

Partners

Part 20

“Sync's taking longer than I thought.” Jess commented, studying the screen. “What do you figure, two more hours?”

“Yeah.” Mike agreed. “About that, and the charge up should be done by then too.” He glanced around. “What is it, near midwatch?”

“After.” Jess dusted her hands off. “Get some rest if you can, people. We got two hours before we can transmit. I want to make sure HQ knows what's going on before we go on the move.” She waited a minute after she finished talking but no one commented back, accepting the plan without question.

Good sign.

Carlos made a final entry, then stood. “I'm going to bunk in my rig.” He said briefly. “Just in case.” He ran his fingers through his dark, dense black hair. “I'll build a link to comms in here and relay.” He told Jess. “Everything looks pretty good though. Old, missing a lot of progs, but it'll compile.”

He stretched and twisted his body. “See you in two hours.”

“Aw, who's gonna see us up here?” Stephen protested. “It's white out for a hundred miles. Packs taking two inches per hour. No one can fly in that.”

Carlos studied him. “No one was supposed to be able to fly in charged met either.” He paused. “No offense.” He motioned his partner to join him and they left the control center together.

“Probably just want some private bunk time.” Stephen called after him, in a wry, meant to be overheard tone. “Well, I'm not. I found a nice hammock and I'm going to grab it.” He got up and sauntered out and down one of the back corridors.

Jess watched him until he disappeared, and then she spent a moment exchanging looks with the rest of the teams still in the center. The two younger agents gazed stolidly back at her, April folding her arms over her chest in a shift of body posture that told it's own tale.

The nomads were like that. Silent and suspicious most of the time, never trusting anyone's motives but their own. Jess knew them from her childhood, their groups appearing from time to time at Drake's Bay to trade.

Weren't much for authority, she remembered. Not from her people, not from their own, save the caravan leader, who fought for his position and held onto it with an iron fist. Certainly her father, who had been the Drake of that time, hadn't impressed them except for the one time.

Jess smiled. The one time, when they'd started a fight in the kitchen and she'd watched, with a child's fright the destruction until the door had opened, and her father had come in, and she'd seen that change for the first time.

Eyes gone flat, and hard, body arched, blaster held in his hand with a comfort level that had told it's own tale. They'd caught one sight of his posture and stopped, knowing instantly what they were facing. Hands went up, bodies backed away from him, and just like that peace was restored.

They were tough, and hard, but they knew where the authority was.

That turned Jess's thoughts back to her own situation. Nominally, Stephen was the ranking op. Bain had given him control over the rebuild of North, and hadn't removed him from his position at 10, and that position at least on paper, put him in charge since Bain hadn't filed an official change of rank for her yet.

Interesting, that he wasn't claiming that. Jess mulled that over. Maybe avoiding blame if it all went sour?

Yeah. She felt disappointed, expecting more from someone she'd considered a friend. “Hm” She grunted audibly. “I'm going to go stake out a bunk. Dev?”

Dev was busy at a console, and now she turned in the chair and faced her partner. “I would really enjoy going to find a bed with you.” She said, in a very serious tone. “But I'm working on a mod for this system, and it will be about another ten minutes or so.”

Jess was glad the lights were half assed, because she knew she was blushing. She hadn't expected the frankness of the answer, but she reckoned she probably should have. Dev was just like that. “Well thanks, Devvie.” She drawled. “Take your time. You're worth the wait.”

Dev accepted the compliment with a smile, and turned back to the console.

“We'll go grab some rest.” April cleared her throat and pointed at the forward corridor. “I guess what was, sometime, a ready

room is up there. Mike?”

“Right behind ya.” Arias picked up his duty pack and slung it over one shoulder. “Be back in two.” He gave Jess a faint salute. “Have a good rest, boss.”

The two young agents and their partners made a show of parading out with their techs behind them, leaving Dev and Jess alone in the control room.

No doubt at all what they were thinking. No doubt at all that's why she was blushing even harder, to the point where it was making her a little lightheaded.

To cover that, she walked over and dropped into a chair next Dev, rubbing her face and clearing her throat. . “What'cha doing?” She asked. “Aside from talking dirty to me?”

Dev studied her face. “Was I doing that? I didn't mean to.” She frowned. “What part of that was incorrect?”

Jess blinked and felt the heat fade a little. “It wasn't... um.” She glanced around despite knowing they were alone. “It's okay. I don't care if they know.”

“Know what?”

Jess nearly bit her tongue. “Uh... well, I mean, you know. I don't mind they know we hooked up.”

“Hooked up?” Dev tilted her head. “What did we hook up to?”

It made Jess laugh, in an almost helpless way. “Aw hell what did I just get myself into.” She sighed, rubbing her face again. “I meant it's okay that they know we practice sex with each other.”

“Ah' Dev's expression cleared. “If that's so, then why are you in such discomfort?” She put a hand on Jess's knee. “I'm glad it's okay. I just don't want to get us in trouble in any way.”

Jess edged a little closer. “I'm not really in discomfort.” She said. “It just caught me offguard. We don't usually share personal stuff with each other in the field... at least most of us don't Sandy never cared.”

‘I see.’

They were both silent for a moment, then they looked at at the same time and into each other's eyes. Then Jess smiled and dropped her gaze. “So what are ya working on?” She asked again, in a quiet tone. “Looking for bears again?”

“No.” Dev acknowledged a surprising sense of confusion, and felt a heating on her skin that made her blink. “No, I was calibrating the scan.” She indicated a screen, with very old fashioned display graphics. “It was set to only thirty or forty degrees from azimuth. I imported wiremaps from our carrier to give it three hundred sixty range.”

Jess leaned her elbow on the console and rested her chin on her hand. “You sound so damn sexy when you talk like that.”

Dev felt the heat increase. “W.. what?” She asked, softly.

Okay. Jess got up and ruffled her partner's hair. “Let me get out of here before I get us both in trouble.” She said. “C'mon back to that set of racks I found just behind the wall over there. I'll set up some hammocks.”

“Okay.” Dev agreed, confused but not displeased. “It won't be long. I just want to set up a long range scan. The amplifiers in this facility are quite powerful.”

Jess grinned at her. “Sexy.” She concluded, winking before she turned and left, and a compressed air silence fell on the control room.

Dev leaned her elbows on her knees and clasped her hands together, having little to do except watch the mapping schema on the screen while the blood slowly faded from the surface of her skin. It left her feeling a little weak, and a little chilled, a very strange sensation she really wasn't sure about.

What had Jess meant? And, was it good or bad? Dev rubbed her fingers together. From her parting smile and wink, she supposed it was good, but it had made her certainly feel strange and it looked like it had affected Jess the same way.

She wondered if it had anything to do with that love thing, and if it did, did that mean she had gotten that same thing too?

With a sigh, she straightened up and turned her chair back around to the console. The program she'd just finished entering now seemed unimportant and boring, when her body was urging her to get up and go follow Jess to the space she'd found, wanting the door to be closed behind them so she could explore this whole sexy thing some more.

They only had two hours to rest, after all. She studied the readout, and then reached over to make an adjustment, finding it very hard to focus. But she drew in a breath and released it, wanting the scan in place before she abandoned her post.

There were many things she felt around them that weren't optimal, and though Carlos was watching from the outside, the carriers had limited scan and they were stuck in a relatively unprotected space.

She wanted them to be safe. She felt very uneasy about things.

A soft noise made her look up, and she half turned to see Stephen Bock entering the space again. He went over to the comms set and leaned on the shelf, peering at it.

"Hello sir." She greeted him quietly.

He jerked in reaction and swiveled, spotting her on the other side of the room. "Oh." He said. "Thought you went to get some rest?"

"I will." Dev acknowledged. "I am almost done with this routine. Then I will go."

Bock watched her warily. "What are you doing to it?" He jerked his head in the direction of the console.

For a moment, she paused, studying his face. "Just importing the scan routines from the carrier." She answered. "The ones here were very old."

His shoulders relaxed. "Yeah, I'm sure they are, kid." He said. "So, how are you liking working with Jess?"

That, at least, she could answer readily and did. "I like it very much." She responded. "I find Agent Drake very competent and pleasant to work with."

"Really?" He walked over towards her. "C'mon, kid. We all know Jess. She's no picnic."

"What's a picnic?" Dev inquired in a mild tone. "I don't know what that is, so I can't comment on whether or not Agent Drake is or is not one of those."

Bock stared at her. "She screw you yet, kid?"

Dev regarded him quietly. "The only reference I have to screwing is attaching something with a metal fastener using a hand tool. So I would have to say no, she has not done that." She paused. "Nor can I really imagine a situation where she would be required to. Bio alts are biological organisms, sir. We don't require screws or bolts."

