

Partners

Part 21

The freezing rain had turned to snow by the time they got to the edge of the fjords and they could see the deep, dark waters beyond it, black under a mist of white, thick flurries.

It seemed eerily beautiful. Dev slowed their speed as they reached the edge of the u shaped valley they'd been traveling down and as she did, Jess came forward and put her hands on her shoulders. "We are here." She glanced at her console. "These are the coordinates you gave."

"So they are." Jess agreed. "On the very edge of the horizon there.." She pointed in the distance. "That's the coast where the center is, but further east. I don't think they picked us up yet."

Dev studied the scan intently. "No returns." She agreed. "It does not see we have been detected." She paused. "Yet. Are we going to land somewhere?" She asked. "If we clear that edge we will be in the open."

"I know. Slow down. There." The agent said, pointing to a shadow at the edge of the slope. "There's an overhang there, get under it if you can. There should be room for us there."

"You have been here before?" Dev inquired.

"Yes. Once." Her partner replied shortly. "Wasn't one of my better memories."

"I see." Dev angled that way, dropping their already low altitude to skim over the snow covered gravel and shallow, iced over channels of water heading down into the sound. It seemed a very sparse and desolate place, there were no moving things anywhere to be seen and at the very edge of the ice she could see waves breaking in a mix of white froth and gray.

The ruffled white surface seemed to show a stiff wind, and as Dev wrapped her hands on the controls she could feel it against the carrier's skin, compensating with the side jets as she fought to bring the craft inline to the far wall.

The shelf Jess had spotted was actually bigger than it first appeared. It was a crack in the rock wall that had fallen away long ago, and once had probably been undercut by the powerful waves. Now, the water had receded a little, and the shelf was almost a cave, the ceiling high enough to admit the carriers so long as they were careful.

Dev was, slowing further and engaging the landing jets, floating just above the ground as she moved them forward with brief, gentle bursts from the side trims. It was a relief to be out of the snowfall and she moved to the back of the shelter and cleared space for the others.

The carrier bumped softly down on it's skids, and she killed the jets, stabilizing the flight systems and shutting down the mains. Ahead of them was the edge of the shelf, and past that, the sound. There were waves rumbling up and crashing below the entrance of the cave, releasing a light spray into the air.

The edge of the rocks was rimed with ice, and Dev opened up the sensors on the outside of the carrier, letting in the low booming of the waves, and the hiss of the surf. She released the controls and flexed her hands, letting out a faint sigh, glad to be out of the wind and down. "We are stable."

"Tired?" Jess was still perched behind her, gazing out at the water over her head. "Been a long day, huh?"

"Yes, a bit." Dev admitted. "So much happened today. It's hard to absorb it all."

"Don't try." Her partner advised her. "Think about what we're going to do next. We've got a lot coming up."

"Yes, I know. I think what I will do next is get a drink." Dev released the restraints and let them retract, then got up out of her pilots chair and stretched her body out. She felt stiff from sitting and it was good to move, even better when she walked around the edge of the console and Jess stepped in front of her and opened her arms.

The hug was nice, and she welcomed it. They hadn't actually gotten to have any rest during the trip – it had gone faster than Jess had anticipated and met and comp had come in that required her review.

So it felt wonderful to be gently rocking in Jess's arms, her back being kneaded as she savored the warmth surrounding her. "What are we going to do now?"

Jess patted her back and released her. "What are we going to do now." She mused, going to the window and looking out. The snow was coming down harder, making a white curtain that almost obscured the view of the sound. Past the water, in the distance she could see the shape of the other side, and she pondered briefly about her plan's timing. "Pretty damn good question, Devvie."

Go now? Go later. Going now would preserve as much surprise as she could muster in this little attack. No one in their right mind would fly at the face of the innovation center in broad daylight after being chased down by a squad of hit men.

On the other hand.. Jess listened to Dev getting her hot drink at the station. On the other hand no one in their right mind would fly at the face of the innovation center in broad daylight, because they would be on full optical scan even if she managed to find a route in that would avoid digital. Probably get her ass blown out of the sky maybe even with the new weapon, her and Dev merely a scattering of ions freezing on the way down.

Not very appealing.

If she went under darkness, she'd give them a chance to prepare for an attack, after they got word of the failure of their attack on the pole base. She wasn't sure she wanted to do that, but she also wasn't sure she wanted to fly into their faces either.

Sucked to be her some days.

"Would you like a drink?" Dev asked, politely. "You seem a little unsettled."

Jess's lips twitched. "Sure." She said. "I was just trying to decide which of my bad choices I'm going to take. What do you think about flying out now, and getting it over with?"

Dev came back over and handed her a cup, then leaned against her chair, considering the question in her serious, straightforward way. "Hm."

