jess said. “If you want a mark, get one. For that last one, we should all get the same.” She unfastened her jumpsuit at the neck and peeled it down off one arm, exposing the marks there. “I'll go first.”

Elaine stood up. “I'm in.” She said. “And I know Jase will want one.”

Jess looked at Dev.

“Absolutely.” Dev responded, with a smile. “That was amazing work.”

“I want one.” Brent leaned on the table with both hands. “I always did.” He added, with a slight flush. “And y'know.. maybe people like Clint might want in too.”

Jess smiled, as the group closed in on her. “Get on comm then, and ask him.” She glanced at Dev. “Give your buddy a buzz. Long as we're all being crazy, he might want in for old time's sake.”

“Better go to med and grab a tub of cream then.” Tucker commented. “Gonna need it.”

**

A week later, and the citadel was returning to normal, as normal as it could be given what happened.

“That really got out of hand.” Jess observed, as she stood on the landing platform in the carrier bay, watching a newly fabricated roof panel get set in place.

“What did?” April asked. The young agent was standing next to her, observing the product of seven days worth of all hands on deck labor in the busy, now cleaned and partially reconstructed service bay. All of the wreckage had been removed and fused together, set on the cliff side as a marker of sorts.

Twelve pads were active, the ten HQ had sent, and the two remaining undestroyed ones, including Dev's, parked on the far pad near the big service console.

Jess gestured towards a group of working mechs, all in jumpsuits that were missing one sleeve, baring shoulders that all bore a reddened burned design in them. “I mean, c'mon.”

April smiled, refraining from rubbing her own arm. “Y'know something?” she said.

“Figure I'm about to.”

“We do that.” April said. “Not a burn, but this.” She unfastened the neck of her suit and pulled it down enough to expose her collarbone. Just below it, there was an intricate colored pattern pressed into her skin. “From my people.”

Jess studied it. “Why?”

“Makes us all a part of something.” April responded readily. “No matter how we squabble, you know? We do, yeah??” she said. “So I think we won that round with everyone who was here, and we all have that in common. So this.” She pointed at her arm. “People want to say, I was there. I took part. I put it on the line.”

Jess nodded. “Yeah. I get that.”

April eyed her briefly in silence. “So let me ask. You ever think about going with Bain?” She asked. “Even for a second?”

A faint smile appeared on the taller agents face. “Nah. I'm a Drake.” She stated easily. “One trait that's common to all of us is pigheaded stubborn pride the likes of which would blow your eyeballs out.” She turned to look at April. “I was the one that trusted Bain. It was my mess to clean up.”

It was April's turn to nod. “Yeah, I get that.”

Jess chuckled. “C'mon.” She turned and retreated back towards the service hatch. “Doc's about to leave. Let's go say goodbye.”

“Too bad he's leaving. Good people.”

“The best. But I bet he'll be back.”

**

It was cold, and raining outside. Dan Kurok stood quietly watching through the blast proof glass portal as the shuttle very slowly settled itself into position on the pad ramp. The rockets fluttered closed, and the locks fastened, off-gassing filling the space around the shuttle as a team of bio alt mechs started forward with ground umbilicals.

He sighed. It was hard to quantify really how he felt. In one sense, it was good to know that things had stabilized and he felt satisfied to go back to station and get on with things.

In another sense, though, he had grown, again, unexpected roots in this place and there was a part of him that really didn't want to go.

Dev was part of that, of course. But the truth was, he now admitted privately, that as long as he'd spent on station, and how rewarding that career was, it had never developed any sense of family in him anywhere near what the feeling was he'd experienced in the last few weeks here.

Maybe you never could really get the corps out of you. Doctor Dan exhaled, and put his fingertips against the glass, leaning forward slightly. He was going to miss the sets here, and the techs and agents who had accepted him, and the easy familiarity he'd encountered in the past seven days.

He would miss that, and the camaraderie of those who understood what sacrifice was and who had seen the things he'd seen and done things he remembered doing that he shared with no one at all on station.