Bock looked intently at her. Then he took a step back and laughed briefly. "Okay, whatever kid." He turned and lifted his hand in a wave, disappearing back down the corridor he'd come from.

That, Dev considered, had been interesting but not in a good way. Her eyes flicked to the console, glad to see that the programming had run its course, and the scan routine was starting up. She pulled the pad over and keyed the alerts to her portable scanner, then coded the console to lock, putting in her own ident and clearing the screen.

She got up and shook herself, turning to look carefully around the room before she finally and gladly quit it, heading around the corner and hauling up short before she crashed right into Jess. "Burfp."

"Sh." Jess touched her lips. "I was just being psychotically overprotective and making sure Stephen behaved." She leaned forward and removed her fingers, then replaced them with a quick, gentle kiss. "I loved the screw and bolt comment. Nearly gave myself away laughing."

Dev reasoned that she'd done something quite right, and returned the kiss, a very pleasant jolt of warmth in the neverending chill of the station. Then she felt Jess's arm encircle her, and they walked along the hallway only a few steps before Jess triggered a door and they ducked inside.

"You handled that pretty slick." Jess complimented her, as she paused to survey her scrounging. "How dy'a like this?"

This turned out to be what looked like a watch station. Her pack and Jess's were on a metal table bolted to the wall, and there was a big, deep shelf built into the opposite wall that was covered in layers of some kind of springy material.

Dev studied it. "I think I would very much like to lay down on that."

"Good, Me too." Jess seemed pleased with her reaction. "Let's shower off, and get a power nap."

The watch station turned out to have a wash down chamber. Jess knowledgeably started it up, and the small space was filled suddenly with the bright smell of water hitting steel and a blast of steam that tickled Dev's face.

She was glad to see the shower. While Jess retrieved both of their sanitary packs she unfastened the catches on her jumpsuit and started to take it off.

A moment later, and her fingers were being removed from the fabric and Jess's took their place. "Let me do that."

It seemed strange to Dev, but she didn't object, feeling her body relax as the warmth of the steam heated the space they were in and the fabric was peeled back from her skin. "That man was not happy talking to me."

"No." Jess agreed. "I don't really know what got up his shorts either. When we talked about it I was the one who went ballistic over the idea. He was just talking Bricker's line. Wonder what made him turn like that." She smiled as Dev undid the catches on the front of her jumpsuit, an adorably serious look on her face. "Or was he just putting feelers out to see if you were going to jank me."

Dev looked up, one pale eyebrow hiking up a little.

"If you were going to play the game." Jess explained. "Be political with him, and try to suck up." She stepped out of her suit and steered Dev into the shower, carefully testing the temperature with one hand before pulling them both under.

"Jess."

"Yeah?" She started to playfully scrub Dev with a handful of soft soap.

"I didn't understand one word of what you just said." Dev said, mournfully. "This wasn't like the shell thing, was it?"

Jess laughed. "No." She said. "He was testing you. To see if you'd say something bad about me."

"Oh!" Dev got a handful of soap and spread it on Jess's bare chest. "Okay, I get that!" She was glad to put the conversation in perspective. "Did he really think I would say something bad about you? I would never do that." She said. "I think he's very incorrect."

"I think maybe he's a little jealous." Jess cupped her face in both hands and ducked her head to brush her lips against Dev's. "He never got along with any of his partners. Never was that successful in the field." She gently rinsed the soap out of Dev's hair. "He got the position more by sucking up to Bricker than skill and he knows it."

That sounded sad to Dev. She didn't much like Bock, but she thought it was a bad thing to be so unhappy. "You were with him when we got to the citadel."

"I was." Jess rested her arms on Dev's shoulders. "He was walking me out. I thought .." She paused. "He told me he was doing it as a friend. That he'd miss me." She gazed thoughtfully at Dev. "Now I wonder."

This time it was Dev who stepped forward, finding the soap covered, powerful form in front of her becoming far more interesting than Stephen Bock. She touched Jess's skin, and felt the water hitting her rapidly sensitizing body. "He doesn't want me to succeed." She did comment, before Jess pressed against her, and she lost track of why that had meaning.

"Forget him." Jess bit down gently on the edge of her ear. "We've got two hours. Let's just lose our minds."

Dev tried to make a picture of that in her head, and then erased it, after she got past the stuff inside her skull leaking out her ear, or possibly being sucked out of her ear by Jess's nibbling.

It felt very good. "Okay." She stepped with Jess into the flow of the water, watching the liquid sheet off her partner's body, studying it in the off color light as Jess ruffled her hair and washed the soap out. She reached out to run her fingers over the pale golden surface, tracing a long scar from her ribcage down to her hip.

It looked old, and faded, but prominent amidst the lighter, fainter tracings scattered over the surface. Aside from that Jess' skin was smooth, and soft, fitting around the bone and muscle that was evident just underneath.

"Wanna know how I got that one?" Jess was observing this exploration with a mild and wry expression.

Dev leaned closer. "I'm sure you were doing something excellent."

"I'm sure I fell down the side of a pier piling back home like a dork and ripped myself wide open on an old and rusty nail." Jess gently nudged her out of the water and shut it down. "Drenched half of Drake's Bay in blood running back into the lower caves screaming my fool head off."

"Really?" Dev removed one of the flat, compressed towels from her pack and opened it, drying her skin off.

"Yeah my first leave from school." Jess sighed. "I told them I wrestled with a shark when I got back. Got cred points for that, at least."

Dev smiled, imagining it. "I saw a picture of a shark." She toweled her hair dry. "Have you seen one really?"

Jess smiled back, tossing her towel over the bolted shelf and plucking Dev's from her fingers and sending it to join hers. She moved to the padded platform and sprawled on it, extending her long legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "I've seen one." She confirmed, as Dev joined her. "I've swam with them."

Dev considered that. "The one in the picture had very big teeth."

Jess rolled onto her stomach and reached around to point at the back of one shoulder. "Look there." She waited for Dev to hike herself up on an elbow and inspect the spot. "That's what their big teeth leave when they bite you."

"Oh. Wow." Dev looked at the triangular scar, deep and thick, and knotted. "That must have been very uncomfortable."

Jess shrugged. "About as much as any of them." She let herself back down. "We were fighting over a four foot long grouper. I won."

Dev's eyes went wide, in silence.

Her partner grinned. "Lesson for you, Devvie. Don't get between me and my dinner."

"I will absolutely remember that." Dev curled her arm around and put her head down on it. It was tolerably warm in the

chamber but she was glad when Jess pulled the lightweight cover over them both from her service pack and then squirmed closer, bringing a welcome warmth as she settled against Dev.

Something was niggling at her conscience, some detail was pecking gently at the back of her head, but just when Dev went to focus on it, Jess's hand touched her hip and her body reacted, driving the niggling back out of her mind.

She felt her body react to the touch, a gentle pulse of desire filling her guts. Then Jess's lips brushed against her shoulder and she put aside all thoughts of sharks and scars. She pressed closer and started her own, gentle and hesitant nibble on the edge of Jess's ear, amid a waft of soap scent from her still damp hair.

A sound made them both go still. Jess's hand moved from Dev's hip to her shoulder, and she lifted her head, ears cocked. "Sh."

Dev remained silent, and kept her hands still. The sound had been mechanical in nature, and she wondered if it was just something in the systems they had just recently restarted.

She felt .. Dev frowned. She decided she actually felt discomfort from the interruption. She wanted to continue their touching and the rest of it, no matter the fact that she knew they were in a non optimal place.

Doctor Dan had been absolutely right about that.

There were no more sounds, and after a minute more of silent listening, Jess half shrugged and leaned forward, kissing Dev on the lips and starting that feeling up all over again.

Probably just was a piece of machinery. Dev stroked the skin on the inside of Jess's leg, and and felt the muscle tense lightly under her touch. Her partner shifted a little and curled an arm around her and she moved closer, pressing her body against Jess's.

It felt very good.

She wished they had more than two hours.

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There hadn't been time, really to sleep. But Dev felt good and her body seemed rested, or at least, contented as she lay in the circle of Jess's arms listening to her partner's soft breathing.

In twenty minutes or thereabouts, they would need to get up and go send the message, and after that, Jess would tell them what the plan was.

Dev felt sure there was a plan. Jess seemed relaxed before they'd retired, and she seemed relaxed now, her hands open and at ease and no hint of tension in the body pressed up against her own.

It was nice to just lay here quietly together. It made it possible for her to set aside the fact they were in a strange place, and in the middle of a lot of trouble. Dev idly observed Jess's arm, the burned marks faded in the dim light and that made her turn her head slightly to look at her own shoulder.

The mark had healed, mostly. It was no longer an angry red, instead, it was taking on a darker hue that was lighter than Jess's, but seemed to look all right against her pale skin. It was still a bit sensitive, but it made Dev smile, knowing there was one almost just like it on her partner.