"Hm?" Jess's brow went up. "What does that mean?"

Dev cleared her throat. "Hm means I really would rather practice sex with you." She said frankly. "And also, I think flying the carrier into a fight in the storm will likely end up sub optimal."

Since this was also what Jess thought, she smiled at her partner. "But we'd be a surprise." She countered, watching the faint twinkle in the bio alt's pretty eyes.

"Or we might get surprised." Dev countered dryly. "Not in a good way."

"Or we might get surprised, not in a good way." Jess conceded. "And I hate surprises, unless I'm the one who's giving them." She sat down in Dev's chair and sipped her hot seaweed tea. "So here's what we're going to do. We're going to wait until just before dark, and come in then, but not in a frontal assault. I want to do some recon and see if we can slip in through the service intakes."

"Okay." Dev didn't really know what that was, but it sounded plannish to her, and it meant they could get some rest. She was good with both of those things. "I think we are out of scan and visual here. Its' a good hiding place."

It was. Jess watched the surf spray laying down an ice curtain, and figured in about an hour you wouldn't be able to even see the three carriers crouched under the ledge. They could stay there in safety and make sure they were ready to attack, let the snow storm go overhead, and coming in at twilight would neatly split the difference between daylight and darkness.

Maybe she would get lucky. Maybe they all would. Jess leaned on the console and put herself at peace with her decision. "Send a squirt to the others. Tell them to bunk down and get some rest while they can."

Dev smiled.

"You like that idea."

"I do." Dev agreed immediately. She turned and settled an ear cup as she reached for the comms key, setting her cup down on the edge of the console. "Tac 2, Tac 3, Tac 1 admin."

"Ack." Doug's voice echoed softly in her ear. "Here." Chester chimed in with somewhat surprising unorthodoxy. "Just got everything shut down and squared."

"We are to stay here until one hour to dark." Dev said. "Then we will proceed."

"Big old ack." Chester said. "Going to start a regen."

"Ack, seconded." Doug sounded relieved. "Synching comp."

The screens flickered as the two carriers published their findings to her database, then settled down to chew over the data, updating her charts with three metrics now.

Dev clicked off and removed her ear piece. "They confirmed." She paused. "Do you know what we are going to do when we get there? Or are we going to decide that then?"

There was absolutely no censure in Dev's tone, only curiosity, but Jess waited for her temper to spark at the question. After a moment she frowned when it didn't.

"Was that incorrect to ask?" The bio alt prompted hesitantly.

"Yes." Jess answered. "No." She corrected herself. "Shit, I don't know at this point. I thought we could come in at the waterline, and see if we could hide the carriers in the rocky escarpment that's at the shore there." Jess said. "Then find a

way in. No way to know how we do that until we do it, but there's openings to the sea where they tunnel in water for the turbines.”

“Like in the cave place, in the citadel?”

Jess nodded.

“It's too bad you didn't bring your board thing then.” Dev mused. “You were amazing with that.”

Slowly, Jess turned and regarded her, one eyebrow inching up until it was buried under the unruly hair on her forehead. ‘My board thing.’

“Yes.” Dev got up and imitated what she'd seen Jess do, holding her arms out and wiggling her butt a little. “It was really interesting.”

Jess clapped her hand over her mouth and closed her eyes. “Don't do that.”

Dev straightened up. “No?”

“If I have to imagine myself looking like that I'll never be able to stay up on that board again.” Jess informed her, eyes still tightly shut. “Anyway, trying to get close to the shoreline on that think would end up with me being fish food.” She cautiously opened one blue eye then the other one when Dev didn't seem to be inclined to repeat the motion.

“Okay.” Dev went back to her tea and took a swallow, making a small adjustment in the carrier's systems. Now that they were out of the wind and the snow, the energy exchange at the skin of the vessel wasn't as drastic, and she calculated that the batteries would let them keep the environmental systems warming them until they were ready to go.

That was good. But she still wished she had her lined suit. Just looking at all the ice outside made her a little chilly and she moved around a bit, to get her energy back up.

Jess came up behind her and leaned her elbow on Dev's shoulder, just watching the spray turn into ice in front of them. They both watched in silence for a few minutes, sipping from their cups as the dull light from outside the overhang reflected through the frozen filigree.

“Know what I miss?” Jess said, suddenly.

“What?”

“Rad. The gloom all the time gets to me.” Jess admitted. “Wish we'd found some of the old school pills they used to take in that base.”

Dev tried to think about what she felt about rad, but she hadn't had the experience of it enough to really know. “I remember liking the sun.” She said. “But they also put us in the sun a lot during sleep but you didn't know you were in it after you woke up.”

“Rad cheers me up.” Jess put her cup down and tickled Dev's ear. “Maybe if we take a nap together, that'll cheer me up. You think?”