They couldn't even fathom it, up there. He couldn't talk to anyone up there like he'd talked to Elk, even attempting it would cause nervous breakdowns and screaming in the halls. He sighed again, watching his breath fog the glass, a little.

Ah well.

A sound behind him made him turn, seeing the inner security hatch open and a crowd of bodies appear. Jess was in the lead, her arm draped over Dev's shoulders, but around and behind her were all the techs and all the agents, and behind them, the sets and mechs he'd led in his small part in the battle.

His heart ached, in truth, seeing them. He'd rather been hoping they'd be too occupied to notice his leaving. “Ah.”

Dev slipped free of Jess's grip and ran to him, throwing her arms around him and giving him a ferocious hug. “Oh Doctor Dan! I wish you weren't leaving. I'll miss you.”

He returned the hug, his eyes meeting Jess's over Dev's shoulder. “I'll miss you too, Dev.” He released her, but kept an arm around her as she turned and the rest arrived. “And I'll miss the rest of you too. It's been quite an experience we shared.”

“It has been for sure.” Clint responded. “Too bad you're going to miss the party tonight.”

“Mm.” Doctor Dan's eyes twinkled. “I am sorry about that, but my head probably isn't if I remember those parties as well as I think I do.”

“Hehehe.” Elaine let out a low laugh. “You do.”

Jess had her hands in her pockets, her black duty suit outlining her tall frame. “You should come visit again soon.” She said, a smile shaping her lips. “Or maybe we'll come visit you.”

Doctor Dan pictured in his head the hysterical reaction to that invasion and smiled his gentle smile back. “I think that would be an excellent idea.” He responded mildly. “Especially when we start developing the advanced programming for Dev's successors.” He glanced fondly at her. “Though we're going to have to really work at matching you.”

Dev smiled in obvious delight. “Please say hello to everyone at the creche for me.” She said. “Especially Gigi.”

“I will.” He promised.

The outer hatch unsealed and opened, and a blast of cold, wet, salty air tinged with rocket fuel gusted against them. A man in the bright blue oversuit of the interspace crew entered, looking around. “Kurok, Daniel J?”

“That's me.” Doctor Dan waved at him.

“Please board.” The man said. “We are off schedule.”

“Ah. I see the customer service is as spectacular as always.” Doctor Dan released Dev and started forward, only to be intercepted by the gang of Interforce personnel, each of whom offered a hand shake, or a pat on the arm, or from the anxiously waiting sets, a timid embrace.

It was almost overwhelming, and it ended with a swirl of motion and then Jess was closing her arms around him in a rush of energy new, and strange, and yet echoing with remembered familiarity. “Both of you take care.” He uttered softly. “You hear me, Jesslyn?”

“You too.” Jess answered, as she released him and stepped back. “C'mon. We'll walk you onboard.”

The interspace loader scrambled out of the way as the gang of them filed through the hatch, out into the icy rain falling around the shuttle, escorting his passenger until they reached the ramp, and he went up alone, pausing the top to turn and wave goodbye before he disappeared inside.

Dev sighed, her eyelashes blinking to shed the raindrops. “Bye, Doctor Dan.”

Jess gave her a one armed hug, then turned and motioned the crowd to go back inside. “We'll see him again.” She predicted confidently. “Maybe sooner than you think.”

The hatch closed behind them, and the rest of the crowd dispersed, but Dev and Jess went to the window and stood there, watching until the shuttle's engines fired, and it rumbled back off the ground into the sky.

**

It was still raining, though the darkness kept it to just a sound on the edges of the dome overhead as the assembly space filled with bodies.

The ramp doors were open, and everyone was wandering in, a mixture of ranks and specialties in a swarm of colored uniforms.

The mess had been restored to the point where it could offer crocks and basins of the basics, and just to one side of the food line was a cluster of black and dark green clad bodies, sprawled on the multi level stone platforms that led up eventually to the dais.

The newcomers sent from HQ mixed with what was left of Base 10's ops teams, personalities already emerging and polite conversation devolving into mild trash talk that even so, barely had a sting.

