

Partners

Part 19

Dev could see the outflow from the enemy craft's engines with her own eyes now and she made a picture in her head of what she wanted to do once they caught them, flexing her fingers around the throttles and leaning forward a little.

"One minute." She warned Jess, who was reading her guns, the soft whine of the energy spool up audible to her outside the ear cups.

"Got it." Jess said. "Tac 1, Tac 2, keep to aft, match."

"Ack." Doug's voice came back, sounding tolerably steady.

"Welcome to Interforce." Jess added, suppressing a grin as she tuned her aim. "Dev, tell our friends to haul up and surrender or we'll blast them."

Obediently, Dev switched comms to broadband all hail and repeated the threat. Then she closed the channel and prepared to maneuver. She could see the two sets of engines flaring bright at full power ahead of her, but the new mods they'd applied to the carriers left her with reserve even though she was catching them.

Excellent.

"No answer." She told Jess, somewhat unnecessarily.

"Hehehe." Jess chuckled audibly. "Take us in, Devvie."

"Hold on." Dev kicked the side jets and put the carrier on its horizontal axis, boosting up and over the trailing carrier in a rush of speed and then dumping over to its port side as it swerved.

"Hehehe." Jess repeated, releasing her triggers and sending a barrage from the lower guns across the side of the vessel. She watched the scan intently as Dev came around and seeing a sudden flare of energy across the boards. "Holy shit Dev get us a.. woah!"

Dev saw the same thing, and instinctively hit the back jets and hauled up, sending them cloud-ward and then upside down putting the heavily shielded bottom of the carrier towards the enemy just as the energy surge exploded towards them and swamped comp and scan, blowing them sideways through the air.

Engines cut out as a wash of energy flowed over and through them, safety systems blaring with sudden vibrant screams.

It was hard to keep control. The carrier tumbled through the air and started to drop, before she got her inputs sorted out and got the engines back online. "What happened?"

"Damn thing blew up." Jess sounded rattled. "I couldn't have blown their shields that fast. Should have just tickled them." She looked at the screens. "Can you get comp back? Where's Tac 2?"

Dev kept them high, but boosted the back jets to pitch them forward giving them a view. "Chasing the other one." She reported, "They're shooting." She ran the repair programming and started recycling the boards. "Stand by for comp and scan."

"Get after them. Anything left of that tank?"

"No." Dev shook her head. She brought the engines up to full power and started after the fleeing second craft, just as Doug dove at it, and April let loose a set of plasma bombs aimed at the front of it while the enemy vessel returned fire, sending a blast of fire along the port side of the Interforce carrier.

Scan came back, and a moment later, comp as well, screens coming alive with alerts and warnings. She spared a glance for them, then concentrated on catching the other craft, feeling the energy release as Jess fired the forward guns.

The beams stitched a line across the top of the enemy as they dove towards it, then once again scan screamed a warning. "Plasma flare!" Dev yelled, as she yanked them sideways and then in an arc.

"Tac 2 evade!" Jess hit the comms and then held onto her console, as the carrier rolled in the air and boosted skyward.

"What in the hell?!!!!!"

This time they were far enough away to weather the wave unharmed, and Dev finished her rollout and got them back on heading, looking intently through the energy wash and blinking to clear the brightness from her eyes. "Tac 2, Tac1." She triggered comms. "I don't see them."

Jess dropped weapons scan and picked up standard to her console, running sweep. "C'mon, you raw little kids. Don't croak your first run on me."

Comp crackled hard. “Tac 1, Tac 2.” Doug's voice sounded breathless. “Nadir.”

Dev dipped the nose of the carrier and headed down, dropping altitude rapidly as a layer of thick clouds rippled around them and then cleared, giving a view of ruffled waves and shoreline beneath them.

“There they are.” Jess said. “Near the escarpment.”

“I see them.” Dev moderated her drop, and leveled, coming even with the other carrier.

“Open sideband local.” Jess said. “What the hell was that? No way either of those strikes should have skunked them.”

Dev opened the channel, and sent the encodes, waiting for the sideband shortwave to come up and let them talk to each other in long speech. “BR27006, BR36024, copy.”

The line opened. “BR27006, we copy.” April's voice sounded relieved. “We lost power after the target blew up. Just got it back before splashing.”

“Copy that, 36024.” Jess responded. “Your comp catch the explosion? I'd like to compare it to ours. Didn't have a standard outflow.”

“What the hell were they doing this far in?” April asked. “Is that normal? They told us in field engagements were in the mid zone.”

Jess was momentarily silent. “Good question.” She responded. “First time I've seen them this far in.” She admitted. “Dev, did we get a squirt back from Base 10?”

Dev checked the comms board, running through the logs. “No.” She said, after a pause. “No response from them at all.” She rekeyed the request, and engaged long scan. “We received comp from Doug.” She shunted the data to Jess's boards. “Everything else seems clean – no additional targets.”

“Yeah.” Jess murmured. “Let's get back on course.” She engaged comms. “April, you good to move on?”

“Took a few dents, but yes.” April responded. “We're picking up some debris on the surface there. Recon?” She inquired. “Didn't think there would be much left but we're seeing some large pieces.”

Jess stared unseeing at her console for a long moment. Then she lifted her head. “Yeah, Dev, take us down to the shore.” She keyed comms. “Acknowledge – let's take a look at what's left. I don't like what I'm seeing on these recordings.”

The two carriers dropped down, angling for the beach and landing above the high tide line side by side. Dev ran the shut down process, and unhooked her restraints. She stood up and removed the carrier links from her flight suit and turned, watching Jess as she got up from the gunner's chair. “This seems incorrect.”

Jess seated her weapons, and triggered the hatch. “It is, Dev. I just don't know why or how it is.” She walked down the ramp, as the wind blew in a gust of salt tinged air.

Dev followed her, stepping down off the carrier step onto the somewhat soft surface they'd landed on. It shifted under her boots, and she could see debris in it, pieces of stone or rocks and some glints of color. It crunched a little, under her. She stopped as Jess stopped, and they waited as April and Doug joined them.

“That was crazy.” Doug said. “That thing blew itself up.”

“That's not necessarily what happened.” April disagreed.

“Something happened.” Jess continued down the beach until she reached the first piece of debris. She circled it warily, and Dev pulled out her portable comp and started a scan on it. “Look at those edges.” Jess knelt next to one and studied it. “This was blown out.”

April joined her. “From the inside?”

“It has a high emission of positive electrons.” Dev said, after a pause. “There is residual in the atmosphere also.” She added. “It appears something released a lot of energy.”

“Engines?” April speculated.

“Not this type.” Jess had gotten up and went around to look at Dev's screen. “Your driver might be right. Sure looks like an internal explosion to me.” She went over to the next piece of debris, which was hardly larger than her two hands put together. It had a bit of steel skin attached, which was curled and burned like it had been plastic.

“Are you saying they blew themselves up?” Her fellow field agent queried, in a surprised voice. “They never mentioned that in school.”

“Never mentioned it in the field either, since I've never seen them do it before.” Jess frowned. “They're not martyrs, any more than we are.” She nudged the piece with her boot. “Unless they had something onboard they just weren't willing for us to see.”

“And they brought it all the way over here? That doesn't make much sense.” Doug spoke up.

“It would if it were something they were going to use against us.” Jess stood up. “I can't think of any other reason they'd want to prevent us from capturing them aside from sheer embarrassment. We should send a squirt with this back to Base 10, and get moving.”

Dev put her comp away and glanced down at the ground, her brows jerking a bit with surprise as the bits of rock resolved unexpectedly into familiar shapes. She looked up to see the two agents examining another bit of metal, and decided she had time to inspect the items on the ground.

She picked one up and looked at it confirming her initial impression of what they were.

“You like shells?” Doug came over and joined her. “My mother collects em, and makes jewelery out of them.”

Dev regarded the oval item on her palm. “Really?”

“Uh huh.” He nodded. “She polishes them up and makes carvings in them, and sometimes if she can find some of that colored glass bits that wash up on shore she insets them. It's nice.”

“Hm.” Dev peered into the small opening, checking for animals inside. The shell appeared to be empty, however, and she decided she liked the dark brown and orange coloring of it.

“Let's go people.” Jess was heading back to the carrier, and April was winding up taking an image of the debris. “Let's get back in touch with base. Something doesn't feel right.”

Dev stuck the item in one of the pockets and trotted after her partner, triggering the hatch as she entered the carrier. She went over to her station and sat down, putting restraints in place before she triggered comms. “Should I send a message?”

“Yeah.” Jess was busy at her own console. “At least get a status through to them, squirt them the vid of the blow up.”