Dev immediately grinned.

“Cheered you up already.” Jess turned her back on the window and headed to the back of the carrier, setting her cup down on her console as she passed. She opened the gear trunk and unhooked the back latch, letting down the flap that would give them space to lay down on.

She was tired. Now that she'd laid out a plan that allowed for rest, she could admit that to herself and as she spread the two sleep sacks out over the hard surface she was already imagining how good it would feel to lay down and relax.

The fifteen minutes she'd ended up with at the base didn't really cut it. Once she had the sacks sorted out to her liking, she stepped back from them and started undoing the catches on her half armored jumpsuit.

Dev had already stripped down to her gray under-suit and she was folding her uniform up and putting it neatly away in the small locker assigned to her in the carrier. She eased into the sanitary unit and used it, aware of the metal and mechanics nearly brushing her skin.

‘So the put you in a capsule to sleep in?’ Jess's voice rumbled from outside the panel.

“Yes.” Dev finished her business and emerged. “It was like an egg.” She explained. “Oval shaped, and soft inside. They said it was supposed to remind us of before we were hatched. They were all on a rotating ring, that went along the skin of our part of the creche.”

Jess came over and undid the neck fastenings of her under-suit, pulling down one side to inspect the burn mark on her arm. At the base, it had seemed a little inflamed, but now it was dark and apparently healing. “Looks good.” She grunted. “I don't know what I would do if someone made me sleep in an egg.”

"It's comfortable." Dev assured her, as her sleeve was pulled back up. "The motion rocks you to sleep, like when we were on the boat."

"But you're closed in."

"Yes."

"Yuk."

They sprawled together on the platform, and Dev squiggled over against the back wall, while Jess extended her long length next to her. "Ugh." The agent exhaled, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling of the carrier. "Wish I knew what the real deal is back at the citadel."

"I do too." Dev answered softly. "I would like to know if everyone is okay." She turned her head and looked at Jess. "I miss having my book with me."

Jess's eyes widened a little. "You didn't bring it?"

Dev shook her head.

Jess regarded her with a perplexed expression. "Sorry about that." She ventured eventually. "I never..." She paused to think. Did she care about her possessions back in the citadel? Were there any memories invested in them?

Not so much. "Anyway. Sorry about that." She repeated somewhat awkwardly. "When we get through this whole crap shoot, we can go back and look for it."

Dev made a little face. "If it's like the North station, I don't know if I want to do that." She admitted. "It makes me feel bad to think of people like Clint and Jason all burned up."

Jess folded her hands over her stomach and tilted her head a little, thinking about Jason and the rest of the people in the citadel dead and rotten on the floor.

It didn't make her feel bad, but then, she didn't expect it to. That's how people like her were made, after all. You just didn't care. That was the whole point, of the battery. It found people who had no sympathy. Had no empathy.

Then she thought about Dev all burned up and felt the immediate, physical difference. Her stomach twisted and her heart gave a huge thump, and she felt a silent scream of horror assemble itself inside her head.

Her eyes popped wide open, and she stared at the ceiling. The sensation was so uncomfortable it felt like she'd been shot in the gut.

"Jess?" Dev put a hand on her arm. "Are you all right? You seem in discomfort."

"I am." Her partner agreed. "I think my navel is going to explode."

Dev hiked herself up on her elbow and gazed at her in alarm. "Should I get a medical kit?"

Jess sighed. "Nothing in there for this." She said, mournfully. "Tell you what, kiss me and it'll probably go away."

"Uh.. what?" Dev looked extremely confused. "What does that have to do with you being in discomfort?"

"Trust me." Jess rolled onto her side and tilted her head, as Dev, with a faint shrug, leaned in to kiss her. Sure enough, when their lips met she felt the turmoil relax, as her body found something else to interest it aside from thoughts of her partner toasted like a three day old fish.

Everyone could die, after all. Including her. She gently explored Dev's lips, the tension easing and moderating to a different type as Dev casually draped her arm over her hip.

They moved closer and she edged back over onto her back again, coaxing Dev with her until the bio alt was leaning over her, their bodies brushing through the grey under-suit fabric. She slid a hand between them and unfastened the catches on Dev's, rewarded with the touch of warm skin moving under her touch.

Somehow her own suit got opened, and she savored the heat as Dev pressed gently against her. She swallowed as a pleasant ache erupted in her gut and washed away some of the stress knotting her muscles. It felt good and she wanted more of it, stifling a smile as Dev's fingers started a curious exploration of her breast, the edge of her thumb brushing against her nipple.

Not really sure what she was doing yet, obviously, and yet that was part of the exciting raw edge of this new relationship of theirs. Jess had no idea really what her bio alt partner was going to do – sometimes the surprises were great. Sometimes they just made them both laugh.