Made them part of each other, sort of. Dev drew in a breath and released it, setting her head down on the folded packing that made their pillow just as her portable comp let out a soft complaint.

Dev reached quickly out and grabbed it, stifling the noise as she drew it close to her and triggered the screen, waiting for it to clear and resolve.

She looked at the data, then without through comprehension her body tensed as what she was seeing and as she did, she felt Jess stir behind her, the agent's tall body arching against her as her head lifted up and she peered over Dev's shoulder.

"What's up, Devvie?" Jess blinked and cleared her vision, focusing on the screen now held closer where she could see it. For a moment, she just stopped breathing, as a prickle of alarm lifted the hairs along her spine and her muscles all tightened. "Oh shit."

"That does not sound good." Dev was already sitting up and moving out of the way as she felt Jess bolt upright, and a moment later the agent's naked body was flickering past her and heading for her jumpsuit. "It appears ships are heading in this direction."

"Wrong kind of ships." Jess was already fastening up her suit and reaching for her weapons. "We gotta get out of here. Someone ratted us."

Oh, that was really not good. Dev got her jumpsuit on and slung her portable comp over her shoulder as she reached for her boots to tug them on. "Those are enemy targets?" She glanced again at the screen, which was just a wiremap at longrange,

and not that discernible to her.

“Oh yea.” Jess got all her weapons in place and moved for the door at a gathering run. “I can tell by the pattern. Not ours.” She drew her hand blaster and as she came out the door she slapped a dusty panel on the wall about a foot over her own head.

Instantly, a klaxon blared, and the lights changed to an odd shade of gray green. “Stay behind me, Dev.” Jess ordered. “Only people who knew we were here are here with us.”

Not good. “Suboptimal.” Dev said. “Do we need to get away from here?”

“Oh yeah.”

Dev started a program running as she moved quickly behind her partner, as they ran down the hall and around the corner into the control center, met a moment later by April and Chester coming from the other direction.

“What the hell?” April saw the gun in Jess's hand and drew her own, making a tight circle and shoving Chester back against the wall.

“Trouble coming.” Jess went to the comp and flipped it through it's screens. “Batallion inbound, ten targets, KR's.”

“Shit.” April, rookie or no, got it. “We have to get moving.” She grabbed her jacket as Mike Arias came into the center, taking one look at her and grabbing his own outer gear. “Need to get the buses running.”

Mike stepped forward one more step, April got her arm in her jacket, Chester rebounded from the wall he'd been bumped into and a breath later the room was full of blaster fire.

Full of yelling and motion and the sizzle of ions hitting metal.

One moment Dev was tapping on the screen, the next moment she was grabbed and held, a rough tension and violence that made her throat catch. She heard Jess yell, and then realized it was Stephen Bock holding her when his voice answered.

“Don't move, bitch. I know you don't want me to waste her.”

“I'll waste you regardless, Stephen.” Jess's voice sounded cold, and rough. “The rest of you – out of here! Move!”

“Stop!” Bock yelled over her. “Just give it up! It's over! You're done! Interforce is done! For craps sake die easy!”

“Fuck you, whore!”

This was not good. Dev grabbed the arm holding her and shoved outward, bowing her body as she turned and pushed herself backwards, taking him with her as they both crashed into the console.

It surprised him. She felt his grip shift and she twisted, slamming her elbow back with all the force she could, feeling a clamp come down on her neck that cut off her breathing.

She shoved backwards again, lifting him off his feet and throwing him against the wall, as she heard motion and a blood curdling howl whose very primal rage made her hair stand up on the back of her neck.

He yelled, and then coughed, and she felt a hot spray of something hit her as she ducked away from his suddenly released grasp and dove for the floor, tucking and rolling as she got behind another console and out of range.

“Go go go!” April yelled, and then a blast of icy cold air blew into the command center, as the klaxon suddenly got a lot louder. “They're almost here!”

Dev started out from her hiding spot only to find herself grabbed and surrounded again, this time by more familiar arms and the rough heave of Jess's breathing. “Jess!”

“Ok?”

Dev shook the hair out of her eyes and blinked them, focusing on her partner. “Yes.”

“Let's go.” Jess's voice was surprisingly hoarse. “They're gonna blow us ten miles out if they catch us here.” She turned and shoved her blaster into it's holster, reaching for and tossing Dev her jacket and stopping briefly over Bock's slumped body to yank something free from it. “Fucker.”

Dev got into her jacket as they kept moving, only then realizing she was covered in a thick, coppery smelling liquid she belatedly recognized as blood. It splattered her skin, but she didn't have time to worry about it, and got her parka fastened as she caught up to Jess' rapidly moving body. “He was incorrect?”

Jess let out a snorting laugh as she pulled her hood up. “Mother fucker.” She said, in a crisp tone. “He called them down on us. Figured to catch us sleeping and let them evaporate us.” She glanced behind her. “Only thing that saved our ass was you.”

They reached the door and plunged into a dark and icy night, full of fast falling snow that had build up around the door and

almost covered the carriers.

“Me?” Dev could now see the other agents digging out the hatches on their rigs, save one that was dark, and black, and open. “What hap..” She paused, realizing it was Carlos and Oscar's.

The carrier next to theirs had a hatch propped open, but was empty. It had been Bocks, she remembered.

“Killed them.” Jess said. “Poor bastards. He was a year from being able to retire.” She plowed powerfully through the snow, shoving her body through the thick ice as though it was water. “Stupid mother fucker. Almost as stupid and clueless and jackass as me.”

“You?”

“Me.” Jess stomped over to the small rise Dev had landed the carrier on, jerking a halt as the snow evaporated under her feet and the cleared hatch opened. “Hah.” She turned and lifted her arm, rotating her fist in a circle and giving it a pump, before she jumped inside with Dev right behind her. “You do that?”

“The hatch? Yes.” Dev shed her coat and fastened it, getting to her pilots chair and settling into it quickly. She started the preflight checks as she sealed the hatch, comp already up and showing her rising energy levels in the other carriers. She kicked the heaters on for the engines and activated the batteries, the rising hum of power starting to surround her.

“Just get us up and out of her, and headed east.” Jess got herself strapped in and pulled comms over. “Sideband Six, open all.”

“On.”

“Here.”

“Follow us. We're going to the dark side and killing as many of them as we can.” Jess was shaking her head as she got her systems prepared. “Stupid son of a bitch.”

“Check.”

“Ack.”

The two responses were quiet, but confident, and Jess stopped kicking herself long enough to take a breath, and let it out, the residual dark energy and rage slowly fading out of her.

She felt the carrier come to life around her, and felt again the rush as she'd had that one chance, one slim moment to put her knife in Stephen's throat before he shot her.

Would have shot them all. Would have killed Dev. Jess felt her heart start to race again and she closed her eyes, erasing the memory of his scornfully triumphant face and his hands on her partner's body.

Engines came live. Jess felt the vibration. Triumphant until he felt the slim form in his clutches lift him up and toss him like a rag doll, giving Jess her chance.

She'd certainly taken it.

Fucker. “How could I have missed it?” She growled, under her breath. “I knew something was wrong with him, and I just..” She slammed a fist against her console. “Shit.”

“Jess - incoming”

“Lift.” Jess said. “They'll blast us.”

The carrier moved under her and she was thrown back in her seat, tightening her restraints as the carrier lurched and then turned on it's side. She strained against grav and got a screen pulled over. “Keep an eye on the kids.” She got her boots braced against her console. “Gimme power.”

Dev was busy trying to keep the carrier level as she came up and around the ice escarpment that had hidden the pole base. She couldn't see the enemy but the scan was sounding warnings in her ear cups, low anxious sounding tones mixed with the incoming chatter of the shortwave from the other two rigs.

It was snowing hard, and it was dark. She relied on the comp to tell her where she was in space, and leveled the carrier as she shunted power back to the weapons systems. Jess had said east, so she quickly laid in a track and transmitted that as comp to the other two, punching up the engines to full power.

The force sent her thumping back in her gimballed chair and she got her hands curled around the throttles, shoving them forward as they rolled up to speed. She kept her eyes on the forward scan, watching for obstacles as she kept a low profile track, skimming over the ice in near total darkness.

“Stand by for bangs.” Jess got her targetting up and the scan immediately pinpointed the incoming enemy sweeping up and over the horizon though not yet in even visilble to IR or UV.

There were a lot of them, though, and she reluctantly put off cursing at herself to focus on the task at hand, now aware that not only had they lost the chance to advise HQ about the attacks, they also couldn't tell them there were squads of bad guys roaming the land with impunity.

Life was just completely full of suck at the moment.

But there was no time for that. She set up targetting solutions and readied the rear guns, bumping the shields up and moving juice from the front systems she hoped she wouldn't need.