Dev got her comms set settled and took the engine systems off standby. She saw a flashing light and paused, reaching over to accept it. “Jess, there's an alert here.”

She barely heard the release of the restraints before Jess was hanging over her shoulder, and she keyed up the automated alert for her partner to see. “I think it's weather.”

Jess studied it. “Met over the base. Damn it. Maybe that's why they didn't answer too much damn EMF.” She absorbed the message. “That's a huge storm cell.” She said. “Look how far it extends.” Her finger touched the screen. “They must be getting the shit kicked out of them.”

Dev tried to make a picture of that in her head, then quickly stopped. “Should I keep trying to send a message? I'm not getting any response.”

“Keep trying. Get us up in the air before we find something else around here that doesn't belong.” Jess sat down in her station. “I'm going to send a warning back to Drake's Bay.”

Dev gently engaged the landing jets and moved off the sand, sending a blast of it out everywhere from beneath the carrier as they rose up off the ground. She heard Jess behind her speaking softly into her comms and paused to watch Doug lift before she put the message system in automatic loop and engaged the main engines.

There were a lot of unusual things happening. She had the feeling that things were moving very fast, and that Jess wasn't really sure what direction she wanted to go in.

It was unsettling, and it made her uncomfortable.

“Okay, later.” Jess closed comms, then opened them again. “April?”

“Here.” April's voice came back on the inter-ship intercom. “We have a met warning.”

“Us too.” Jess said. “We'll come in from the north, top side of that met's moving faster. Keep your eyes open for more of the bad guys.”

“Ack.”

“I have the squirt on loop.” Dev said. “So far, no response.”

Even with the met, that started a ball of worry in Jess's gut. This close, they should have gotten at the very least, a reject of the message no matter how bad the storm was. She unlocked her restraints and got up, moving over to the lockers and opening them up. “Just in case.”

Dev glanced in the mirror. “What is a case?”

Jess managed a brief smile, as she got out of her standard jumpsuit and into her heavier gear. The light armor settled into place as she sealed the openings, tightening the fit around her body. “I'm putting this on in case it's all gone to crap at base and I need to drop and start shooting people in the halls.”

Dev digested this. "I see."

"Been kind of a crappy day so far. I'm betting that's not changing in the short term." Jess slid her small arms in place, adding a set of throwing daggers in the small of her back. "Any response to the squirt? What's the time in?"

"No, and twenty minutes." Dev inched the throttles forward, and ran a check on the power systems. They were racing fast for both the edge of the storm system and the base, she could already feel the buffeting from the wind against the outside of the carrier in minute shifts of the controls against her hands.

She could feel the nervous energy building inside her and she heard Jess take her seat again, the sound of a heavier body thumping against the padded surface, and the soft whine as Jess activated the restraints that would hold her in place.

From the corner of her eye she saw all the targeting systems come online and for a very brief moment she thought about the people that must have been in the two enemy craft that had been destroyed.

Had they gotten ready, been doing the same sort of tasks she and Jess were doing right now?

"Tac 1, Tac 2." April's voice filtered over the comm. "Review of comp shows they got a message off, and it was answered, about sixty to one twenty prior to the first one exploding."

Jess nodded slowly. "Tac 2, ack." She answered. "I think this kid's gonna be good." She commented to Dev. "Sharp. Check the timestamps – see if that message went out before or after we threatened em."

"After." Dev responded at once. "Was that the person April you were referring to?"

"Yeah." Her partner said. "Always a crap shoot with women in the corps. Either you're an asshole like me or an asshole like Sandy usually."

"If the definition of asshole is what you seem to mean it is, I don't think you are one." Dev adjusted setting, and increased torque to the engines to counteract the increasing wind. "That other agent seemed a lot more unpleasant."

Jess chuckled. "You only say that because you like me." She set the scan on long range and directed it at the base. "Ask anyone else at Base 10, even Jason, and they'll tell you different. I treat them all like crap."

"You treat me very nicely." Dev protested.

"Yeah, well." Jess reran the scan her muscles starting to twitch when it refused to return anything to her. "You're different."

Dev sighed. "That is true. Ten minutes. No response to the squirt."

"Nothing from scan either." Jess drummed her fingertips on the console. "Know what the most different thing about you is?"

Dev knew perfectly well what the most different thing about her was. "Yes." She said. "I'm a biological alternative and I was born from an egg in space." She dutifully responded. "But I don't know why that either makes you treat me nicely or makes me not think you're unpleasant."

"Ah." Jess tweaked the scan a little, filtering out the spiking frequencies she knew were from the storm. "Actually, what makes you different for me ain't that." She peered closely at the screen. "It's the fact you're the first person I let myself fall in love with."

Dev's eyes went to the mirror, staring at the dark head bent over the console. "What?"

"Yeah, you can look that up later. I think we've got some real problems here." Jess keyed comms. "April, we're getting a lot of disruption from base. You get that?"

"Ack." The other agent came back immediately.

"We may need to drop."

"Kitted up."

Jess gazed fondly at the comms, very glad her instincts had read true on her pick of escorts. "Follow us down. There's an emergency dock midway on the backside that's keyed to my bus. Manual in."

"Ack."

Jess cut off the comms. "Sending you up the coordinates, Devvie. Not big enough to land, just do a pass and drop me." She studied the comms. "Something's disrupting base systems to the point they're non functional. Don't think they can even open the bay."

She looked up after a moment of silence, to find Dev watching her in the mirror, those pale, gentle eyes completely intent.

"You okay?"

"Yes." Dev responded mildly. "If the disruption is causing so many problems won't it also affect the carrier?"

“Yes. That's why we're coming in on the backside of the ridge. It'll clear the storm front first.” Jess got up and went to the drop chute, turning and backing into the pack and locking the frame in place. She reached over and grabbed her blaster rifle and seated it, then she swung the comp pad next to the rig in place so she could see their progress. “Drop down so we come in low, Dev.”

The bio alt exhaled, then focused on the fast moving wasteland beneath her. She cut their altitude by half, and now the ground – a vast plain of rocky gravel and deep gorges – was clearly visible. Ahead of them, she could see the line of storms, black thickness shot through with almost continuous lightning strikes.

The clouds were low enough to cover the escarpment that contained the citadel, not a bit of the structure was visible and she could now hear low booming cracks rippling across the ground. There was still no response to their comms hails, and just as Dev wondered how the citadel was reacting to that, the threat scan blared alive. “Jess!”

“I see it” Jess unhooked herself from the drop rig and leaped into her gunner's seat, slamming the straps in place and bringing the guns live. “How in the hell are they flying in that!”

A line of enemy craft were coming over the ridge right through the storm clouds and heading their way, already firing. Just as abruptly a small, thinner craft came arching up from the base itself, streaking towards them at top speed.

Dev evaded the incoming bolts and steeled herself to fly into the barrage, tightening her grips on the throttles and picking a line between the diving enemy and the streaking flight coming from the base.

That, at least, was blaring an ident the carrier recognized.

“Drake!” The comms crackled alive, weird and skewed sounding though they were. “Get out of here!”

Jess let loose a full release of her guns towards the enemy. “Sir!” She yelled back, recognizing Bain's voice. “We'll cover you!”

“No!” Bain said. “They've got something that shields them from energy. Get out of here. Go find it! Or we're all dead! I'll draw them off! That's what killed North!”

“I can feel interruption in our systems.” Dev warned. “I don't think we can get closer until the storm leaves.”

Jess took a breath, as the carrier spun in mid air and arched up through the enemy with the guns on automatic repeat, sending them off in different directions. “Ack.” She finally said “Dev, get us out of here. Go up and get over the clouds and head..” She paused. “Go polar. Due north.”

Dev reacted at once, pulling the carrier up hard into a hard arc, turning sharply to one side as a barrage of fire came at them. She got them leveled and threw in the afterburners, blinking a little as the rear scan blanked out white as Jess kept up a continual fire.

Blasts came back at them, impacting the rear shields and shoving the carrier violently to one side as she felt the rippling boom of them clearing the speed of sound and then they were up through the first cloud layer and she was fighting to arc them over before they ran out of air to fly in.

The enemy came roaring up after them, but only two of them and after a moment they spun off, heading back down and leaving the two carriers to streak on together alone.

After a moment of silence, Jess exhaled. “Guess they wanted him more than us.” She felt her hands start to shake as battle tension relaxed. “Shit.”

Dev kept all power on, driving the engines to full speed and more. “Did they damage our place?” She asked softly.

“Probably isn't much to go back to, yeah.” Jess responded. “They probably just did to Base 10 what I did to Gibraltar. They had no way of fighting back. I could see it on scan, no power anywhere. The generating mains were offline.”