She slid the under suit down off Dev's shoulders, blinking as the dim overhead light outlined her slim form and glared highlights off her pale hair. She rolled onto her side again and Dev agreeably adjusted, taking the opportunity to strip her under-suit off to her waist, exposing her back to the cool air.

Dev's attentions moved lower, tentatively nibbling her skin as Jess helpfully peeled the bottom part of her suit off. There was a faint hint of the pleasantly scented but strange soap they'd found in the base, the warmth of Dev's body altering the smell into something Jess found quite attractive.

She slid a hand across Dev's hip and a moment later she felt her partner's thighs clamp gently around her leg and she leaned against her, bare skin now touching bare skin.

Worry about the mission evaporated. Her heart lightened and she gave herself over to the pleasure, sincerely hoping no alert, no squirt, or inopportune knock on the hatch interrupted them.

Was wrong, probably, but she didn't care.

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A soft chime woke them up, Jess rolling off the platform and standing up before it sounded more than twice. She reached up and silenced it, feeling a restoration of energy that reassured her. "That felt good." She remarked. "You agree?"

Dev was curled up with her arm still wrapped around a folded blanket she used as a pillow. "Yes." She agreed. "And the sleep was nice too."

Jess half turned and folded her arms over her bare chest, one eyebrow hiking, and a rakish grin appearing on her face. "Why Dev." She drawled. "I didn't know they programmed you for hedonism."

"Hedonism." Dev mused, unwinding herself from her sleeping sack and sitting up. "No. I don't think so. The only time I ever heard that word before was from some of the proctors talking about stealing fish eggs from the lab." She worked her way off the shelf and stood up, going to the storage shelf and retrieving a fresh under-suit from her pack. "I don't really know what that was all about."

"Ah huh." Jess put her hands on her hips and watched, a mild, amused look on her face. After a moment, this disappeared and she went over to her own pack and rummaged in it. She pulled out a thermal under-layer and slipped into it, the micro thin fabric almost sticking to her skin.

On top of that she put her under-suit, and then her half armored jumpsuit, sealing the catches around her. She could hear some soft sounds outside the carrier, and she walked over to the window near Dev's chair and looked out.

April was already armed, and walking around the ledge they were parked on, a long blaster cradled in her arm. Her partner had an engine cowling open and was halfway inside, and next to them, Mike and Chester were just emerging from their craft, long streams of fog issuing from their mouths.

Jess ran her fingers through her hair and retrieved a bottle of kack from the dispenser. "How's the met look?"

Dev was fastening her flight suit. She sidestepped over to her station and pulled a pad over, her fingertips tapping lightly over it. "There is still some snow, and heavy fog."

"Perfect." Jess smiled. She shrugged into her parka and hit the hatch, letting in a blast of cold air that thoroughly woke her up, and nearly put frost on her eyebrows in the process. "Bitchin."

April heard her, and detoured over. "Met looks good."

"Does." Jess agreed, her ears catching the sound of Dev exiting the carrier behind her. She saw April's eyes glance past her shoulder, then return and the soft crunch of Dev's boots against the frosty iced stone ground.

Mike had spotted them and was walking over, raising a hand in greeting to Dev as she moved past and joined Doug at his engine. "Good to get a rest." He commented. "Haven't had that long a nap in years."

No, sometimes you didn't. Jess nodded. Sleep wasn't assumed. Even in the citadel, which was... well... had been safe, there were always night alarms, sounds, sudden assignments.. you never could count on a full night's sleep. "Yeah, nice to get a shift in." She said. "Let's get a meal in, then we leave."

"Do we know where we're landing?" April asked, bluntly.

"No." Jess smiled. "I know there used to be a little, rocky flat at the tidal boundary but it's a toss if it's still there. If it is, we'll make for that if we make it in under scan. If not..."

"If not." Mike mused. "If not, we nose first, take out everything we can?" He watched Jess's face, alertly.

She shrugged. "Something like that, but I'd rather get out and get back with something worth the effort. I don't want this to be an end run."

April nodded in agreement. "You think they'll be expecting us, really?"

Jess nodded back. "Sure." She said. "What they did, and my history? They know I'm coming." She walked over and touched the ice covered rock wall. "But I'm betting they'll think I'll be coming for revenge. Heading for Dover base. Biggest of

theirs, and a training center.”

“For what they did to North?” Mike hazarded.

“For what they did to Base 10.” Jess turned and looked at him, her pale eyes taking on the sheen of the ice around her. “That’s why they came after us, and wanted to blow us out. They knew I’d come after them.” She smiled without any humor at all showing. “I have a family history of unrelenting insanity when it comes to revenge.”

