

Partners

Part 18

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 flatline.”

“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.”

“Sssuuure.” 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.

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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.

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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 synched 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 born's 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 nothing's 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 April's 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."

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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 intruding 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 from 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.

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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 beachward, 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 that's going on.”

Dev let herself be hauled up to her feet, and slogged 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.

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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 undersuit. "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 he'd 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 offline 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 afterhours 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 an 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 its 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 things 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 undersuit. “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 tale, 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 a nonchalant tone. "Couple of families of stone masons and steelwrights 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 its components in the holding, so they did what made sense – grind it up and expell 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 now 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 its baking pit and cooktops.

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?"

Taylor'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 Taylor 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 Justin, matter of fact."

"That old coot?" Jake spoke up. "Haven't seen his fishy ass in years. He still remember you?"

"Oh wow!" Taylor 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 Justin's catch. Made more than I take a year." She chewed a mouthful of leaf seaweed and mushrooms, along with a forkfull of the whole fish filet 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 Taylor was playing with his food, ignoring

what was going on around the table. “Cmon, 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 assholeish as I usually am.”

Doug cleared his throat. “My dad's a senior councillor 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 they 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.”

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[Continued in Part 19](#)