Dev thought about all the people there. About Jason, and Brent, and Clint, and all the bio alts down in their compound. Were they all damaged?

Dead?

“But who knows.” Jess finally added. “We've got work to do ahead of us.” She glanced at comp. “Those guys behind us?”

“Yes.”

“All right, lets move. “

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They were clear of the storm and Dev had them on auto nav, while they sat quietly together sharing some rations. Long range scan was set to detect anyone approaching, only the carrier flying port side aft of them considered friendly.

Jess had been very quiet since they'd left the base's airspace. Now she was sitting on one of the arming benches, elbows

resting on her knees as she stolidly munched her way through a fish roll. "We need to get somewhere we can set up a plan, and get our bearings."

Dev swallowed. "Will we go to one of the caves?" She asked.

"Sort of." Jess said. "There's an old met and science station near the Pole. We used to keep it stocked. It was North's responsibility so who the hell knows if they did. We'll try that first." She finished one roll and started a second. "Now I know why those other two carriers blasted themselves. Probably were told to."

"To keep us from capturing them and finding out what their new thing is?"

Jess nodded. "Didn't expect us to be out there." She bit a mouthful off. "Freak chance we were. You and I would have probably been there, in rad, or... something."

Dev thought about that. Then she studied her partner's face. "You seem in discomfort." She put her hand on Jess's arm. "Are you angry? Did we do something incorrect?"

"Nah." A faint smile appeared on Jess's face, then faded. "I just get the feeling.. like I have been... that there's some big plan going on we don't have any clue about. I hate that."

"Ah."

"Anyway. When we get up to the old station, I'll see if the powerhouse is still running and if it is, we can alert the rest of the force. Our shipcoms won't do squat. Not enough transmit unless we bounced it off a base, and the two closest are now dead and doornails."

Dev felt a lot of discomfort about that, the bases not responding. "I hope they just turned everything off." She said. "There were some nice people at our place."

Jess sighed. "Yeah." She admitted. "My promotion sure didn't last long, huh? I'll probably end up low on the totem in some outpost if we make it through this."

Her bio alt partner considered this, as she finished her fish roll and chewed a dried mushroom cake. "Will I get to go with you?" She asked, in a very quiet tone.

"If I have anything to say about it. Maybe that's my dark cloud's silver lining. I don't have to worry about being promoted out and losing you."

Dev felt warm and good hearing that. She thought about what Jess had said before, about the love thing and she wondered if that was connected to this. What did that mean? She'd said she'd fallen in love. Was that like falling down? "I hope so. I want to stay with you. I don't want to be with anyone else."

"Not even April or Jason? They're both okay."

"No." Dev said, definitively. "I don't think Jason likes me and you're much more attractive than April."

Jess looked up, and smiled. "You think so, really?"

"Yes."

"Thanks. I don't usually hear things like that." Jess admitted. "Especially not from someone I want to hear it from." She put the remains of her box into the trash compact and remained seated, lacing her fingers together. "Did I freak you out with that falling in love comment before?"

Dev put her trash away and edged a little closer. "No. I don't really understand what that means." She said, apologetically. "I think it's a good thing. Right?"

"Is it good or bad? I don't know either." Jess said. "I think from a job perspective it's not good. You get trained not to think about that, not to get involved in that way with people because it makes you really vulnerable. You know?"

"Um."

"No, I guess you don't." Jess sighed. "Doesn't really matter anyway."

"It doesn't?"

"They tell you not to do it, warn you about it, but forget to mention you can't do a damn thing about it when it happens." Jess leaned against her and rested her head against Dev's. "They do their best to suck the souls out of us, Devvie, and then something like this happens, and you realize how much of it is bogus."

Dev's brows knit a little. "Jess, is this good or bad?"

"What do you think it is?"

"I have no idea." The bio alt answered honestly.

Jess scratched the bridge of her nose and shrugged lightly. "I like it." She concluded. "I look at you and it makes me feel good. I really like feeling good. Don't you?"

Dev considered solemnly, then nodded. "Of course."

"So there we are." Jess said. "It's good, Dev. Even if it ends up bad for us, it's still good. You get that?"

Now, Dev smiled "I do get that."

"Good." Jess just sat there for a bit, leaning against Dev's warm body, letting her mind slip a little. She felt Dev rest her head against her shoulder and something in her just let go, appreciating this human contact in a new and surprising way.

Dev circled her arm with her own and gently rubbed the skin on Jess's forearm in an absent sort of way, her eyes focusing on one of the panels next to them.

Jess focused on the sensation, warm and friendly and tending to make her heart skip a little. She wished it could just continue on, and that they weren't in trouble, weren't running from some new terror, were tucked away in their quarters or in a cave, or...

Or anywhere.

She could feel the thrum of the engines through the frame she was sitting on, images of the recent past shuttling through her internal eye. She took a breath, and a second, and let the past go, consciously shifting her focus to the present, and the near future.

"We have to find out how the bad guys are flying through EMF." She remarked, after a few minutes. "Otherwise, they can attack us at random, and we can't fight back."

"Yes."

"So we need to either capture one of their rigs, or get into the developmental science center." Jess mused. "If we get one of their trucks, you think you can dissect it?"

"Yes." Dev answered, with surprising confidence. "I have programming on that."

Jess turned her head and looked closely at her partner. "You do?"

Dev nodded. "On the type of system we saw earlier, and some older models, and also, a bigger one they use for transporting a lot of people." She said. "I can fly them, or take them apart, whatever it is you need."

Jess blinked. She looked around the carrier, and then back at Dev. "We don't know how to do that. How did they get the programming for it to give you?" She asked. "We've captured a few, but they program them to short themselves out if one of us boards – just like we do."

Dev shrugged slightly, looking a touch sheepish. "We don't know, most of the time, where the programming comes from." She admitted. "But I know the big blocks of it. I've done sims for the other side's stuff."

"Wow." Her partner murmured. "I bet your buddy knows where that came from."

"Doctor Dan?"

Jess nodded. "So you know, there's definitely a reason we need to get him back."

"Didn't we have a reason before?"

"You and I had a reason." Jess turned her sharp gaze on Dev. "He's your friend. He was my father's partner. But that wasn't enough for Bain. He wasn't going to make a deal for him, not only because we don't make deals, but because there wasn't anything compelling for him to do it for."

Dev considered that. "I thought they were friends." She said, with a touch of sadness in her voice.

Jess shook her head. "I don't think so. I think... I think they respected each other. But finding this out, finding out how that kind of information got processed – he'd want that."

The bio alt got up and went to her station, settling in her chair and starting a report running on their status. She checked the course they were on, and also the comms for any messages, finding it all quiet, and blank and aware of Jess's eyes watching her. "Does that matter about why we would go help him?"

Jess went back to her seat and dropped into it, folding her hands over her stomach and looking up at the ceiling. "Not to you." She said. "But I'm a selfish bastard, Dev. I want to go help him, but I want there to be something for me in it too." She replied with stark honesty. "I break the rules and go after him and end up being locked up or thrown out, it ruins my day, and yours too."

"I see."

“Do I sound like an indecisive ass? I feel like one. I tell you I'm gonna go rescue him, damn the consequences and then I back out and go pansy on you until I don't have a choice. I'm such a jerk.” Jess sighed. “I feel like my head's in ten different places.”

Dev turned around in her chair. “I'm sorry you're in such discomfort.” She said. “I'm sure we'll figure out to make everything come out right.”

The comms set buzzed gently, distracting them. Jess reached over and closed the connection for the intercom. “Yeah?”

“Um.” Doug's voice sounded hesitant. “We're picking something up on scan. Looks like one of ours, but not answering squirt.”

Dev turned and lit up the comp board, setting up a long range scan and starting it.

“So you sent out an automatic ident?” Jess asked.

“Yes.”

“It's at the very edge of the band.” Dev reported. “Outline does show as this type of vehicle.”

“Probably Stephen and his team.” Jess said. “We're just passing the edge of North's territory.” She studied her own screen.

“Now why isn't he responding to comms, and where are the other two buses?” She coded in her own ident to comms.

“BR27006 to incoming, acknowledge.”

There was no response. Jess frowned, and changed frequencies, moving to a reserved high encrypt one. She repeated the message and waited.

Still nothing.

“BR27006 to incoming, acknowledge or stand by for enemy action.” Jess enunciated the words carefully and loudly. “Dev, give me power please, then slow down and hold steady.”

Obediently Dev shunted power to the weapons, and felt the soft rumble as the guns came online and the protective covers slid back, exposing them to the wind outside. She cut their forward momentum and turned, hearing the guns move as she did

“Stand by” The incoming craft said, briefly. “Hold for shortwave.”