April studied her with a mild expression on her face. “I think we studied your grandfather in strategy at school.”

“You did. So did I.” Jess turned, crossing her arms over her chest. “Funny watching my whole class make the connection and turn around to stare at me.” She released a faint chuckle. “Grandpa Jack and his cobbled up thermonuke taking out three bases and half their control stations.”

“That was the last one, wasn’t it?” Mike leaned against his carrier.

“That we know of.” Jess wandered over and peered at whatever it was Dev was wrenching at. “They’ve still got three headed fish coming out of that area, made it useless to live in for a half million years. Dirty as hell. I figure if they’d come up with one to respond with we’d already know it.”

She tapped her partner on the shoulder. “You done in there?”

Dev pulled her head up and shook her hair out of her eyes. “Almost.” She said. “I’m giving Doug one of our spare sensors.” She explained. “This one’s inoperative.” She held up the part, which was crispy and darkened. “About two minute more.”

“G’wan and finish.” Jess patted her hip. “Then let’s get ramped up and go.” She addressed the rest of them. “When we fly in, make sure you’re both lined up right on my axis.”

Both agents nodded, then turned and headed back to their craft. Jess loitered around the engine until Dev hoisted herself up over it, braced on her hands, then hopped backwards off, landing with a tiny skid on the ice. “Okay, that should be optimal.” She told Doug. “Try it and let me know.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Doug closed the cowling and locked it down then he trotted off and hopped up into his carrier, the ramp already retracted by his impatient partner, the hatch thumping closed behind him.

“Good job, Devvie.” Jess draped her arm over the bio alt’s shoulders and steered her towards their rig. “You’ve become the queen of the wrenchers.”

“The what?” Dev dusted her hands off and then stuck them in her pockets to keep them warm. “I’m glad I could help out with that system. The component failure in the tracking device would not have been good if we had needed to locate them.”

Jess stopped. “Tracking system?”

Dev also stopped, since she didn’t want the warmth along her side to be removed. “Yes.” She said. “It must have been damaged in the fight. The component board was completely destroyed.”

Jess cocked her head thoughtfully. “Hm.” She continued on, climbing up the ramp with Dev at her side, and waiting for it to retract and the hatch to close behind them. “So now they have a component that’s the same as ours?” She asked. “It’s new? One of the ones that just came in?”

A little puzzled, Dev nodded.

“Have Chester and Mike check theirs.” Jess said. “Do we have another spare if theirs is older?”

“Yes.” Her partner responded. “But I believe that one is functional. They didn’t say it wasn’t.”

“Uh huh. Well, if it’s older, functional or not, replace it.” Jess said, stripping off her outside gear and stowing it. “Tell them it’s a precaution.” She dropped down into her chair and pulled her console over, one hand skittering across the surface inputting data

“Okay.” Dev removed her jacket and heavy boots, putting them aside but not away before she went over to her station and settled an ear cup into one ear. “Tac 1, Tac 3.” She keyed the sideband channel. “Requesting comp link, and diag.”

“Ack.” Chester responded amiably. “Stand by.”

Jess listened to the exchange with one ear, while she set up a battle plan in front of her. Details were now slowly edging into place, and the picture of what was happening was starting to form in the back of her head. Coincidences not really coincidental, facts and pseudo facts sorted themselves out were starting to line up.

“Jess.” Dev turned in her seat. “The component they have is a Model 12C2. Older than ours, and older than the one that was in Doug’s system.” She reported. “That seems incorrect. That carrier was just retrofitted. It should have had, at least, the version we just replaced.”

“Uh huh.” Jess nodded. “Replace it with the new one you’ve got here, mkyay?”

"Of course." Dev put her ear bud down and got up to re-don her jacket. "I have told them to open the system for it." She advised. "Would you like to examine the part?"

"Nope" Jess got up and retrieved a padded square insulation pack. "Put it in there, and leave it just outside the rock wall there." She instructed. "Slosh some water over it so it'll freeze down."

Dev was pulling on her boots, and she paused to look at Jess, with a puzzled expression. "Is it correct to leave a piece of our systems in the open?"

"In this case, yes." Jess smiled a little. "I'll tell ya all about it later, Dev. Just do it."

"Yes" Dev straightened up and took the pack, reaching into the stores and removing a card from it that she put inside the square. "Be right back." She tugged her hood up and stamped her feet well into her boots then headed for the hatch, a determined look on her face.

Jess went back to her plan, nodding a little to herself.

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They were underway. Dev slid her carrier sideways out from under the ledge, doing her usual circle before she moved aside to allow the other two craft to exit.

The lowering light cast very pale shadows past her, the sky already a dark gray on the horizon rather than the lighter dun they'd been before. There was still a steady snowfall going on, and the edge of the water crashing up against the ice was thickening into a slushy mass.