"Chester and Doug are inline with us." Dev reported calmly. "Intercept in two minutes. They have an angle on us."

"So I see." Jess flexed her hands and settled them on the gun triggers, her fingers fitting into the metallic half gloves whose inside surface was full of controls.

Each finger controlled one of the main guns, the knuckles positioned to release ion torpedos. Coordination had to be instinctive – at some level there was no real way to even learn how to do it. Just something you felt your way through. Jess exhaled and tightened her focus, the wiremap on the scan now showing a solid outline of their pursuers.

Ten of them.

Had Bock been right? Was it all over? Was she just prolonging the inevitable?

Jess watched her reflection in the screen, seeing the smile appear on her face. "Ready, Dev?" She wiggled her fingers. "Time to make the doughnuts." She took her eyes off the screen long enough to glance up at the pilot's station, where she found Dev's pale eyes meeting hers in the reflective mirror.

The bio alt, though harried, had that expression that indicated she was puzzling out something out.

"Doughnuts are bits of cake they fried in oil back in the day." Jess supplied. "You'd like them."

Now a faint twinkle entered her pilot's eyes. "I do like them." She agreed. "We would have them once a season, up in the creche. I just wasn't aware that was something we produced downside." She informed her partner. "Intercept, one minute."

Jess tore her attention away and put it back on the targets, uncapping the triggers and getting ready to fire "You little lucky monkey. I've only heard of them." She triggered comms. "Stand by for battle. Keep moving. Don't let them take a bead on your or they'll fire at once and your shields are toast."

"Ack."

"Ack."

The two other carriers shifted a little, moving away from hers to give them space to fire and she got herself ready, feeling the sudden change of motion as Dev wrenched them out of plane and curled in a tight U, plunging down again towards the ice as she let off a barrage from the rear guns.

They cut between the leading two enemy and Dev rotated them along their axis, a move Jess was getting used to. She took advantage of it and held her fingers down on the center guns, firing in a circle as they dove down again.

"Holy crap." The sideband erupted in a crackle. "Stay clear of them!"

Them meaning her and Dev, Jess realized, their aerobatics as dangerous to their allies as to the other side. She ducked instinctively as they took a broadside hit, hearing the thump against the hull as the shields reacted and then she was upside down again as Dev spun them.

It was disorienting – but she tightened her focus to the screen, her hands reacting automatically to what her eyes were seeing, firing incessantly as they swerved to miss a direct impact ahead of them.

Two enemy rigs peeled off to either side, firing their own midship guns at them point blank. Jess flinched, but then left her stomach on the floor as the carrier peeled straight up and then angled down and around to come up behind the two that had just been shooting at them.

She let off a blast from the forward guns, hastily transferring energy to them, watching it splash back at her as it impacted the left enemy's rear shields.

There were clouds overhead and in a moment they were in and through them, as the other rig chase them firing all the while. Blasts hit them on the side, and she heard alarms start to blare up in the front. "Whoops."

"Please hold on." Dev abruptly cut the power to the engines, and they fell down back through the clouds like a rock. Jess squinted and just started firing in all directions, hoping her blasts didn't hit their own people.

The enemy scattered out of their way, and arched off, and then Dev fired up the mains again, sending them rocketing to the left on their original course.

Jess checked scan and saw eight targets instead of ten, and spotted the distinctive maps of her colleagues coming up from

the ice almost right at her. She let off a steady stream of torpedos to the rear, and followed that up with a barrage that caught one of the chasers with shields fluctuating and had the satisfaction of seeing it blow apart in a blare of sudden light that outlined the stark ice below and lit the clouds above with orange.

The rest of them scattered, diving out of her way and arching off.

Three down. "Let's see if we can out run em now Dev."

"Yes." Dev was very busy up front. "Running our damage control now."

"Check in." Jess opened comms. "Damage?"

"Shields seventy five." Doug responded. "Ack?"

"Ack." Jess agreed. "Tac 3?"

"Standby." Mike answered for his tech. "Running comp."

"Full speed, on course." Jess ordered. "Redline it. Let's leave em."

"Ack, Tac 2."

"Ack, Tac 3" Chester said. "We have full power to engines, but lost scan and some steering."

Jess felt the shove as they came up to full power and moved back into line with their original course. She watched scan carefully, seeing the enemy pull themselves together and form up, but they were still gathering as the three of her force were speeding off, already losing sight of them on visual.

The wiremap formed and showed her their images, and she held her breath, then cursed as they started after them, spreading out in a search and destroy formation. "Dev, you're gonna need those tweaks."

"Yes." Dev agreed. "However, Chester's machine does not have the improvements." She said. "He can't keep up with us."

Ah. Well. Jess tossed that plan out and studied her options. "Okay." She sent a set of coordinates up to her pilot. "Head there, and send that to the other two. Let's see if we can out fly them if we can't outrun them."

Dev nodded, and tapped the configuration in, adjusting the throttles with a twitch of her fingers.

"Tac 2, Tac 3." Jess cleared her throat. "Stay low, follow tight."

"Tac 1, Tac 3." Mikes voice came back. "Ack, but we can keep rear."

Jess understood the message. At some level, she even admired it. "Stay low, follow close." She repeated. "We'll turn and pick them off if we have to."

"Ack."

She looked up, not surprised to find Dev looking back at her in reflection. She could see the spattering of rust stains on her partner's skin, from Bock's blood but the gaze remained steady, and there was a little smile on her face. "Stupid cocksucker dind't hurt you did he?"

Dev's brows tensed, then relaxed. "The man Bock?"

"Yeah."

"No." Dev adjusted trim, and edged the speed up a little. "They will overtake us plus ten, or perhaps twelve." She remarked. "I was just surprised he took hold of me."

"He knew I'd..." Jess paused to release a barrage of torpedos to seed their path. "He figured I'd stop."

Dev studied the wiremap intently, making a picture in her head of the next maneuver she wanted to try. "You would stop?" She asked, after a moments distraction. "Why?"

Jess held off answering for a minute, the roil of emotion the thoughts incurred surprising her. "I did stop." She answered at last, in a subdued voice. "I didn't want you to get hurt."

They were both silent for a few minutes, adjusting things, making changes. Jess sent another barrage out, Dev changed their course just slight. "Did that man do something incorrect?" Dev finally asked. "To cause this attack now?"

"They must have paid him off." Jess obliquely answered the question. "He sold out to them... I don't know if he told them where we were, or they just found us and he didn't warn us, or what." Some part of her, she discovered, really didn't want to believe Stephen had turned.

But... Jess watched the screen, seeing the wiremapped enemy moving closer. Dev had been right about one thing – Bain hadn't trusted him.

Had he known?

Jess exhaled. "Glad we got the kids out with us." She said. "Dev, we'll let them get close then break up. Have the other two go out to the right and left and try to get around in back of them, we'll go topside and do the same."

Dev nodded briefly.

"Unless you've got a better idea." Jess added. "Since your flying instincts are a hell of a lot sharper than mine."

"Five minutes to intercept." Dev responded. "The location you requested us to go to is about six to eight minutes away."

"Story of my life." Jess sighed.

"How accurate are the maps for that?" Dev asked, somewhat suddenly. "Of that place?" She had a scan up and was looking at it. "It appears irregular."

"They're fjords." Jess said. "Deep valleys with ocean at the bottom, or sometimes ice, or sometimes just gravel. They were made by glaciers a long, long time ago." She paused. "Why?"

Dev studied the screen. "If these are accurate, I think we could try to lose them in there." She announced "Or perhaps we can make them crash."

Jess straightened up in her chair. "Crash?"

"Yes." Her partner said. "That's why I asked about the accuracy." She glanced behind her. "So we can avoid that."

"Huh."

"So are they accurate?"

Jess half shook her head. "No guarantees."

After a moment of silence, Dev cleared her throat. "Want to try it?"

Did they have a choice? Jess felt her body settle. Did it matter? "Go for it." She tightened her restraints again. "Fly your ass off, Devvie."

"Yes." Dev glanced in the mirror. "But it will make it really hard to sit, won't it?"

Jess chuckled, and triggered comms, shaking her head as she composed her words for her erstwhile troops.

No point in worrying about it anyway.

**

The carrier shuddered as they were hit by a blast along the topside and Dev only kept from ducking as she felt the craft swerve in response.

Alarms were blaring all around her, and she glanced at the comp screen, seeing the shields on the port side almost nulled. "Jess, we are exposed on the left side up to the hatch."

"Nifty" Jess was busy trying to avoid hitting the other friendly craft while targeting the six enemy that were swirling around them, taking shots at will. "How long to the coast?"

"Two minutes." Dev could see the rapidly approaching outlines of solid structures, and once again hoped the scan was accurate.