Jess kept the hatches open, swinging her aim around and plotting a targeting choice on the craft moving towards them. “Tell our friends to just stay behind us.”

Dev keyed the intercom. “Doug?”

“Here.”

“Jess says to keep behind this vehicle.”

“I'm keeping way behind the direction she's pointing those guns at.” The rookie tech told her. “No worries.”

“Excellent.” Dev studied the clouds they were between, the thick surface off to the left flickering with lightning below.

Scan was detecting the disruption from the flashes, but they were far enough away not to be affected. “Do you think those people are correct?”

“They're either correct, or about to try and shove their guns up my ass.” Jess remarked. “Hard to say which one it is at this point in the general miasma of craptasticness today's been.”

Dev turned around and looked at her, then she swiveled back and took a better grip on her throttles. The incoming carrier was now visible, and she felt her heartbeat speed up when it appeared to not be slowing down. “Hm.”

Jess audibly released the safety shields on her triggers and leaned back, bracing her boots against the console. She'd played chicken before, but rarely in such an uncertain situation. She took a breath and let it out, then focused on her target, looking past the screens and past the front window as the carrier came into range.

Her fingers tightened.

“Incoming request on shortwave sideband six, Jess.” Dev said, calmly. “BR27004 channel setup acknowledge.”

The comms crackled, and Jess let her hands relax, but not completely.

“Jess?” Stephen's voice came over the intercom. “That you?”

“It's me.” Jess answered. “You want to travel with us before the storm backs up and kicks our asses?” She asked. “You know what happened?”

“I know what happened to North.” Stephen's voice sounded grim.

"It might have just happened to Base 10" Jess told him, in a quiet tone. "Just got out of the area in time."

Silence. "Oh shit." Stephen said. "That's why I can't get a squirt through. I thought it was just met."

"We're going to the pole station. Have to get a plan going. Bain said they've got something that lets them fight in met.. I think it's something that makes met worse." Jess said.

"Bain got out? Figures."

Jess shrugged, even if he couldn't see it.

"No sense going to North. Every thing inside's burned to a crisp and it stinks from dead bodies." Stephen said. "Pole sounds good. Any clues what the new tech is?"

Jess started to answer, then she paused, and keyed the mute. "You got any ideas?" She asked Dev. "What could fry all that stuff?"

Dev was watching her in the mirror, as she piloted the carrier on their original course, at a very slow speed. "It might be useful to see what it did. I can see if it matches any programming."

Jess nodded. "Stephen – let's take a quick tour of North. See what we're up against."

"If you want. Hope you haven't had lunch." Stephen answered. "Follow me. Got the two busses with me sitting on top of the next ridge waiting."

His carrier pulled ahead, and curved to the left, and Dev changed course to follow him.

"Let's see where this takes us." Jess capped her triggers and pushed the targeting system back off its axis. "And get the whose the boss knock down drag out over with."

Dev glanced behind her, brows contracted.

"You'll see. Want to make a few cred? Bet on me." Jess leaned back and closed her eyes, content to let the crosscurrents carry them for now.

Bet on her. Dev increased power to the engines and pulled the comp pad over, typing in the statement and waiting for it to regurgitate its meaning.

**

Seeing North base was shocking. Jess had come up next to her and they were both looking out the front wraparound windows.

"Holy shit." Jess exhaled. The pinnacle and mountainside that they'd been to only a week prior was now shattered and blackened, the stone cracked away and a third of the rock wall collapsed down the side of the slope and littering the valley at the bottom.

Where they'd entered the bay there was only a smoking hole, gray mist still emitting from it.

"I'm getting a complete null on scan." Dev said, in subdued tone.

"I bet." Jess was leaning against her chair. "See if you can get the bus in near the entrance to the bay. Shine some light in there." She held on as the carrier dipped and dropped in altitude, the powerful front lights coming on and splashing against the smoke dulled granite.

It was creepy. Dev approached carefully, slowing their speed to almost nothing as she drifted in front of the bay, and the interior became visible. "Oh." The bio alt murmured, seeing the destruction inside. "That is not good."

Jess let out a long breath. "No. Get closer."

Dev did, easing the carrier into the gaping opening. Inside she could see carriers in complete wreckage, and lumps on the floor completely black that she suspected were people. "Its like everything touched a live wire." She commented. "I saw that happen up in the creche once."

"It does." Jess agreed, reaching over to key comms. "Stephen, it like this everywhere?"

"Yeah." He responded shortly. "Worse inside. Central ops looked like a bomb went off in it."

Jess stared at the interior of the cavern in near disbelief. "Dev, go ahead and land. I want to get a look firsthand at this."

Dev inched the carrier in and then rotated a half turn, putting the edge of the craft over the ledge. "I don't want to go further there's a lot of debris. Can you get out now?"

Jess fastened the catches on her suit and seated her weapons, then she triggered the hatch. It popped open and she stopped in her tracks, blasted by a gust of stench that took her breath away. "Ugh." She glanced back at Dev, whose face was scrunched in an expression of distaste. "Sorry." She stepped onto the ledge and keyed the hatch shut, hearing the air handlers cycle

behind her.

Jess had seen a lot in her time. She'd seen dead people of all types, many made that way by her own hand, but the charred, crisped black remains she was carefully stepping over were horrible even to her hardened senses. A flash of this cavern not a week ago when they visited appeared in her mind's eye, busy and full of techs and bio alts, all going about their business as they had for years.

Now there wasn't a sound around her save the faint rattling of bits of rock falling out of the walls. Jess turned on her light and moved further inside, coming up next to what was left of a big transport, probably the largest craft assigned to North. It was charred like everything else was, the walls blown out and panels melted into nothing but hard lumpy slag.

There had been a tech inside working. His burned body was half in and half out of the service bay, testing probe still clenched inside his fist.

No warning. Jess picked up a piece of the burned panel and examined it, flashing her light on the tracings inside. It meant little to her, but she kept as she walked on, intending on showing it to Dev.

Everywhere she looked was horror. As she stood in the center of the cavern and slowly turned, she noticed a faint pattern on the floor – lines that angled out from a more or less central point not far from where she was standing. Jess moved over and set her boots over the point, looking to her right and left, and seeing the destruction flaring out on all sides.

Something had blown up from where she was standing, and caused the damage. She could imagine the stark terror of the few who'd gotten out, direly wounded, leaving all their colleagues and friends behind.

Interesting perspective, since they were so often the ones bringing the terror not facing it.

Jess turned around and started heading back to the carrier, waiting patiently at the edge of the cavern for her. She'd already gotten used to the stench, and as she moved closer to the opening she spotted something against the inner wall. Curious, she diverted her steps and walked in front of the humming carrier, patting its nose as she moved past and played her light along the inside rock surface.

Nothing very remarkable, just a tool box. Jess stood next to it and studied it. Just a plain metal casing with drawers and cabinets, slightly dented and dinged with use.

But altogether strange in its whole, unscorched plain-ness the only item in the cavern that has escaped the blast.

Jess studied it for a long moment. Then she took hold of the handle of it and started back around the carrier, dragging it behind her. As she got to the hatch it opened, and she boosted the case inside, then climbed after it. "Lets go Dev. Faster we get under cover, the better."

**

It was full dark by the time they got to the old station. It was quiet, they hadn't seen anything on scan for hours, and Dev had dipped below the lower cloud layer and flown with nothing but gray over her, and white below for quite some time.

Jess had spent the time examining the box she'd dragged onboard, sitting cross legged on the floor next to it as she patiently took it apart piece by piece.

"Jess?" Dev called quietly. "We're almost there."

Jess hoisted herself to her feet and came up to the pilots station, still holding an adjustment tool in her hand. "Yeah, we are." She said. "Look at that place. Nothing but ice."

"Really?" Dev studied the wire map, showing a low, craggy outline. "It's built from ice?"

"Built from ice." Her partner confirmed. "Back in the old days, they built it after the end times, cause they figured nothing was going to end up habitable and it was a last chance bunker for the governmental big shots that are now long gone." She said. "Interforce took it over after that all ended, and for a while it was a training center. Then they moved the school out to Denali where at least they had elevations to work with."

"I see." Dev murmured. The wiremap showed almost nothing but the outline, scan reported only ice. "There's not anything operating there."

"No, we shut it down." Jess said. "Remains to be seen if we can start it back up again." She put her hand on the back of Dev's chair. "If not, we can land the carriers in a circle and make a rough camp, but I'd rather be able to charge bats. They sunk a heat sump a mile deep up here."