There was nothing else to be seen, save the channel they'd come down, and the far off edge of land. No living thing was in range of eye or scan, save some blips Dev caught deep under the water that seemed large, but solitary.

Maybe they were whales. Dev dredged up a smile for the idea, then she tugged her restraints a bit tighter and waited for the other two to form up behind her.

She had her course programmed in, and the carrier was as ready as it was going to be. Jess was behind her, setting up her weapons and whistling softly under her breath. "We are ready to go."

"Go baby go." Jess responded, glancing to her right to make sure her drop kit was secure. "Let's go do what we do."

Dev engaged the engines and they started forward, keeping tight to the waves as she skimmed just over the surface of a dark and frothy sea. She had the heaters on for the forward plas, and her view was clear, the clouds building overhead as they moved quickly along.

The trip would be relatively short. Dev had no idea really what they would find at the end of it, but she realized she wanted to find something at the end, get some kind of final resolution to this task, and then... and then see what life was going to be like for them afterward.

She felt sure, inside her, that they were going to continue. She didn't want to stop living, and she thought Jess didn't really want to either. So it would be interesting to see what they would do if everything was gone where they came from.

She thought about Doctor Dan, and what he would do if they rescued him. Would he want to go back to the creche? Would he want Dev to come with him?

Dev thought carefully about that, and didn't like the feeling that created. She didn't want to leave no matter how difficult it was all turning out to be. Then another thought occurred to her. What if Doctor Dan asked Jess to come too? Would Jess want to go up to station, and see what it was like?

See the sun?

Dev frowned. She still didn't want to go back to the creche, but if Doctor Dan was okay, and he asked Jess, and Jess wanted to... well, maybe she would have to go.

Anyway.

"Hey Devvie." Jess called over from her station. "Get me a long range, wouldja?"

Dev set up the scan and told it to output to Jess's console. "Yes." She picked up a container of seaweed tea and sipped from it, while another thought occurred to her. "Jess?"

"Yup?"

"What are we doing to do if our place is like North base was?"

Jess remained quiet for a time, then she cleared her throat. "You mean, if it's all gone there? Like, all gone?"

"Yes."

Another silence. "What do you want to do?" Jess asked. "If we can't go back there. You want to go back upside?"

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” Dev stated firmly. “I do not want to go back to the creche.”

Jess smiled to herself. “So you're sure about that now, huh?”

“Yes, I am very sure.” The bio alt said. “However this event ends, I never want to go back there. Ever.”

Jess considered that and wondered what exactly Dev's legal status was. “We'll work something out.” She promised her partner. “Don't worry about it.” She added, figuring if they survived the raid, she'd have plenty of time to arrange... something.

She settled back in her chair and reviewed the scan, glad to see nothing on the near or far horizon that might intercept them, but now wondering if that in and of itself wasn't a suspicious warning. They should have patrols out. Especially on this coast, which was so close to their industrial heart.

So were they just waiting for them?

Maybe. Probably. She was probably leading them right into another trap, but this time, her eyes were open and she was waiting to see how she could turn the trap back on them. “Keep low as you can go Dev.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “I'm getting the bottom of this craft wet.”

“Lucky carrier.” Jess snickered.

Dev looked at her in reflection, her face a study in bewilderment. “Excuse me?”

“Never mind.” The agent wriggled into a more comfortable position in her seat and leaned back, her thigh muscles jumping a little in an unconscious release of tension. “I'll explain that all later too.”

Dev shook her head and concentrated on her controls, not leaving anything to the auto pilot this close to the waves. There was no judging when the waves might roll up at them, and she kept a light touch on the landing jets, ready to elevate them if the water got too rough.

She checked her rear comp, and saw the other two carriers obediently in a straight line behind theirs, sticking to their tail. It felt reassuring to have them back there, and let her concentrate on what was ahead of them.

The coastline was starting to become more distinct. She could see the darkness of slopes beyond the edge of the water, but they were gradual and in front of them she could see a lighter colored surface that ran right down to the waves.

It was quiet. She had the external sensors turned on, and only the sound of the waves and the wind echoed softly in her headset.

Her pulse was starting to pick up, and she flexed her hands around the controls, already scanning ahead for the landing place Jess had mentioned. She could see a pinnacle of rock, and past that seemed to be a flatter area, and she adjusted their course slightly to angle towards it.

Scan was short range, and on rapid now. She kept expecting to see the enemy respond to them, and as the minutes went by and they didn't, it made her more nervous rather than less.

She could hear Jess behind her, making a drumming sound, but she didn't dare look behind her to see what her partner was doing. “Ten minutes.”