Another blast shook them, and she felt the shift as one of the engines cut out. "Jess, we lost a pod." She adjusted the trim but they lost speed, and after a second, she dove for the surface of the sea, rolling over and presenting the bottom of the carrier to the ongoing attack. "Hold on please."

"Sure." Jess was hanging in her restraints, holding off on firing until the carrier allowed her guns clearance again. She could feel the hits on the bottom, but that was where their heaviest shields were and they were only muffled booms, not the crackling pops the ones on the sides had been.

Her ears were throbbing from the blood rushing to her head and she held her breath a little, watching her screens intently. She could see the other two carriers criss crossing overhead and she realized after a second that they were drawing fire away from her and Dev.

Good kids. She felt them start to right and she got off a quick burst, tracking across the absolute darkness when she spotted a shadow against the clouds.

Lucky shot. She watched the enemy craft come apart in mid air as her unexpected hit impacted a weak spot and the parts went spiraling out, two of the other attackers swerving out of the way and bringing themselves into her line of fire.

She took advantage of that, of them being distracted by sending some blobs their way and then she had to stop when they went up side down again. "Hey, I got one. I was doing good."

“Sorry.” Dev replied. “We’re about to go into the .. what did you call them?”

“Fjords.”

“Yes. And I wanted to complete a repair cycle on the engine or we’re not going to have enough maneuverability to get through them.”

Jess took the opportunity to remove one hand from her firing gloves and scratched her nose. “You really are cool under fire, you know that? I bet you’re not even sweating.”

“Please stand by.” Dev watched her scan intently, then nodded in relief as they reached the edge of the land and the engine came back online. “The only time I have really experienced sweat is when practicing sex with you.” She remarked. “We are at the fjords.”

“Is that good or bad?” Jess felt them rotating and then she was right side up, and then they were pitching down and she had a sense of enclosure “Never mind, don’t answer.... Tac 2, Tac 3, follow.”

“Ack.”

“Ack.” The responses came back at once.

“Stick to our tail.” Jess added. “Will be tight maneuver.”

“Ack.”

“Ack.”

And then they went to hell. Jess could feel the sudden and violent buffeting of the wind against the carrier as Dev slowed it, and plunged into the narrow space between the fjord cliffs. “Whoa.”

Dev kept her eyes glued to the scan, watching the wiremap outline of the space around her. The valley was very narrow, and she set the carrier in the very center of it, aware that in some spaces, the walls were only a winglength from her wing.

Comp showed both other carriers right behind her, and behind them, the staggered flood of enemy.

“Just lead em, Devvie.” Jess instructed. “Don’t worry about whats on your tail.”

That was easy. Dev slid her chair forward and concentrated on her work. This was hard, and she felt her breathing quicken as she made slight adjustments, keeping the carrier even between the walls. She flinched a little as a blast hit the wall on her left hand side, blasting rock off and sending bits of it over to scatter on her front windscreen.

The walls were very stark, and very craggy, even in wiremap. In light they would be awesome. Dev pondered if she would get to see the light when another blast hit then on the top of the carrier, nearly sending the nose of it pitching down. She only barely kept it even, and saw the damage alerts start flashing.

“Not nice.” Jess patched in the vector and sent a blast back up and to the rear.

Dev adjusted a setting and let their altitude drop a little more, forcing their pursuers to enter the valley to chase them. The blasters only had a certain range, and she kept the angle going, studying the topography. To the right there was an even narrower crevice, and she ran a quick calculation.

“Bastards.” Jess was grumbling under her breath. “They’re gonna tank us, Dev.” She said. “I don’t want them to tank us. I’m not done here yet.”

Tank. Tank. Dev frowned and keyed in a route, then squirted it to the two other carriers. She snugged her straps more tightly, then took a deep breath. “Please really hold on.”

Jess had just shot off a few blasts, now she turned and regarded her pilot. “What are you going to do?” She looked at the forward scan. “That’s a dead end.. we going back up?”

“No.” Dev said. “There is a space there, to the side.”

Jess blinked. “Dev, we can’t fit in there.”

“Not going straight, no.” Dev glanced in the mirror. “Do you wish me to stop?”

Jess looked at the scan, then at her pilot, then back at her scan. “Oh boy.” She released her guns and yanked her restraints tight.

“Tac 1, vector unpassable.” The sideband erupted.

Jess slapped at the comms. “Just stick to her tail.” She ordered. “Be kickass, or be dead. Your choice.”

Dev took that as an agreement on her plan, and she settled herself, then she smoothly tipped the carrier onto it’s side and turned, arcing out of the main channel and heading for the slit.

A curse trickled through the sideband, before it was cut off. Dev heard the sudden rattle of blaster fire around her and she felt a thumping impact on her topside wing, making the carrier swerve and shudder under her touch. She gripped the throttles harder, and bore down, adding speed to even out the path.

“Incoming!” Jess yelled.

Dev could almost sense the closeness of the attack, the wall before her abruptly lit up with plasma, showing her a realtime view of the wiremap she was using as a guide.

Really small. Her heart started to thump a lot faster, and she bit her lip, almost closing her eyes as she reached the opening and the enemy reached her at the same time.

The explosion nearly did them in. Dev barely kept control of the carrier and she felt the skin scrape the rock, making a grating, keening sound that set her teeth on edge. The craft started tipping over, veering dangerously towards the rock walls and she hit the side jets with a rapid touch.

Then the enemy craft imploded over them and she was blinded by the flash, losing all sense of sight and flinching at the barrage of sound all around her.

Terrifying. “Jess!” Dev yelped. “I can't see.”

“Notgoodnotgoodnotgood” Jess released her restraints and climbed up onto her console, leaping across the open space and landing with her arms around Dev's chair and she got her hands on the controls just as they were about to smack into solid rock. “Yow!”

Dev was blinking furiously, trying to get her vision to clear.

Jess tilted the carrier back up on it's side and sprawled over the chair, the arm of it digging a dent in her ribcage making her short of breath. “Notfuneither.” She grunted, reachign around Dev to grasp the throttles. “You ok?”

White spots on black, the sound of imminent destruction all around her. Dev felt a moment of angry frustration, shaking her head and straining to see. She could feel Jess's warmth around her and the heat of her breathing against her neck. She could also feel the tension in her partner's body, and the strain in her breathing.

Jess was sweating. She didn't really have the skills Dev had in flying, and she could barely see the outline of the crevice they were in on the wiremap past the bio alt's shoulder. The action was happening to fast for to absorb and she could hear warnings and sirens all around them.

They were running out of sky, and the collision alert sounded, and Jess frantically tried to judge which way she had to turn when hands fitted over hers and moved the controls. A quick look showed her Dev's face, her eyes wet with tears, and her pale lashes moving as she blinked, but with a clarity there that made her take her own fingers off the throttles. “Got it?”

“Yes.” Dev nodded, dodging and twisting in between craggy outcroppings and then dropping suddenly and twisting the carrier in mid air to send it half falling and half under power, boosting the landing jets and ducking under a thick ledge of stone that scraped the top of the ship.

“Good.” Jess just hung on, getting her elbow down to lift her ribs up off the chair just as they took two g's and she wrapped her legs around the chair to keep from being thrown across the carrier. “Oof!”

“Sorry.” Dev spotted a wider space and headed for it, at last able to tip the carrier back onto it's axis as she shot out of the narrows and into a valley that opened up on either side of them. “Are you all right?”

“Peachy.” Jess got her feet under her and leaned against the console, flipping through comp. “Kids are still there.” She commented, triggering the comms. “Tac 2, Tac 3, stat?”

“Holy fuck.” A blast of static carried the words through the sideband.

“Stable.” April's voice came through in calm counterpoint. “Comp shows no targets.”

Dev ran the damage assessment programs. The carrier was running very rough, a heavy vibration rattling her bones as she worked to even out the power grid. “That was difficult.”

“No kidding.” Jess eased her way back over to her seat and dropped down into it. “My stomach's killing me.” She put her hand on it, flexing the fingers of her other hand. “What in the hell was that flash? Damn good thing I wasn't looking at it like you were.”

“I don't know.” Dev ran comp on the logs and studied them, glancing at the nav that plotted their course spreading out in a wide V shape before them. “There's a flat space ahead there. Should we stop?”

“Do we need to?”

Dev checked comp. “I would like to examine the outside of this vessel.” She admitted. “Many sensors are not reporting.”

Jess pulled over her own pad and scrolled through a set of readings with impatient fingers. “They really not back there?” She studied the report. “Or are they just hiding?” She pressed the comms. “Tac 2, squirt comp.”

“Ack.” Doug responded. “Got rear cam action.”

Jess waited for the transfer, then she injected the squirt into her comp. She ran the vid, mostly darkness overshot with blaring light, then quickly shielded her eyes as the blobs erupted into a hellish white overflash, briefly outlining the rock edge, blasting it to nothing but an implosion of vaporized powder.