Dev started a slow descent. A glance at the comp showed her a chilling temperature outside, and the darkness they flew through was complete save the faint glow from their engines. She wished she'd brought her lined suit with her, and after that, she realized it was possible it no longer existed.

That her whole space no longer existed, including the one thing she'd brought, her book. She felt very sad thinking of that.

“Where do you want to land?”

“Good question.” Jess enlarged the wiremap with a swipe of her fingers. “Try here.” She pointed at a flat area on the left of the structure. “Once you get to this point, turn the lights on.”

Dev trimmed the engines and started up the landing jets, coasting over the blurry white surface to the spot Jess had indicated, slowing to hover as she turned on the bright lower lights.

Instantly, the area blared into reflective relief, a relatively level ice field covered in a layer of fresh snow. It was large, and very desolate looking, and Dev selected a spot near the wall of the structure to land on, delicately letting the extended skids settle and leaving the landing jets activated until she was sure the surface was going to bear the carrier's weight. There was one slight lurch, then the craft seemed stable, and after a pause, she shut things down save the exterior lights.

Around them, the other carriers were landing, and in a moment the area was lit up brightly with five sets of lamps as they settled around in a rough circle.

“Glad I forgot to take these out of here” Jess had the equipment case open, and she pulled out their heavy parkas and ice boots.

“Yes.” Dev agreed wholeheartedly as she exchanged her flight boots for the heavier ones and stood up to shrug into the thick jacket. She dropped the portable comp into one pocket, and her diagnostic scanner in the other, and fastened up the catches as Jess moved towards the hatch.

She weponed up and slapped the latch, waiting for the door to open and the ramp to extend.

A solid, cold, startling blast of air came in, and Dev immediately got her hood up and the flap over her mouth as she drew in a breath and felt the inside of her nose freezing.

“Brr.” Jess went down the ramp, bringing up her own hood. “Hope like hell we can boot this place.”

Dev got her gloves on and followed her partner, blinking as she felt the chill against her eyeballs. She paused to extend the spikes on her boots then advanced over the ice, moving towards the center of the open lit space to join the rest of the agent teams.

As they closed in, she recognized Stephen Bock, and then the other two teams – one the newcomers Mike Arias and his partner, and the other an older pair she wasn't sure she remembered the names of. Doug and April came up on their right hand side, having landed just behind them.

“Jess.” Bock nodded at her.

“Hello Stephen.” Jess had her hands in her pockets, her breath a steady stream of fog. “First things first, we should see if we can commission this place. Let the techs get their hands on the gear.” She finished talking, then paused, waiting for a response.

There was a little silence. Then Bock exhaled. “Sounds good to me. Let's go.” He nodded at the two pairs with him. “Place hasn't been used in years. No telling what we'll find.”

Jess started towards the structure, and Dev fell in at her heels. The rest of the group followed, and they climbed a small hillock of ice towards a rounded arch packed with snow.

“I'll get that.” Mike pulled out his small blaster and steadied it, moving a step past Jess and firing carefully at the doorway, melting the ice in the center of the opening. The pale blue light of the weapon disappeared in a fog of vaporized crystals and after a few minutes the doorway was exposed.

Jess moved forward. “Thanks, Mike.” She examined the door and touched the panel, but it was dead and didn't produce even the faintest twitch of a response.

“Dead?” Stephen edged in next to her. “You ever been here?”

“No.” Jess took a step back. “My father was.” She gestured him to get out of the way. “So let me see how much we're going to have to destroy before we get in here. Dev?”

“Yes.” Dev wormed her way over.

“Take the rest of the wrenchers and go over that lump there, that's where the plant is. See what you can do with it.”

“Yes.” Dev backed out and started across the ice. “Please follow me.” She told addressed the other techs. “We have a task.”

“Right behind you.” Doug tugged his hood a little tighter. “Holy crap it's cold here.”

Mike's partner Chester was right behind him, along with the older tech, a man named Oscar. They all climbed over the snow drift and down into the next hollow, which seemed to be a semi projected alcove.

The snow came up to Dev's thighs, and she plowed through it gamely, moving across the bowl towards the wall of the

enclosure. "I am not sure using a blaster on this is correct." She said as they came to the power plant, encased in a solid wall of snow and ice.

"Maybe on the outside layer." Chester offered.

"Get too close and it'll break it's bits." Oscar was standing with his arms crossed, observing the surface. He removed his light from his belt and shone it on the wall, shaking his head a little. "Anyone got an ice ax?"

The techs all looked at each other. Then Dev cleared her throat. "I think we might. We took an ice kit on our last mission and I think it's still in there." She turned and started back and after a moment, Doug plowed after her.

Chester pulled out his hand blaster and set it on it's lowest setting "I'll see how much I can trim off."

"I'll start here." Oscar moved to the other end. "This is all so fucked up the most normal thing I seen is that bio alt tech today." He shook his head. "Now we get to try and shelter inside an ice ball."

"Not having a great first month of service myself." Chester carefully started working down the edge of the structure. "Maybe I should have stuck to clam harvesting back on Rainier Island."

**

Dev keyed the hatch open and ducked inside, glad to be out of the cold wind for a moment. She waited for Doug to follow her and then palmed the door closed. "It seems we're in for a lot of difficulty."

"You can say that again." Doug pushed his hood back. "I figured three of us trying to melt that ice back there would mean at least one of losing a finger."

That made Dev chuckle a little as she opened the big equipment locker and dug out the ice axes she and Jess had used in the white. She handed one back to Doug and took the second for herself. "Jess said in the worst condition we could move the carriers together and make a shelter that way."

"Well." Doug hefted the ax. "At least no one's likely to go looking for us up here. Last thing I'd wanna see is some death ray from the other side coming hunting for me. That base was ugly."

"Yes." Dev tightened her hood again. "It makes me feel a lot of discomfort to think about our place looking like that."

Doug was briefly silent. "Yeah me too." He said. "I hadn't been there long but it was okay, you know?"

"Yes" Dev turned and headed for the door. "I feel the same way."

Doug followed her out and they started across the bowl, where snow was starting to drift in flurries outlined in the work lights from the carriers. "You do?" He asked. "Not to be a jerk or anything, but I never met any bio's that cared about much before."

Dev thought about that as she walked, the ice crunching under her boots. "Well." She blinked against the cold. "They teach you not to show a lot. It makes natural borns feel discomfort. But we do." She paused. "I do. Jess told me it's all right to say that."

"Huh." Doug tugged his hood a little closer. "You're the first one I've ever talked to for more than like ten seconds." He admitted. "I's kinda weird."

"Well." Dev climbed over the ice hill. "It's strange for me too."

They reached the wall and both Chester and Oscar moved aside to make room for them. Dev took hold of her axe and studied the surface, selecting a spot where Chester had been burning a groove and starting to chop at it. With all four of them together it cut the chill down and soon she was completely absorbed in the effort to expose the power inverters.

She hoped Jess was having good luck as well.

**

"Okay, that's open." Jess clipped the light to her hood and pulled her gloves off, grimacing as she eased the entry panel from it's pocket and turned it over. "We get in there and they get the juice flowing, maybe we can figure out what the hell we're going to do."

"Thought you had that figured out already" Stephen was patiently chipping the ice from the door edge with a screwdriver.

Jess chuckled dryly.

April and Mike were clearing ice from the front of the structure and Oscar's partner Carlos was in his carrier, keeping a scan running to make sure they didn't get surprised.

All under Jess's direction, which Bock hadn't made a move to countermand yet. Jess wondered briefly why. She shook her head and returned her attention to the panel, which now under the warmth of her hand had revealed the tracing of it's circuitry.

Very old. Jess breathed gently on it, studying the etched pathways. "Okay." She said. "Stephen, give me your insignia."
"Huh?"

"Give me your insignia." Jess repeated, slowly. "The thing on your collar."

"I know what my damned insignia is." He unfastened the throat flap on his coat and fished beneath it. "What the hell do you need it for?"

"You never really took any of the tech ops classes, did you." Jess took the insignia from him and bent her head over the tracings. "Or have you just forgotten it all already?"

"Don't be an asshole, Jess."

"I'm not, for a change." She delicately touched the edge of one insignia post to one trace, and licked her lips, half closing her eyes as she touched the second to another.

Nothing.

"Saw the squirt from Bain when he bumped you." Bock spoke up unexpectedly. "Kind of burned my ass."

"Wasn't my choice." Jess tried another combination, with an equal lack of success. "And it didn't do me a damn bit of good seeing as they torched 10." She studied the board. "Matter of fact I didn't even officially accept."

"False modesty?"