The weapons systems powered up. Dev could hear the energy surge around her and she focused hard on the route they were taking, lowering their altitude a little more, and steering the carrier around the waves rather than over them. She felt her breathing come a little faster as the land approached, the hills behind the shore now becoming more distinct.

The scan picked up life forms. Dev drew in a breath, then released it when they resolved into sea lions, perched on rocks offshore that comp identified as benign.

Now she could see the structures built into the mildly sloping shoreline, random vertical lines being wire-mapped by scan into vents and narrow towers, the front of the structure sealed and windowless facing the sea.

Like the base was, she remembered. Except for the one opening, that she and Jess had visited.

The rocks here were tan colored though, not the dark slate she'd become used to, and they stood out very distinct against the dark gray of the water that brushed up against them.

The light was fading fast. The clouds overhead were becoming indistinct, and the light snowfall that had continued following them across the water now seemed to be slacking off. Dev angled a little more to the east, so low to the waves that the carrier appeared to blend with the water, the skin melding it's cover to the gray and white surface.

“Go, Devvie go.” Jess rumbled softly. “Right to that beach, there, just past that big upthrust there, see it?”

“Yes.” Dev put a dot on the wiremap. “There?”

“There.”

A wave brushed the bottom of the carrier, rocking it a little. Dev kept them steady though, and a moment later the carrier came behind the rocks and she could no longer see the installation. The beach beyond was cut off from all sides by the cliffs, and a moment later she was over it, selecting a spot near a pile of tan boulders and setting the carrier down onto it with a rotation that put their nose back toward the water.

The other two carriers set down, their skins mottled and morphing from the slate and white of the water to the tan of the rocks and blending in rapidly.

They were down. Dev checked the shields, and did a quick burst scan to see if anything was approaching. “We are clear.”

“Amazing.” Jess was leaning on her elbows and staring at her screens. “We just fly in here, no one says anything, lets us land. What do you think, Dev?”

“I think it's probable they know we are here and are coming to get us.” Dev responded calmly. “What would you like to do? There does not appear to be a route to the facility from this location.”

“There is one. But I'm the only one who's gonna like it.” Jess got up, and came over, flicking on the sideband. “Tac 2, 3, meet waterside, bring water gear.” She released the comm and turned to face Dev. “So here's the deal.”

Dev turned in her seat and listened attentively.

“Just below that big pylon of rock?” Jess indicated the upthrust on the wiremap. “That's their sea intake. I'm going to take Mike and April, and ride the flow inside.”

Dev digested this. “I can't go with you?”

The immediate agreement on Jess's tongue stuck there, as those clear, pale eyes met hers. “B..”

“I wanted to help you rescue Doctor Dan.” Dev explained.

“Yeah I know.” Jess felt a very uncharacteristic sense of confusion. “But you're not that great a swimmer, you know?”

“Yes, that's true.” The bio alt admitted. “I haven't had much practice.” She continued to study Jess. “But also, if something bad happens, I'd rather be with you.”

Oh well, hell. “C'mon.” Jess motioned her over to the stores locker. “You said you knew about their stuff. Maybe we'll need that.” She pulled out a set of gear and then a second. Then she looked up. “If something bad happens, I'd rather be with you too.”

Dev hopped up out of her chair and joined her, studying the gear. “Is this for going under the water?”

“Yes. So you can breathe under there.” Jess handed her a suit. “Put that on over your flight suit. You're gonna need it. Water's a lot colder than the air is.”

“I remember.” Dev agreed, sorting out the new gear. “I got some programming for this. About the under water part. How they made equipment to let you do that.”

“Yeah, that's how most people do it.” Jess muttered under her breath, as she sealed her suit and picked up the breathing pack and it's mask. “Grab those.” She pointed at two pairs of fins and hit the hatch. “Let's go. Every minute we wait here is one more minute they can kill us with.”

The suit felt a lot warmer than she expected. Dev picked up the objects and followed her partner out into the chill air. April and Mike were waiting for them, both of them looking surprised at Dev's presence.

“Did you..” April started to ask, glancing at the hatch to her carrier.

“No.” Jess negotiated the half frozen, half wet ground. “Dev's got special programming we're going to need.” She indicated the edge of the water. “Tube's just around the point there.”

“We're going in via the intake?” Mike asked.

“Yes.” Jess glanced at him. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Unexpectedly, he grinned. “Nope. Rather do that then climb that cliff with my ass bare to a blaster.” He indicated the rocks. “Just hope we don't get sucked into a turbine.”

“Don't worry, Dev'll hang on to ya.” Jess slipped her mask over her head and let it hang on her neck, while she strapped the breathing bladder to her side, pausing to do the same for Dev. “She's stronger than she looks.”