Only the narrow slit they'd been flying through had protected them. Jess felt a chill go down her back, and she anxiously searched the comp to make sure none of the bastards were following them. “They tried to fry us.”

Dev glanced in the mirror. “Is that what that light was?”

“Must have been.” Jess said, after a pause. “Go on and pick a spot to put down, Dev. Let's make sure we can maneuver. I get the feeling we're gonna need to.”

**

They found a gently sloping side valley and landed on it, the carrier's skids crunching and slipping a little on the loose rock, then coming to a halt.

Nestled between the high walls, they were protected from the wind and when they all stepped out into the faintly visible dawn light it was almost eerily quiet.

Overhead, dark clouds were moving, their edges shredded and packed with moisture. Far off in the distance they could hear thunder, but at the moment nothing was falling on them.

Jess was grateful for that. She turned on her hand light and studied the ground, leaning over to pick up a bit of the loose gravel and let it run through her fingers. It was sharp and hard, and had thick veins of color running through it. “So.”

Dev was busy slobbering over one of the engines, the cowling pulled back and her body half buried in side it. “There was intense disruption.” The bio alt said, in a muffled tone.

“No kidding.” Doug came over, his hands clasped around a burned out piece of hardware. “Fried my comp.”

April had just finished a walk around her carrier and came over to join her partner, her jacketed figure emerging from the shadows into the circle of Jess's light. “Was that their new weapon, really?” She looked grave. “Went right through our shields.”

“Looks like it.” Jess agreed. “We lucked out.” She handed over the rocks. “Metal content in that must have been high enough to have reflected the blast on them.”

“Two of them flew into the cliff.” Chester said, dusting his hands off. “The other two, yeah, my back cam got them getting backlash. Guess the aim's a little off still.”

Mike joined them. He folded his arms over his chest and regarded their little group gravely. “Wasn't how I was looking to start my hitch out.” He said. “What do we do now?”

Everyone looked at Jess, save Dev, who was still head first down in her engine pod.

Jess turned and leaned back against the wall of her bus, putting her hands inside her pockets. The air was cold, not the killing chill of the pole, but still enough, and she felt her skin warm as she flexed her fingers. “What do we do now.” She repeated the question. “Well, we could just find some place and hide out until we hear from HQ.”

April frowned.

“Or.” Jess went on. “We could surrender.”

Mike joined in the general, though silent disapproval.

“But we'll probably be of more use to our oath if we find a way through these Norwegian fjords and sneak across into their mechanical base, just east of Gibraltar.” Jess's voice was quiet and very serious. “Then we can get into the developmental sciences center and find this thing.”

Both rookie agents nodded in immediate agreement.

“And turn it on them, and make that center look like North.” Jess concluded. “Maybe if they realize it can bite them in the ass as much as us, they'll stop using it.”

“I like that idea.” April said. “I'm not hiding. That's not what I came here for.”

Jess smiled a little.

“Besides it won't do us any good.” Mike said. “We can't hide forever, and when we come out they'll be there waiting for us.”

What would be the point?"

"Glad you both think that way." Jess said. "Because I'm not surrendering and I'll shoot anyone who tries." She added. "Let's get ourselves patched up as best we can, and then Dev'll find us a way to navigate through these cliffs. They'll block scan, at any rate."

The light was growing, and they could now see the steep, stark valley they were in. The stone walls rose on either side, folded in naked, sharp relief, their once green sides gray and featureless. "I've seen pictures of this place." Mike said, after a moment. "It was pretty."

Behind them a solid, ruffled surfaced black water spread out, covering the ground between the cliffs they were between and the next set of escarpments. It was deep water, Jess knew, and a little further north it was ice and snow, glaciers filling the spaces between the walls as they inched down towards the sea.

Glaciers had made the slope they were on, unremembered eons ago. Jess exhaled and leaned back. These slopes would have been covered in green trees before the change, rich and fragrant as they towered over the waters below. It would have been pretty, indeed.

Now there was only raw rock, and the same dark waters, and as the dawn light touched the walls and brought out the veined patterns that had likely saved their asses, Jess still found it so.

The slope they were parked on stretched out in a long finger, ending in another sheer cliff than then branched off to the east into the distance.

"I like the idea of us sticking it to them." Mike spoke up suddenly. "It bothers me to think about my.. our classmates in the citadel, toasted."

Jess nodded. "Bothers me too."

April stuck her hands in her pockets. "Funny." She said. "We were always told it wouldn't." She studied Jess gravely. "You weren't supposed to worry about anyone else."

Dev hopped out of the engine and sealed the cowling. She came back over to the group with a somewhat relieved expression. "I think that will be all right." She said. "The repair sequence did enough."

"No." Jess answered April's comment softly, her eyes fixed on her partner. "You weren't. But that's not how life is." She switched her gaze to the agent. "Even for us." She let her arm rest on Dev's shoulders. "So. Here we are. We only have us to work with, so we should get working."

The four rookies nodded. "I'll see what I can do to get this sorted out." Doug held up the card. "I think I have a spare in the back box." He turned and headed for his carrier. Chester joined him, and after a moment, April and Mike also turned and walked towards their respective crafts.

Jess let out a long breath. "This sucks, Dev."

"Does it?" Her partner asked. "I am glad the carrier is not as damaged as I thought. That's good, isn't it?" She moved a little closer to Jess, glad that the bone chilling cold had moderated to just the damp temperature she had started to become used to in the citadel.

This cold didn't freeze her eyeballs, at least. That let her keep them open so she could watch Jess's face, now outlined in pale gray morning light. Her partner looked like she was in discomfort, and Dev wanted to make that not so, but she wasn't really sure how to.

"Yeah, that is good." Jess said. "We're going to need these carriers." She paused and chewed the inside of her lip. "We need to get in there, and get this done."

Dev considered that for a minute. "I will continue mitigating the damage" She decided. "But this all seems very difficult, and dangerous." She found Jess's hand inches from her face, and studied it briefly, then touched her cheek to it.

The fingers moved, brushing her face gently.

"It's dangerous and difficult and probably we're going to die doing it Dev." Jess told her. "I'm sorry. Maybe I should have just kept going onto that shuttle when we met. You'd probably have ended up living longer." She gave her partner a brief hug, then she released her and headed for the hatch. "Let me work up some kind of half assed plan."

Dev let her go. She spent a moment with her hands in her pockets, then she turned and regarded the stark landscape they were in. It was desolate and empty, but as she watched a seagull floated over the edge of the escarpment and soared overhead, it's wings outstretched.

Almost effortless. Dev watched it in mild fascination as it circled slowly down. It was a totally different kind of flying than she did, and she wondered what it felt like, to just spread out your arms and let the wind take you.

After a moment she exhaled and turned back to the carrier. She did a walk around it, her boots sliding a little on the gravel and made a mental note to take care with the jets on the way back up. The ground was uneven as well, and she placed her steps carefully, walking up behind the craft and checking the dull surface of the skin.

It was marked with carbon, but as she continued around, she was gratified to see that there were no near burn throughs, and the structure itself was not compromised. She put her hand on it, feeling the chill of the metal against her skin, and let herself feel a little sad.

There was so much discomfort. Jess was unhappy and the other agents and techs were, and there seemed to be no end to the incorrectness they were involved in.

It made her sadder, remembering the interesting times she and Jess had back in the citadel, and on their missions. Even sadder than that when she remembered Doctor Dan, and how happy he'd been over her performance.

Now, everything she'd known might be lost.

Maybe everything she was, if she ended up dying. Dev felt very incorrect inside thinking about that. She felt very incorrect overall, and rather than stay outside looking at her carrier, she half walked half slid down the slope and trotted to the hatch, climbing up inside.

**

Jess left the hatch open and walked inside, dropping into her seat and for a minute, just sitting there staring at the screens. Part of her knew that she should start bringing up met and nav, and getting the plan started, and another part of her was just looking bleakly into fate not wanting to do a thing.

She had to wonder, given how her luck was running, if going a mile further was even smart or just heading into the inevitable.

She found herself wondering, for the first time, if what she was doing had a point. Was the battle for a purpose, or were they just so used to conflict it had just become an indelible part of their psyche. Had Dev's question, about why they didn't just work together asked in all open innocence not had a point?

Did it even really matter anymore?

Jess exhaled, feeling a sense of exhaustion she'd thought she'd left behind with her injury. She honestly didn't feel like even moving, much less forcing herself to go be a leader of her little, battered force.

She heard footsteps, and looked up to see Dev climbing up the ramp and into the carrier. As she got inside she looked up and their eyes met and Jess had the uncanny feeling the bio alt knew everything that was going through her head. "Hey." She murmured.