So Jess and Dev, along with April and Doug and Mike and Chester, Elaine and Tucker, and a carefully wrapped up and still pale Jason and Brent were in a crowd of newcomers, Jeff and his partner Able, and Donna and her tech Caroline, both veterans along with eight other pairs who were waiting to hear if the assignment was going to be permanent.

“S'better here than back west.” Jeff was saying. “Room to make a mark, y'know?”

“True.” Donna agreed. “It's like starting new. Just need to find out if we'll stay here, or be part of the North team.”

“Other side makes a move, we'll be the front lines.” Elaine reminded them. “It's not a picnic.”

“Can we have another picnic?” Dev softly asked Jess, whose head was resting on her leg.

“Sure.” Jess opened one eye and regarded the crowd of ops teams. “No it's no picnic but where in the corps is?”

“Exactly.” Jeff nodded. “Least we'll see action here.”

A stir got their attention, and across the room Bensen Alters was walking up to the podium as the lights brightened a little to focus the attention on it.

Jess sat up and swung her legs off the platform, bracing her hands on the edge of it as Dev scooted over a little. “So now let's see what we're in for.”

Alters had been acting commander for the week, and proved himself to be a calm and laid back presence who focused on returning the citadel to functionality and handle the logistics of the repair teams and materials that had been flown in.

Jess had found herself hoping they made his a permanent assignment. She didn't know who the other candidates might be though. HQ and Alters had left her pretty much alone the whole week as though hoping it would all fade into the past and let normality take over again.

It was almost a bit of a let down kind of feeling. She'd at least expected to get a request to submit a report, or something.

But no, nothing.

Maybe they'd reviewed everything again, and decided she was a cock up after all. That she should have seen through Bain earlier. Or something.

Alters cleared his throat and the sound in the room died down as everyone turned to listen to him. “Good evening people.” He said. “I'll make this brief since this is a time to relax and celebrate for a few hours.”

That didn't sound so bad. Jess picked up her mug and took a drink from it. Maybe they hadn't decided yet about anything.

“I've just got a few announcements.” Alters said. “First off, a final assignment of command has not yet been made here. So you will be stuck with me for a while longer.”

“Heh.” Jess chuckled. “Bet they want to see how he does.”

“Sounds right.” Elaine had settled next to her. “He's all right.”

“Secondly, it has been decided that North base will not be revitalized at this time.” He went on. “At least until we have more personnel available. The recent past has left us a little shy of that.”

“That's not good news.” Elaine muttered.

“To address this, we have opened up a staffing review.” Alters said. “New announcements will be made as warranted on that. We are also reviewing the possibility of renewing our base at the Pole.”

“Oh shit. Please don't let us go there. “Jeff moaned. “I saw that report.”

“So until any of that changes, this facility will be the eastern vanguard and as such, the decision has been made to do a refresh of the battlements, and add some new weapons systems now under development.”

“Ah. Good.” Jess nodded. “I like that.”

Alters cleared his throat again. “HQ has informed me commendations and citations are in transmit. Likely those of you affected will have something in queue by tomorrow morning.”

“So far, so good.” April commented.

“However, I would like to announce just one of them now.”

The ops group all turned and looked at Jess. “If this isn't for you, I'm limping out.” Jason said. “Dripping blood all the way back to my quarters. I swear it.”

Jess shrugged. “I don't need any useless commendations.”

“That's not the point. Take the respect.” Elaine retorted. “Don't be an ass.”

Jess didn't particularly think she was being an ass. There had just been so many people who pitched in, she didn't feel her own role had been that important. But she waited in silence as an officer brought a box up to Alters, and put it on the podium in front of him.

“Oh ho, bet I know what that is.” Jason joked weakly. “Definitely for you Jessie.”

“Crap.” Jess sighed, as she realized what he was talking about. “Shoot me now.”

“In the long tradition of Interforce.” Alters said. “We only have a few.. a really very few physical citations. We mostly like to give you all comforts and bonuses, as you all well know.”