Jess sighed. "Now who's being an asshole?" She tried a third trace, and paused, then selected another at random and touched it.

Her hand twitched, as a residual jolt went through the card, and she almost screwed it up. But it held long enough for a low, anticlimactic groaning click to sound in the door next to her, though it didn't move. "Pry it."

Bock got the edge of the screwdriver into the gap he'd been chopping and put pressure against it, leaning his muscular body against the end of the driver as Jess let the circuit card rest against its holder and turned to help him. She picked up a bit of metal they'd pried loose and went to a knee, jamming it into the ridge and shoving hard against it.

With both of them prying, the door moved an inch, reluctantly.

"Hey that's progress." Bock grunted "Nice."

"Larcenous youth." Jess reseated her makeshift pry bar and leaned on it again. "I was breaking into storage silos when I was four."

He snorted, then wryly chuckled. "Figures."

The door opened a bit more, and then they could get a grip on the edge of it with cold stiffened fingers. "Mike. April. C'mere." Jess called to the two rookies, who joined them at once. "Grab this thing and pull."

Four sets of hands gripped the door and hauled backwards, metal grudgingly giving way to powerful bodies as the door screeched open and thumped against the ice.

"Least we'll get out of the wind." Steven sighed. "Lead on, Jesslyn."

Jess obligingly drew her blaster and set her light to high, then cautiously stepped inside.

Wasn't really much to see. The facility was a series of long, corrugated metal boxes set end to end to make corridors all covered by tons of ice and snow. Containers, Jess remembered they were called, which had once held stores of whatever stacked on a cargo ship or carried on trains.

They were rusty and the air smelled rancid, but she kept moving on with the other three behind her. They came to a cross corridor, the square blackness extending to either direction. Far off, they could hear faint bangs and scrapes, echoing softly in the darkness.

"Hope that's the tinkers." April said.

"Me too." Carlos muttered. "This place is complete horror."

Jess moved on past the side corridors and continued down the main one. Another five minutes walking and they entered a big, dark area that seemed to be six or so of the containers all welded together. There were consoles on shelves welded to the walls, but nothing was live. Not even the faintest hint of power was evident in the center.

"I guess this is ops." Stephen remarked, turning around in a circle. "Or something."

"Main control room for the facility." Jess said "I remember seeing the plans for this place somewhere."

"Not going to be useful to us without power." Mike remarked. "Could we power this place off the carriers?"

Jess went over to one of the consoles and touched it. The shelf was clean and the control surfaces looked in reasonable condition. "My tech can probably power it off three salmon and a glow worm but we draw all the power from the carriers we don't have power we need to go get that weapon."

"At least it's warmer in here." April said. "Can I ask? Does anyone really know what happened to our base?"

Jess undid her jacket and folded her arms over her chest. "You saw the same thing I did."

"Which was?" Stephen asked. "Since I didn't see any of it?? He looked at April in question.

The new agent cleared her throat. "We were coming back from Drake's Bay."

Bock swung around to face Jess. "You giving guided tours now?"

"My mother died." Jess answered flatly. "I attended her processing." She added. "Bain mandated I take an escort."

He lifted a hand. "Sorry." He said, gruffly. "Didn't know."

April studied him with a dour expression. "We noticed that standard status messages weren't getting acknowledged, and then we encountered two enemy targets heading east."

"Two? What kind?" Stephen asked.

"TK300's." Jess commented briefly.

Bock folded his arms over his chest. "Just flying in our airspace??" His tone was incredulous.

"We chased them, and when we were on top of them, they blew themselves up." April stated. "At least." She conceded. "That's what we think happened."

"That makes no sense." Bock frowned.

"Not to us either." Jess said. "I got a hit on their sideboard and next thing I knew scan was showing a blowup. We just got clear in time."

"They were hiding something." Arias suggested. "Maybe this new weapon?"

"Maybe." April walked over to one of the consoles and studied it, directing her light on it's surface. "But if that was the case, why did they attack the citadel in force? Didn't they fear the same thing from them?"

"Storm was over them." Jess was standing, just staring off into the shadows. "They were flying free in and out of it. Must be tied in to whatever this new thing is."

"You sure of that?"

Jess felt the raw prickle of temper rise at the skepticism in Bock's voice. "I'm sure I saw at least six TK300's flying through a storm front coming across the range." She said. "We could feel the EMF disruption. Dev was adjusting for it."

"Oh, the wonder child." Bock snorted a little.

"We felt it too." April spoke up quietly. "And with all due respect, Mr. Bock, given the crap we've been through today no one needs to be slighted here."

Jess had turned and felt her back arch under her jacket, but relaxed a bit at the words. She gave April a brief grin, and then turned back to the console. Hopefully Stephen would stop being an ass and rubbing her temper the wrong way.

They were in the field, after all, and all kinds of things happened out here.

Bock gave April a sour look, but refrained from commenting. He walked over and joined Jess at the wall. "Well if that's how it is.." He said, in an undertone. "You collecting supplicants already?"

Jess turned her head and looked him full in the eye. "Why not?" She answered softly. "She's a hell of a lot smarter than you are." She knew he heard the slight rasp in her voice, and he took a step back away from her, his hands coming out of his pockets and lifting up between them.

"Don't get crazy on me, Jess." He told her. "It's not the time or place."

"Take your own advice and shut the fuck up then."

Footsteps behind them made them both turn, as a light entered followed by a short, slight figure in arctic gear. "Hello." Dev removed the cover over her mouth. "We have revealed enough of the structure to determine it's functionality."

"And?" Jess moved closer to her partner, watching the grave, pale eyes focus on her. "D'ja fix it already?"

Dev produced a brief grin. "It will require a power boost. I have instructed Doug to bring his carrier over so we can use it to restart the batteries." She said. "However, I do not know if resuming the heat exchange will allow all of this equipment to function. It has stage six degradation."

"That's pretty bad." Mike commented. "My grad sim was to recommission one of these old stations. Never did get it all the way right."

Dev nodded. "It's not optimal. I would like to suggest that you vacate this facility while power is applied. I do not know what result it will have on this facility."

"So you think it's going to blow everything up?" Jess only just kept from reaching up to push the pale hair out of her partner's eyes. Her hand and arm twitched, in fact, and she clenched her fingers into a fist to keep herself still, surprised at how much effort it took.

"I don't know, but I don't want to take a chance having you be in here." Dev answered honestly and loud enough for everyone to hear her. "It would be better if you were outside."

"Fair enough." Jess agreed. "All right people, let's go outside and see what trouble we can cause." She put her hand on Dev's shoulder and steered her back towards the entrance, clearly expecting the rest of them to follow.

April and Mike promptly did, turning their backs on Stephen who waited almost until they were no longer visible before he reluctantly started moving. "Fucking ridiculous." He muttered, as he cleared the entrance and pulled his light from his pocket. "Absolutely fucking ridiculous."

**

Jess used the back of the ice axe to tap down the stake clenched lightly in one gloved fist. There was now a roughly made tarp over the outer panel, protecting it from the snowfall that was slowly burying everything else.

Under the tarp Dev was kneeling with Oscar next to her, connecting up a set of power leads on the laboriously cleared external interfaces and behind them, parked precariously with its forward skids on the ground and the rear ones up on the snow ridge was Doug and April's carrier.

Oscar picked up the leads and walked over to the front of the carrier, which was also providing a convenient shield for the wind and snow. Doug was already in front and opening an access hatch, running a scanner over the interior.

"Better hurry up before this thing freezes." He told Oscar. "Holy crap it's cold."

Stephen had retreated to the carrier he'd piloted alone, but Mike and April were standing next to Jess, their cold suits fastened all the way up and eye shields in place. Inside the suits it was bearable, despite the sixty below zero temperatures, but any exposed skin suffered immediately.

Dev stood up and stuffed her now gloved hands into her pockets, coming over to stand next to Jess. "The ingress is prepared." She said, her voice muffled by her face cover. "Application of sixteen point five volts across the terminus will stimulate a response."

Oscar got the leads connected then turned, giving them all a nod.

"Go on, Doctor Dev." Jess bumped her with a hip. "Give the sign. Let's see what we're going to get out of this so we can either go inside and get warm, or get into our busses."

Dev hopped in place a time or two then she trudged over to where Oscar and Doug were standing. "Go ahead." She said. "Please make sure it's exactly sixteen point five."

"Roger that." Doug tuned his comp, and pressed a small relay inside the hatch, resulting in a slight whine and thump, as the leads went from leaden gray to purple, and power surged across them lighting the snow and then hitting the power panel of the facility.

"Cease." Dev said.