"Hello." Dev came over and sat down on the floor next to her seat. "I think the outside's okay."

Jess studied her, guiltily glad of the distraction. "You look bummed."

Dev tilted her head back and regarded her. "I do? What does that look like?"

Jess remained silent for a minute. "Like you're sad." She finally answered "Or.. what do you call it? In discomfort?"

"I am." Dev agreed. "They teach us not to say things like sad, or mad though. It reminds natural borns that we're people." She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. "So we say.. we're in discomfort. Or .. incorrect. But I really am sad. I feel bad about the big place, and what happened to the others, and about Doctor Dan."

Jess reached over and touched her head, stroking her soft, straight hair in an almost hypnotic pattern.

"And because you're sad." Dev continued. "I like it a lot more when you're happy. I don't want you to feel bad."

"Is that because you're programmed that way?" Jess asked, in a mild tone.

"No." Dev responded immediately. "It doesn't feel like programming. I just hurt.. " She touched her chest. "When I see you feeling bad."

"Do ya?"

"I do." Dev scooted around a little so she was facing Jess. "Isn't it strange?"

Her partner smiled a little. "I don't think so. I feel bad when you're sad too." Jess felt a certain sense of something altering inside her, that eased her breathing and made her shoulders shift a little and relax.

Dev studied her gravely. "Could it be part of that love thing?"

"In me?"

"In me." The bio alt's face edged into a faint smile. "I looked it up in comp. I'm not really sure about all the contexts but I

think it's possible that I love you." She pronounced seriously. "A lot."

Jess sat there blinking.

"Is that okay?" Dev put a hand on her knee. "You seem in distress. Was that incorrect of me to say?"

Jess felt her whole body flush, bringing a sense of warmth that made her slump back in her chair and gaze at her companion with slightly widened eyes. "I don't know. Was it?"

"I don't know either." Dev chuckled a little. "But I don't feel bad when I say it."

Jess smiled back at her "I don't feel bad when I hear it." She plucked at Dev's sleeve. "C'mon up here." She edged over and made space for the bio alt in the chair next to her, a squishy but very comforting situation. With a sigh, she put her arms around Dev and hugged her.

Dev hugged her back, putting her head down on Jess's shoulder despite the awkward position. "This feels good."

"It does." Jess willingly surrendered the gloom of her thoughts for the pleasure of the contact. With everything so bad, this bit of friendly affection almost bowled her over with its potent appeal and though she knew nothing would change because of it, she wanted it anyway.

Wanted to hear Dev say that, about loving her. It made her crazy happy for no really understood reason since she'd never really wanted or thought about feeling that way. It wasn't really encouraged, in the corps. Too much baggage.

Too much death. "Dev, you're the one good thing in my life right now." She uttered softly. "How did I let that happen?" She sounded melancholy even to herself. "I don't want all this to be happening. I wanted to have some good times with you."

Dev wasn't at all sure what to say to that. This was all so outside her experience all she could really do was go along with it. Certainly, the words made her feel good inside. Jess seemed to be saying that she was important to her, and that she was valued and that was all good.

It did feel good, too, to hug Jess and be hugged by her, and Dev considered that this was different than the whole sex thing. That was good, and she liked it a lot, but this was something else. "I think I do really love you." She said. "I can't imagine what else this could be."

"Lucky me." Jess exhaled softly. "At least I got to know what that felt like."

Dev felt unhappy about that. "You think bad things will keep happening." She said, not quite a question.

Jess swallowed an unexpected lump in her throat. "Dev, we're so screwed here. I don't know what the hell to do." She admitted. "I know we have to go try and attack them but... shit. What's the point?"

Dev considered this question at its face value. "Well." She said. "The point would be that we could stop them from hurting more people, and rescue Doctor Dan." She looked up at Jess's profile, half hidden in the hood of her parka. "Correct?"

Jess blinked at her again.

"Not correct?"

Her partner let her head rest against Dev's and closed her eyes. "I'm an idiot. Keep thinking for me, willya Dev?" She let the moment go on, absorbing the unexpected grace and the surprisingly pragmatic advice from her bio alt buddy. "I know we have to go and do it. I'm just..."

"Tired?" Dev suggested. "I am. We didn't get much rest."

"Yeah." Jess said, after a moment. "Tired, and pissed off, and kind of discouraged." She felt Dev's hands fold around one of hers, and without thinking, she lifted her hand up and kissed the back of Dev's knuckles. It caused a flash of memory, confusing and vivid, and she remembered then seeing her father do that one time.

Was that inherited? Jess wasn't sure, but the gesture made her smile anyway. "We should move our asses and get this show on the road." She said, reluctantly. "We're too close to where they last saw us. Don't want them showing up on top of us."

Obediently, Dev untangled herself and stood up, moving around the console and heading for her station. She sat down and started calibrating her systems, still leaving her heavy jacket on.

Jess reluctantly pushed herself to her feet and went to the hatch, looking out over the landscape as she listened to the clanking and thumping of Doug fixing his sensors. The cold wind blew into her face, and she could smell rain on it, the torn clouds overhead heavy with moisture.

She scanned the towering walls of rock around them, figuring if she wanted to she could find some cave to hide out in, but aware too that this would only be delaying the inevitable. She didn't want to do that. "Doug." She called out, waiting for the tech's head to appear. "Time?"

"About ten minutes." Doug said. "Just making the connections."

Jess nodded, and stepped down from the carrier, hearing the rising hum of its systems as Dev brought them online. She spotted April and Mike talking on the far side of Mike's carrier and motioned them over to join her in the middle of the triangle made by the three craft.

They did. Jess pushed her hood back and regarded them. "Those things going to hold together?" She motioned at the carriers.

"Yes." April nodded. "They were really going after you. We only took a few hits."

"We lost two backup systems, but Chester put a patch in." Mike said, when she finished. "What's the plan?"

Jess crouched down and the others did too. She brushed aside the gravel and got down to dirt, using a piece of the rock to draw with. "I checked comp. We're here." She sketched in a rough outline of the fjords, continuing around to fill in the land between them and the target. "This is approximately where their central command is."

"Approximately?"

"They move it around." Jess said. "We usually pinpoint it not by where it is, but how they protect it."

"Ah." Mike nodded. "Got it." He touched one of the lines. "This lets out just north of the line where you think the might be."

"Exactly. We stick to ground level, follow the land." Jess said. "Try to stay out of scan, give us a chance to get close before we hit the deep water here." She juggled the piece of rock in her hand. "We can't depend on met to hide us. We'll get our asses blown up."

"New game." April commented.

"New game." The senior agent agreed. "But the advantage of a new game is, you get to make the ground rules." She said. "So we pause here." She marked the spot. "And we see what we can see. If this storm overhead sucks snow down we might be able to use that as cover."

"So the technical ops center is here, you think?" April put her fingertip in the dusty surface. "On the edge of the landmass, there?"

Jess nodded. "I think that's where this new tech comes from. Doesn't do us any good to go to the ops center and try to kill it there – this is where it comes from. There's a big, sprawling complex spread out over this area near the river delta. Hard to get at."

"Flat, no target to dive at." Mike murmured.

"No target. It's half underground... hell, it's mostly underground. Can't barely see it except for the sump towers. We've been trying to get in there for years."

April rested her forearms on her knees. "So what makes you think we'll get in this time?" She asked. There was no sarcasm or challenge in her tone, just bare, raw interest.

"Because we have to." Jess responded. "Before now we just wanted to."

Both agents nodded in understanding, and smiled. Jess smiled back at them, understanding their understanding of the situation and bleakly glad she'd ended up with these two, who seemed to have him the that same animal spirit she knew in herself.

Agents were supposed to have it. But they'd been scraping the barrel for a while, taking in kids who were on the margins who took on the veneer and became killers, were trained to be, but didn't have it in the gut. She did. These two did. Jess grinned a little wider.

Maybe they'd make something of this fiasco after all. You never knew. "Okay, let's get buttoned up and rolling." Jess stood and casually scraped out the marks with her boot. "When we get to the edge, we'll see what the situation is. Maybe we'll go right in, maybe we'll wait a bit and watch."

"Sounds good." April nodded in satisfaction. "Let me just say before we leave – I'm glad you put that knife in Bock's throat. My gut said he was compromised." She gave Jess a direct look. "I know you knew him a while."

Jess's lips twitched. "Dev told me the same thing." She confirmed. "She said something changed in him since we left the citadel, that he wasn't right."

Mike's eyebrows lifted. "Pretty bold for a bio."

"She's not a regular bio." April said before Jess could say it. "I know you told us that, but you can see it. No bio I ever heard about would have ordered the techs around like at that base. That's outside." She studied Jess's face. "That a scam? You can tell us. We're probably going to die together."