Now everyone was looking back at Jess, as she covered her eyes with one hand, a faint hum of chuckles rising in the room.

'Two of our physical citations are posthumous.” Now Alters was looking across the platforms with the start of a smile. “The third is the oldest, and can only be given to an active member, and it's purpose is to acknowledge not number of enemies destroyed, or successful missions but instead to celebrate the ideals of gallantry, of nobility and the old fashioned notion of heroism.”

“Please tell me this isn't happening.” Jess muttered under her breath. “Someone call an alert.”

“Is.. “ Dev looked profoundly confused. “Something wrong?”

“Oh Jessie. You poor thing.” Jason was leaning against the wall, holding his arm to his side, but grinning at her.

Alters cleared his throat again. “This citation is remembered best for it's first recipient, and though it hasn't been given in at least four generations as it happens today we'll award it to that recipient's direct blood descendant. Jesslyn Drake, please c'mon up here and get this thing.”

Jess wasn't really sure how to react. She could hear the thunderous applause, and feel the hands patting her back and pushing her forward. She got control of her body and shook off the hands, but kept her own grip on Dev. “C'mon. You're coming up there with me if I have to go get it.”

Dev had absolutely no idea what was going on, but she obediently stayed at Jess's side as they climbed up to the top platform amidst the cheering crowd until they were at Alter's side, and he was opening up the box and taking something out of it.

“I know you probably want to kill me.” Alters muttered.

“No one wants to have to live up to this.” Jess muttered back. “It's a millstone.”

“Maybe.” Alters carefully sorted out the bright metal chain and stepped forward. “But I didn't argue with them when they said to give it to ya.”

With a silent sigh, Jess ducked her head and felt the links settle over her neck, as Alters gently laid the medal on her chest. She could see the delicate lattice of the backgound, and the stolid five pointed star, and the ring of letters around the edges of it.

She felt Dev shift and looked over at her, finding her inspecting her new decoration.

“It's pretty.” The bio alt said after a moment. “Why do you think it's incorrect?”

“Tell ya later.” Jess muttered.

“Try to bear up under the horror of it all, Drake.” Alters whispered. “Say thanks, and go and get drunk.” He patted her on the shoulder, then faced the crowd. “People – I give you our history's sixth recipient, and the fourth of the same name, of the Star of Valor.”

With a long exhale, Jess turned and faced the room, accepting the applause and the whistles, and trying not to think about how red her face had to be. She clasped her hands behind her back and waited for the noise to die down, then cleared her throat self-consciously.

All those eyes looking back at her. “So I guess the first rounds on me, huh?” Jess said, before she could really think of what she wanted to say. She let the resulting laughter relax her though, and then felt a touch on her arm that was Dev and that made her relax even more. “I don't think I did anything for this that everyone else here didn't do.” She said. “I just was the unlucky one whose name was on the reports. So thanks.” She considered. “Let's go party.”

Another roar of applause, and then she was free to leave and she did, tugging Dev along with her as she escaped back to the platform and a big mug being held out to her, hands slapping her back, and a big crowd gathering to admire her star.

She would spend the night in self deprecation and hopefully get drunk enough to forget about it. Jess accepted the clink of mugs against hers. Maybe later, though, there'd be a moment for her to look at herself in the mirror with the damn thing on and not feel like such a dork about it.

Maybe.

**

The shuttle docked to station with the usual graceful twisting drift, locking on and grappling with a jostling clang as the ship came into rotation and returned gravity to the people inside the vessel.

“Docking secure. Releasing restraints.” The cold voice echoed softly on comm.

Dan Kurok shouldered his bag, pausing with a grimace to swing the bag to his other shoulder and shake his head as he went to the hatch and waited for the green access light to go on. “Contagious insanity. Must have been. I wasn't consciously that idiotic, was I?”

Why yes, yes he had been.

The light went on, and a chime sounded, and he depressurized the hatch and opened it, getting a puff of clean and engineered air into his lungs as he walked down the passage and into station, into a world of light, and sand colors and space that had once been totally familiar to him but now seemed a little strange.