The purple faded, and then for a moment it was all dark and gray again. The wind blew a gust of snow into their little alcove, dusting them all with a covering of ice.

Then with a crackling bang that made them all jump, the power panel came to life, and a second later, lights came on and outlined them all in the old fashioned green tinted glow.

That was followed by a series of bangs and thumps, and a moment later than that, a puff of discharged air came rolling out of the entrance behind them spraying dust and ice crystals almost to the back of the open space.

"Interesting." Dev commented.

"Glad we weren't inside the damn thing." Jess observed.

Oscar was studying a hand scanner. "Power readings coming up." He said, briefly "Looks like things are trying to boot. Good job, Dev." He glanced at Mike. "Want to see if your sim'd work?"

"Let's all move inside." Jess noted her partner's shivering. "Nice work, Devvie." She casually draped her arm over Dev's

shoulders, and started towards the now lit entrance.

Stephen met them as they reached it, hunching his shoulders in his parka as he entered the squared off portal after Jess and Dev. "One good thing. No one's around here for a thousand miles." He commented, as they trooped down the hall. "If any of this comes up, we can get a high level long range scan going from here."

"We can open a channel with home base too." Jess said. "Let them know what's going on."

Stephen eyed her. "Let everyone know how screwed up we are?"

"This isn't some blown mission, Stephen." Jess felt her body relaxing as she felt the air moving in the hallways, already warmer than the outside. "Two bases are blanked. It's not like Bain doesn't know."

They entered the central space and it already looked far more friendly. Panels were showing some kind of life, and there was an audible hum around them.

"Okay." Mike pushed his hood down and moved to one of the panels. "Let me see if I remember any of this from class."

Oscar sat down at one of the scan consoles, and the rest of them drifted around, getting a better look at what was, to them, ancient technology.

But there was power, and a very gradual warming of the air, and that was all to the good.

There was an awkward moment of silence, then Jess drew in a breath and straightened. "Okay." She said. "Let's split up and see what we've got to work with here. Check for stores, and weapons. I doubt anything's going to be useful, but you never know. We're going to have to stay here long enough to put a plan together to insert."

It was the tipping moment, and she knew it. Stephen could choose to challenge her at this point, or follow her lead. If he challenged her, she also had a choice – to step back, or fight.

"Sounds reasonable to me." Bock said, somewhat anticlimactically. "I'll check the central stores." He pointed at the back of the central space, opposite the door they came in, then headed towards it, shrugging his hood back.

Aw. Jess actually had to admit to a guilty sense of disappointment. April and Doug had started off without comment towards the front corridors, leaving her and Dev standing in the middle of the control center together.

Dev gave the room a speculative look, then she tipped her head back and looked up at her partner. "If the precipitation continues the carriers are going to be covered." She commented. "I don't think that would be optimal."

"Me either. Let's go look." Jess indicated the front entrance. "When this place was commissioned, those suckers didn't exist."

**

Outside, they found the snow slowing down, and the carriers only buried up to their skids. Jess studied them, then turned to her partner. "Doesn't look like that much of a problem."

"No." Dev agreed. "I really didn't think it was, I just wanted to talk to you and didn't want everyone listening."

Jess looked at her in surprised delight. "For real?"

"Yes." Dev smiled a little.

"You going to tell me I'm good looking again?" Her partner asked hopefully.

"If you want me to, of course." Dev said. "But what I wanted to say first is, that man Bock seems to me to be incorrect."

"Ah." Jess stuck her hands in her pockets. "What do you mean by incorrect?" She glanced across the now lit central opening, where the carriers were parked in their orderly circle. She could see the internal lights on in Carlos and Oscar's bus, where the older agent was keeping watch until they got the base systems working.

Dev thought about the question. "He does not wish you well." She said, slowly. "I think he wants to cause you discomfort."

"He's jealous." Jess nodded. "He heard about Bain wanting to promote me. He wanted that job."

"But that's not your fault."

"No, of course it isn't, but he not man enough to be mad at Bain and I'm within reach." Jess sighed. "I didn't care when he was promoted. Not sure why he cares that I am. He was going to get a senior rank at North when he rebuilt it."

"That's not really what I meant." Dev frowned. "I think he wants to do bad things." She said. "I get a bad feeling about him."

Jess crossed her arms and leaned her shoulder against the metal entranceway. "Bad things.. as in, you think he's on the wrong side?"

The bio alt looked disturbed. "I'm not really sure what I mean, but something... maybe it's programming? Tells me not to trust him."

"Ah." Jess straightened. "Okay that's different." She considered, reaching a hand out to capture an errant snowflake. She cupped it in her hand and showed it to Dev. "Every one of them's unique."

"Like you." Her partner said.

"Like you." Jess smiled in response, then sobered. "Stephen was the one who told me about your project." She said. "He kept nudging me. I wondered... but then I forgot about that after we met."

Dev watched her with alert eyes.

"We kind of got distracted by you... the whole issue of trust and our techs and the leak kind of got pushed under the rug." Jess mused. "I forgot about Stephen. He was all ready to escort me to the shuttle, too."

"The day we got there?"

"Yup."

Dev caught a snowflake herself and examined it. "I don't think the man Bain trusted him."

"I don't know about.. " Jess paused, as a memory surfaced. "Huh. When we met on the shuttle..." She remembered the moment, Bain seemingly sure if they left Stephen alone long enough he'd go and tell... go and tell what? To who? Bricker? Or someone else? "Maybe." She murmured.

"At the first lunch thing we had, he seemed okay." Dev said. "But now, he's saying incorrect things about me." She observed. "Remember he spoke sternly to the agent Sandy?"

Oh. Crap. Jess gazed intently at her partner. "You're right."

"I don't understand why it's different now. I didn't change."

"No, you didn't. But." Jess tapped her on the nose. "That was before you showed your stuff. Maybe as long as he thought you were just an experiment... one he thought would fail... you were okay, but now he's scared of what you can do."

"But why would he be? He's already in charge."

And that was true. Jess shook her head. "I don't know. But anyway, lets go back in side so your nose stops turning blue and see what we can find stashed away in this place. Probably nothing but long frozen whale crap but you never know." She put her hand on Dev's back. "I'll keep your idea in mind though. He's being a prick, no doubt about it."

Dev exhaled in some relief, glad she'd told her thoughts to her partner. The uneasiness she'd felt around Bock had seemed quiet strange to her and she now felt much better having expressed the oddness to Jess. "What's a prick?"

Jess chuckled. "It's slang for a male sexual organ." She steered Dev down the right hand side corridor as they headed back down towards the control center.

"I see." Dev commented. "Why would you say he was acting like a male sexual organ? They showed us vid of that as part of the sex class. He wasn't going up and down." She said. "At least, not that I could tell."

Jess closed her eyes and stifled a laugh.

Dev wasn't really sure what was funny. She shrugged and studied the walls instead, spotting a door in one of them. "Is that a storage space?"

"Yeah. Stand back." Jess didn't bother with the archaic locking system. She drew her blaster and shot the hatch with casual accuracy, leaning back and kicking the door open with one booted foot. A puff of dusty air emerged into the hallway, and she waited for it to clear before she poked her head inside and shone her light around. "Nothing."

They continued down the hallway, discovering another corridor at the end that was set at right angles. Everything was lit with the weak, green glow and it made distinguishing things difficult. There were old signs on the walls, and Jess let her fingers trail over them as she walked, feeling the roughness of the corrugated metal walls.

The words on the signs were almost meaningless. Jess wasn't sure what most of the signs were for, save the ones that marked muster stations, and one that seemed to have something to do with weapons. "There's another door. Lets try it." She studied the roll down hatch, then aimed and fired at what appeared to be a latch at the bottom center of it.

The door abruptly let loose and flew up, sending Jess hurtling backwards, her arms wrapping around Dev and hauling them both against the far wall.

With a boom, the door hit the roof, and a thick cloud of rusty dust invaded the hallway, bringing a taste of dry, rancid age on the back of the tongue.

"Pah." Jess cautiously looked around, her back turned towards the door as she set her body between Dev and the opening.

“That was exciting.” Dev commented mildly, apparently content to stay where she was, wrapped up in Jess's arms. She really didn't think the dust was dangerous, but she had no intention of protesting.

“Sorry.” Jess straightened up and released her, dusting off her jacket. “Wasn't sure what that was.” She cleared her throat and turned to study the now open, apparently inoffensive door. She walked back over to it and turned her light on, making show of inspecting it carefully.

Dev joined her, putting one arm around her and giving her a quick hug with it. “Thank you for ensuring my safety.” She said. “What's in here?”

