

Partners

Part 17

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 tech’s green 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 than 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.

Digger, he'd called him, 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 really wanted to ask.

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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 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.

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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.

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 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.

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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 tech's 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 its outline. There were erratic flares emitting from its 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 outside 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 clammering 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, its 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 its side and then rolled it over as she

cut off the main engines and got the landing jets back in control.

“Ahh!” Brent yelled, 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 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 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 uncountered.”

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 than 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 she'd 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 LifeForce 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 crystalized 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, 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 won't 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. "Something's 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.”

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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 handheld 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 of 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.

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[Continued in Part 18](#)