A little off, his eyes missing the tint of granite, and the smell of salt on the back of his tongue.

“Daniel!” Randall Doss hurried forward, from the small group that was waiting for him just inside the lock. “Thank goodness you're back! I can't begin to tell you all the things awry here! Projects out of scope! Delays!”

“Yes, I'm sure there are.” Doctor Dan felt the variable gravity make his steps a trifle unsteady. “Couldn't be helped though. There were some complications.”

“Oh, I hope not.” Doss looked concerned. “We were so concerned when you told us of the attack there.. and you almost injured! Why, what would we do, Daniel? What would we do without you? I can't begin to imagine the magnitude...wait.. where are you going?”

“Randall.” Kurok faced him. “Please shut up.”

“Aid.. “ He stopped. “Daniel! There's no cause to be rude.”

“There's more cause to be rude than you could possibly imagine.” Doctor Dan said. “Feel free to call any amount of meetings tomorrow to catch things up, but right now I'm just go to go to bed. It's been a long, long, day.”

“Oh.” Doss backed off. “I see.. okay, well, of course. You've just finished a long trip. Absolutely we can catch up tomorrow. But..” He eyed the pale haired man in trepidation. “Was it a success, Daniel? I see you didn't bring the unit back with you.”

Pausing in the act of walking away, Dan Kurok turned again and studied him, then smiled briefly. “Yes.”

Doss sighed in relief. “Oh, that's good to hear.” He said, then paused. “That's an interesting jacket, Daniel. Quite attractive.”

Kurok looked down at the Drake's Bay colors decorating his chest and smiled again. “Small reminder of an old friendship.” He turned and started towards the lift tubes, then stopped again and turned. “We'll need to rearrange the budgets,”

“We will?”

“And the production schedules. I'll need to pull programming teams.” Kurok turned a final time and this time kept walking, leaving Doss's sputtering behind him. “Good night, Randall.” He lifted his hand in a wave. “Night all.”

He walked on alone, crossing the rounded corridors, the soft pops and clicks of the station sounding a bit strange. At the end of the passage way he paused, going to the clear wall of a dome and peering out, seeing the sun start to emerge from the far edge of the cloud covered planet beneath him and wishing for a sudden, intense moment, he was under the atmosphere rather than over it.

Then he shook his head, and continued on, reaching the lift tube and stepping into it. He pushed off and up and allowed himself to feel as tired as he was, acknowledging the portion of that which a weariness of the heart, rather than of the body.

Ah well. It would pass.

“Doctor Dan!”

He turned in the tube as he drifted upward, and slowed to let the female bio alt coming up from below catch him up. “Hello, Gigi.” He smiled at the young woman. “How are you?”

“Doctor Dan.. you're back.” Gigi smiled. “We really missed you.”

“Thanks, Gigi. I appreciate that.” He smiled back. “In fact, I have a message from Dev for you. She said to say hello.”

Gigi's eyes brightened “Really? It's good to hear that. How's Dev's assignment?” She asked. “Is she doing well?”

Doctor Dan chuckled. “Gigi, she's doing spectacular. Her assignment absolutely loves her.”

“Thats excellent!” Gigi responded. “We hoped that would be so. It was such an exciting opportunity, the Director said.” She responded. “In fact, he wanted some reports that were due in, so I am on shift late tonight.”

“Yes it is exciting.” He guided her off the tube into the admin section and turned off the corridor to his housing unit. “Goodnight, Gigi.”

“Good night!” Gigi trotted off towards her assigned station.

He reached his door and scanned it open, walking inside as the enviro systems detected is presence and brought up lights and wall screens, tuned habitually to the outside view.

“Home sweet home.” He spoke quietly, hearing an unaccustomed rasp in his voice. “Maybe I should have stayed for that damn party after all.”

He paused and put his bag down on the workdesk with a sigh. Then he eased the jacket off and set it beside the bag, standing there in his tech jumpsuit with his arms folded folded for a few minutes. He nodded to himself and sat down, pulling the keypad over and tapping it, signing in with his credentials and pulling up his template. “Time for a change of scenery I think.”