“Good question.” Jess edged inside. “Let's find out.” It was definitely a storage chamber of some kind, the inside walls were lined with locked cabinets, and plastic boxes were lined up on pallets up and down a narrow space with two aisles. “You check the containers, I'll open those cabinets.”

Dev willingly went to the first one, studying it intently. On the top there was a piece of plas, but the characters on it had long faded off. The container was closed by a hasp and a lock, and she drew out her multiple tool and applied it to opening the device.

Programming was strong here. As she lifted the lock and held the tool in her other hand, she felt the patterning driving her motions and she inserted a small, thin probe into the bottom of the cylinder, a picture coming strongly to her of what the inside looked like.

A moment later, and it was open. She removed the lock and opened up the container, shining her light inside.

“Did you just pick that lock?” Jess asked, from across the chamber.

Dev nodded. “There are some kind of frozen units in here.”

“Frozen units everywhere.” Jess joined her and looked inside. “Ah hah!” She hauled out one of the packages, knocking it against the edge of the container. “Rations.”

Dev picked one up and looked at it. “Quite old.”

“Probably completely useless.” Her partner agreed. “But we'll take some back. You never know.” She closed the container and went back to the cabinet. “C'mere and pick this one. I'm lousy at it. I'd rather use my gun.” She held the cabinet door still as Dev applied her skills to it. “And there's armament in there that could ruin both our days.”

“Yes.”

“Been a long enough day already.”

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Two hours later, they were gathered back in central ops. Cases had been dragged into make work tables, and two portable heaters had been located and were adding their warmth to the room. Oscar had gotten the comms systems online, and he was patiently reworking the radio bands to match the ones currently in use.

Parkas were strewn about the space, draped over boxes and hanging on console edges, the dark black of standard jumpsuits standing out against the glare of the phosphorescent light and the dusty gray of the consoles.

“We got power up to everything?” Jess entered from the corridor, an old style brown pack on her back that she unloaded onto one of the boxes.

“Yes.” Dev looked around from the control console she was seated under, her head halfway inside the metal structure.

“There are a lot of ruined components.” She added mournfully. “It's not very optimal.”

“No, I would guess not.” Jess peered inside the pack. “Okay, so I dug up enough of these things to give everyone a feed if we can figure out how to heat some water.”

“There's a dispenser in that second chamber.” April spoke up. “I turned it on when I went through – it might have done something since then.” She came over and peered at the packs' contents. “What are those?”

“Rations. Old style.” Jess held one up. “Really old style. They used to dehydrate cooked stuff and zap it into these bags. You add boiling water to them and they become something.”

April looked skeptical. “Really?” She examined one. “All these years.. you sure they're not just dried seal barf??

“Not sure at all.” Jess readily confessed. “But all I've got in my bus is two days worth of fish rolls so if we can use some of this stuff it'll make life easier.”

“Yeah, us too.” April agreed. “Mike, did you take a bigger stock?”

Arias was paging through a personal pad on the desk, his jaw resting on his fist. “Got five days worth onboard.” He said.

“We were going to make a stop in Quebec.”

Jess paused with her hands on the pack and looked around. "Where'd Stephen go off to?" She asked April casually. "Thought he came back here."

"He was just here." The younger agent replied. "Said something about starting up the backup generators, maybe charging the carriers off it."

"Ah." Jess picked up the pack. "Yeah, that's right. His specialty was mech." She headed towards the bare, half lit convenience chamber in the section past the control center. "Might as well make myself useful too." She added. "Want to give me a hand?"

"Sure." April caught up to her as they reached the chamber. "You have any idea what the plans going to be yet?"

Jess put the pack down and examined the dispenser. It had dusty lights lit on the front and she pressed the hot water tab, jumping back when it started sputtering and spewing liquid everywhere. "First, we let the corps know what the story is." She said. "Then, we find a hop point closer to the target."

"In the white?" April removed one of the food packs and fitted the spigot to the small plas intake valve on it and carefully triggered it to fill. "So is your theory the new thing is dangerous when it's mixed with met?"

Jess filled a second pack, and set it aside to do whatever it was it was supposed to do. "That line turns red when it's ready, according to comp."

"Uh huh." April retrieved more rations.

"I think they've got the advantage when it's mixed with met, or those two wouldn't have blown themselves up when we caught them. They were two on two, no reason not to turn and fight if they had the better weapon." Jess agreed. "Not sure where the jump point needs to be yet – but probably."

"I found this too." Jess pulled out a stack of cups and some packets. "I don't know where these guys hid all this stuff, but that's freeze dried coffee."

"Coffee?" April's eyes opened wider in surprise. "I had an elder who claimed he tasted that once. No one ever believed him."

"Excuse me."

They both turned to find Dev entering the space, the bio alt's face smudged with dust. "Hey Devvie." Jess said. "Want to try some coffee with us?"

"Actually, some water would be good." Dev demurred. "I heard there was a dispenser in here?" She wiped her hands off on a cloth clipped to her belt. "This air is very dry. A little like the creche."

Jess filled a cup with cold water for her, and handed it over. "Between snow and the desal, they always had plenty of water here. Just like we did at the base." She said. "I found showers and sleeping quarters. Pretty basic but not bad."

Dev's eyes had lit up at the mention of showers, but she silently sucked her water down.

"Must have been hell, living up here though." April said, carefully opening one of the coffee packets into a cup and smelling it. "Oh, that's weird." She applied some hot water to it, and set it down, observing it as it bubbled a little and emitted steam into the air.

Jess duplicated her motions and swirled the water around a little. "Kinda looks like mud."

There were crates lined up against the walls. They took their cups and sat down on them. "It's late." Jess said. "Soon as we get comms up we should get some downtime while comp updates from HQ."

April nodded, taking a cautious sip from her cup. She mouthed the substance and then swallowed it, licking her lips thoughtfully. "That's not bad."

"No, it's not." Jess agreed. "Got a kick to it." She half turned and offered Dev her cup. "Want a taste?"

Dev took it and swallowed a little, then handed the cup back. "They gave us something like that in the creche." She said. "They said it was chicory or something. Some bark they'd replicated. It didn't last though, some fungus killed it."

A soft rumble made them all jump a little, then Jess put her hand on the wall. "Generators." She said. "Guess Stephen got them going." She walked out into the hallway and stuck her head in the central ops area. "C'mon in and get some of this fantastic grub."

Then she went back and sat down on the crate next to Dev. It was, by her internal clock, well after late watch and they'd been on the go since before dawn. She was tired, and there seemed to be really no end to the tasks ahead of them, and as of yet she had no solid plan.

She could, of course, turn the whole problem over to Stephen but she knew she wasn't going to do that.

The rest of the group entered, and everyone took possession of a food pack, using their multi tools to open them and studying the results.

“What is this?” Chester asked poking at it.

Dev looked at the partitioned tray under the stiff plastic. “Those are carrots.” She said, in a surprised tone. “I think.”

“Carrots?” April picked up a small, orange item. She put it in her mouth and chewed it. “Huh.”

Jess picked up a chunk of brown something and sniffed it, then bit into it. It was, to her surprise, some kind of solid with a rich, pungent taste. “That’s meat.”

“Meat?” Dev tasted it cautiously. “Meat of what?” She stopped chewing. “Jess, this isn’t bear, is it?”

Her partner chuckled wryly. “No.” She picked up the packet and read the almost faded to illegibility label on the bottom.

“Pot roast. Well that’s damn helpful.”

“I think this is beef.” Mike had been chewing his meal thoughtfully.

“Beef?”

“Cow meat.” The young agent said. “I had it once. They found a deep freeze where I lived when I was home on leave once. Unfroze some of it and cooked it. Tasted like this.”

“Huh” Jess ate another piece. “It’s good.” She said. “Different than fish, anyway.”

“Yeah, not bad.” April agreed. “This white stuff is okay too.”

Chester entered, wiping his big hands off. “Got comms up.” He looked satisfied. “Synching the crypto keys from my carrier now. Should be ready to go in about ten minutes.” He picked up a tray and sat down with it. “I told Carlos to head on in. Bet he could use some grub.”

Stephen came past the doorway then paused, and entered. “There you all are.” He said. “Got the gens up. Plenty of power to spare.” He entered and went over to the processor. “Found their weapons store too. May be something useful there.” He said. “Things are looking up, huh?”

Jess watched his back, seeing the tension in his posture. She recalled Dev’s suspicions, and felt a prickle of her own chase up and down her spine. “Yeah, sure are.” She spoke into the almost uncomfortable silence. “We’re right on track.”

Stephen turned and smiled briefly at them, taking a seat on a box, drumming his heels on the side of it.

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[Continued in Part 20](#)