Jess regarded them for a moment. She didn't feel any temper at the question, just curiosity and she spent a bit of time thinking about what she thought about Dev being a scam. "Are you saying maybe she's not a bio?"

April nodded. "Yeah. Something like that. Maybe they were just trying to sell Interforce on the idea. Put in a ringer."

Was that possible? Jess wasn't sure if she felt excited or disappointed by the thought. "Dev thinks she's a bio." She acknowledged. "I'm gonna guess only Kurok knows for sure. But what she told me, she went through the regular deal with them."

"Could be lying." Mike suggested.

Now that caused a temper flare, but Jess held it down. "I don't think so." She remarked mildly. "Some of the things she's said, some of the things she's done, wasn't a natural born acting as a bio. It's too.. " She considered. "It's too layered."

April nodded again.

"Besides, Kurok was one of us." Jess said. "Not only that, he was my father's partner."

Both junior agents eyes widened. "Really?" Mike said. "How'd he get... he left Interforce and went up topside?"

"I think he more like created the bio station. Created the bios. That's why they grabbed him. They want him to do that for them." Jess dusted her hands off. "So now you know. I want to get him back... not so much for our side, but for me, and for Dev."

"Got it." April said. "More going on then we knew." She stuck her hands in her parka pockets. "School said there'd be days like that."

Jess chuckled, remembering being given the same advice. "Been a while hearing that but yeah, there are days like that." She turned and regarded the sky. "Here it comes." She felt the first patter of icy drops against her skin. "Let's go."

They parted, and returned to their vessels, Jess hopping up into hers and shutting the hatch as the thunder rumbled softly overhead. It wasn't a bad storm, not like the ones they'd been seeing, but any met now made her more than slightly nervous. "Hey Devvie."

"Hello." Dev was standing by her chair, holding a steaming cup. Now that the hatch was closed, she put the cup down and stripped off her jacket and stored it. "Are we ready to go?"

"In a few minutes. Doug's just buttoning up." Jess went and got a cup for herself, feeling the warmth start to gather around her as the air handlers kicked in. "I think we've got the start of a plan."

"Excellent." Dev sounded confident. She picked up her cup and sat down in her chair, swiveling it around to face her partner. "I hope we can do good work and rescue Doctor Dan." She said. "I have a lot of things I want to ask him."

Jess chuckled. "I bet you do." She went to her own console and dropped into her chair, lifting her cup and toasting Dev with it. "We're going to give our best shot at this, Dev. No guarantees, though."

Dev nodded. "I know." She said. "We can just do our best."

They drank quietly together, with the occasional glance at the screen that showed Doug finishing up his work. Then Dev put her cup into it's holder and turned her seat around, fastening the restraints around her and swinging her chair closer to the controls.

A very natural motion, even after so short a time. Jess watched her work, part of her mind casting back to what Mike had asked. Dev's speech was, still consistent with her origins, the turns of phrase coming naturally to her and completely unaffected.

It was layered. Jess felt her own trust rang true, and catching Dev watching her in the mirror, that little, cute grin on her face, made her almost believe it had nothing to do with how she felt for her.

Almost.

Jess tried to be honest with herself most times. She knew she didn't want to think any ill of Dev and she knew she had allowed a very soft spot for the bio alt to form in her heart but she also knew, or wanted to make herself believe that the reason she felt that way was because some innate instinct in her said it was okay.

She'd never felt that way about anyone before. She'd always kept everyone at an arms distance, understanding that people were people and they all had their own personal stories and motives.

But not Dev. She'd felt from the start that Dev was true, and she knew damn well that Dev trusted her wholly – and liked her. no, apparently loved her with a full hearted honesty that in itself seemed unlike the rest of humanity that Jess had encountered.

Now, that could be true, or it could be the strength of her own desire to believe making it true, but Jess found herself not

actually caring. To her it was true. She didn't want to believe otherwise. "Hey Dev?"

"Yes?" Dev was doing the last of her pre flight checks.

"What's the first thing you remember?"

Dev considered for a moment. "You mean, of anything?" She asked. "I think it was of the play ring." She went on without waiting for Jess to answer. "We were all in the ring and they had just fed us, and we were tumbling around in the sun." A smile crossed her face. "I remember going near the plas and seeing downside through it."

Jess relaxed, and settled back in her comfy chair. "What was that like?" She asked, as she started getting her boards up. "I think the first thing I remember is going in the water. The sand and rocks and what it smelled like, and getting water up my nose."

"I don't remember thinking anything about it, really. I was very small." Dev said. "Just a huge gray and white thing rolling under us. I didn't know what it was." She settled into place. "Should I lift?"

"Sure." Jess said. "Stay as close to the ground as you can, and follow the valley heading south." She got her screens in place and set up scan, feeling the carrier shift underneath her as the landing jets kicked gently in. "Send the track you'er going to use to the others."

"Yes." Dev squirted the track and brought the main engines online, glad the coming of daylight now let her see where she was going in something other than a stark black and green wiremap. She started down the valley, keeping low along the slope they'd been landed on.

It seemed quiet, but she slipped in her ear cups and turned on the external sensors, listening to the soft whistle of the wind and the shift of the gravel they were flying over.

Behind her she could hear Jess get up and start rattling around, but she focused her attention on her route. She was aware of the two other carriers swinging in behind her, and they flew along in single file between the towering walls.

It was nice, sort of. There was almost no wind, and only a mist of icy, freezing rain and after a few minutes she felt her body relaxing into the flight.

"Hungry?" Jess asked. "I'm going to break out some rations."

"Yes." Dev felt her stomach rumble. "That would be very nice, thank you."

Jess removed two sets of rations from the store. "When we top at the south escarpment, we should do a little fishing. This stuff's not going to last and we didn't have time to load on that beef stuff from the base."

"I wasn't sure I liked that." Dev admitted. "I have to look up what a cow is. I hope it's not as appealing as that bear." She adjusted a settling. "I like the fish better."

"Me too." Jess agreed. "So we should catch some fish, and I'll make you my one speciality." She brought over one of the plas trays with their utilitarian meal, two fishrolls a dried shrimp cake and shredded mushrooms with a dispenser of kack. "Here ya go."

"Thanks Jess." Dev reached out and touched her leg, giving her knee a squeeze. "I would love to try your special thing."

Jess laughed, blushing, then cleared her throat. "Yeah and the fish isn't bad either." She winked and then settled onto the low bench next to the console, resting her own meal on her knee as she put her cup down on the floor of the carrier.

Now what did that mean? The bio alt wondered. Was it something to do with sex? It seemed so, based on the blush that was still coloring Jess's distinctive cheekbones. Well, that was all right with her.

Dev put the cup in one of the holders and studied her partner from the corner of her eye. Jess could, she knew, have gone back and eaten comfortably at her own station, not sitting here on the narrow bench. But she seemed content to be where she was, her elbow only inches from Dev's hip. "I think it will take about three hours to get to the stopping point." She said. "I don't want to go too fast since it's so narrow here."

"Fine." Jess munched her fish roll. "Tell you what I'll get some sack out time while we're underway, then I'll spell ya." She extended her legs, and gently bumped the back of Dev's calf, leaning back and watching her pilot's profile. "Since we can't sack out together tonight."

There was a faint flush of color on her pilot's cheeks, and a moment later, Dev glanced aside at her, a tiny little wry grin appearing on her lips, her pale brows scrunching down a little.

Really cute. She picked up a bit of shrimp cake and offered it to the bio alt, grinning back as Dev opened her mouth to accept it, feeling the tickle as her teeth bit gently on the edge of her fingertips.

No, she was sure. Jess gently traced the shape of Dev's lips. If she was sure about anything, she was sure about this. About the raw honesty in those eyes watching hers.

“That's really too bad.” Dev said. “It would be nice to be in an ice cave.”

Jess chuckled softly. “It would.”

They were on auto nav, but Dev was keeping one hand on the controls and an eye on the comp, because of the closeness of the walls. Shyly she broke off a piece of her fish roll and returned the offer, feeling her heart beat a little faster at the slow smile on Jess's face, and half closed eyes watching her.

Oh, that felt good.

Dev found herself feeling happy, despite how terrible the last little while had been. The look and that smile were filling her heart and she could feel an almost ache in her chest from it. She hoped she got to ask Doctor Dan about it, but she thought surely this was what love was, and no matter what happened to them she was very glad she'd gotten to experience it.

One more thing she'd gotten to do that the rest of the bio alts hadn't. She had such a collection now that she could almost imagine herself going back there just for the human pleasure of telling them all about it.

She turned her attention to the bit of mushroom dangling near her nose and stuck her tongue out to capture the shreds, a sense of happiness bubbling up inside her.

Somehow they would make it end right. She was sure of it.

**

[Continued in Part 21](#)