A moment later the walls faded out, the moving starfield replaced with rough rock walls and the light moderated to a dim blue tint, the gentle whisper of airflow covered with a very light rumble of thunder.

“Mmhm. That's better.” He stood up and caught sight of his reflection. “Wonder how much they'd freak out if I wore these in the lab.” He mused thoughtfully. “Well I suspect we'll be finding out.”

He glanced at the screen, and noticed a message alert. Idly curious he touched it and brought up the message, seeing the sender and smiling. “Ah, Dev.” He read it through and let out a faint rueful laugh. “Oh, damn it. I should have stayed for that damn party.”

He could hear, in his mind, the echo of the big room, and the laughter and applause, and the mental image of Jess so grudgingly accepting her star brought a reluctant smile to his face. “I really should have.”

He closed the message and opened his travel case, pulling out the packet Jess had given him and starting to thumb through it, the smile slowly growing less reluctant as time went by.

**

It was very late. Dev leaned on her folded arms as she looked out over the sea, feeling the wind ruffle her hair. It had stopped raining, at least for the moment, and the seas were calm and only lightly white capped.

She drew in a deep breath of the salt air and enjoyed the faint spray as it hit her face, leaving a coating of salt on her lips that she tasted. “It's so pretty.”

Jess came over and handed her a glass, already full of the rich, golden honey mead. “So are you.”

“It's very nice of you to say that.” Dev held up her glass, and Jess touched it with her own. She'd learned about this curious habit and felt it was a little strange, though harmless. “And it's true I find you a lot more attractive than the water.”

They both took a sip of the liquor.

“So here we are.” Jess leaned on the rock shelf next to her. “Here's to hoping your second month in service is less insane than your first was.”

“I think the best part of it was meeting you.” Dev said. “Flying the carrier was good too.” She paused again. “And those shrimps we had.”

Jess started laughing. “Glad you've got your priorities straight.”

“And it was awesome rescuing Doctor Dan.” Dev said. 'But you were still the best thing.”

“I feel the same about you.” Jess leaned against the wall, facing her. “Ready for some fish?” She indicated the portable griller behind her. “I know it's late, but it smells good, doesn't it?”

They settled together on the bench with a small tray between them and Dev had to agree that the thing Jess had made smelled very good indeed.

Jess held up a forkful of it and she took it into her mouth, chewing it thoughtfully. It had a slightly spicy and slightly sweet taste, and she licked her lips after she swallowed it. “Thats' very good.”

Jess smiled and took a mouthful for herself. “That makes me a lot happier to hear than getting that damn medal.”

“Why don't you like it?” Dev asked, after a moment of silence. “Everyone seemed to think it was an excellent thing to get.”

Jess offered her more fish. “It sets an expectation.” She said. “Then you always have to live up to it. You always have to be a noble selfless nitwad throwing yourself into a pit on everyone else's behalf all the time.” She swirled her mead in it's glass and took a swallow. “It reduces your options.”

Dev chewed thoughtfully and swallowed. “But Jess.” She said. “ You do that anyway. Put yourself in danger for everyone.”

Jess stared at the fish. “Yeah, I know.” She finally said, in a soft voice. “It's just .. uh.. uncomfortable thinking it's expected of me.”

“I see.” The bio alt bit down on the fork she was using. “I think.”

Jess shook her head. “Never mind, Dev. You're right. It doesn't really matter, I guess.”

Dev reached out and touched her hand. “If it makes you feel more comfortable, I will try to remember to jump into the pit first, all right?” She said, seriously.

One dark eyebrow quirked. “That doesn't make me feel any more comfortable.”

“It doesn't?”

“No!”

“I'm not sure letting you jump into a pit would be correct then, Jess. Can't we jump together?”

“No!”

“No?”

“Dev!”

“Yes?”

“How about you finish that fish and we both go jump together into my bed.”

“That would be excellent.”

“Thought you'd think so. C”mon partner. Let's go home.”

**

The End.