Both agents looked at Dev, who blinked back at them without comment.

April remained silent, adjusting the straps on the weapons pack she was wearing and clipping her fins to the hook on the

bottom of it.

“Let's go.” Jess started for the water, as the light started to fade and the clouds lowered, snow starting to fall again and dusting their shoulders. Dev glanced behind her, reassured when the carriers blended in to the rock, then she turned and followed Jess towards the surging surf, considering that she might possibly want to find time right now to be afraid.

It seemed like a good time for that.

“Okay.” Jess paused, and faced them. “Make sure the magnos are turned on for the gloves and the knee pads.” She held her hands up. “Soon as we come around the edge of the tube it'll suck you in. Get a grip, and just follow me.”

Dev flexed her hands and felt programming kick in hard, showing her the touch points for the magnets, and giving her the knowledge of when and how to settle the mask, and keep it tight to her. She nodded her head when Jess looked at her, then got right behind her partner and waded into the cold surf after her.

“Good luck.” April said, sliding her mask down as she followed Dev into the water. “Let's go earn our marks.”

“This'll end up shoulder to elbow.” Mike agreed, as he brought up the rear. “We'll start right at the top.”

**

It was cold, and very frightening. Dev felt the water tug hard against her as she copied Jess, sliding the mask into place and holding onto the rocks as she fit the fins over her boots.

A wave nearly swamped her, but she had a good grip and after a second, she regained her balance and continued her task. The water had seeped inside the outer layer of her suit, but the inner one had remained secure, and now she could feel the water between them insulate her a little.

She could feel how cold it was against her face, though, before she put the mask on and her lips and nose had numbed and were only slowly regaining their feeling. Not surprising, she supposed, as snow continued to fall around her and she could feel the ice slush brushing against her body as she edged through the waves.

It was now full dark. She could only barely see the faint light on Jess's wrist, as the agent braced herself against a rock and waited for them to finish gearing up. She then tapped her finger on her mask and tightened the fit, watching them do the same before she turned and motioned them to follow.

Dev did, leaning forward like her partner did and letting the water cover her. As it came over her head, she took a gasping breath in reflex, hearing the soft sound of the reaction from the canister strapped to her side, relieved when her lungs expanded and the mask provided clean air.

It was a simple device. It took in water, made breathing air out of it, and then recycled the exhaled breath into the process. Dev had programming on it, and she understood it's workings, but she realized abruptly the programming was mostly to maintain and manage the devices not so much about using them herself.

That was, the programming told her, one of the things the agents did, like the weapons she knew how to power and fix but not aim herself. She had only rudimentary knowledge of how to put the gear on, for emergencies.

Oh well. It was far too late to go back now. She would just have to use what programming she had and adjust to the situation. It was an emergency, after all... wasn't it?

Dev watched Jess closely, just a bare outline in front of her, and mimicked her motions as best she could. She waved her boots and felt the fins propel her, and she held her hands out in a balancing motion as she swam after Jess. It was quieter than she'd imagined, with just the rush of the water against her ears, and as they moved away from the rocks the water didn't pull so much at her and it became a little more comfortable.

They angled down and approached the tube. Now she could see the end of it, lit dully with a green ring and in that light she could see outlined a metal grate that stretched across from end to end. There was a sense of pressure against her ears, and she swallowed in reflex, feeling it ease as memories of the creche surfaced, those times when they balanced the bio systems and the tanks would cycle.

As they rounded the edge, the force of the water sucked them against the metal with starting fierceness, and she grabbed hold of the grate before the force could suck her through it as April and Mike thumped against it next to her. She glanced at them, their eyes barely visible in the faint light from the helmets.

Jess moved cautiously across the grid, motioning them to follow. She mimed putting her hands carefully on the metal, and shifting her body over the cross pieces. Her knee pads gripped the surface, and she was able to move fairly quickly with her three companions sticking in her shadow with meticulous care.

When she reached the far edge of the tunnel, she stopped and waited until they clustered up next to her. Jess pointed through the square grid, the opening just large enough for her to squirm through it. She reached through with one hand and put it flat on the rounded wall of the tunnel, a faint blue light appearing around her glove after a moment.

She looked back at them.

April nodded and lifted a hand, flexing its fingers and causing it to glow blue for an instant. Mike and Dev nodded also, but kept both hands firmly in place.

Jess eased through the grate, twisting and getting her grip with a smoothly athletic grace until her entire body was inside, and both hands, and both knee pads were firmly anchored.

She moved a little further, and Dev went next, her smaller form transiting the grate with far more ease as she got her gloves in place and released her leg grip, pulling her lower body in and tucking it next to Jess's. The action was difficult, but she felt it was well within her strength, and now that she was getting used to the pull of the water, it vaguely reminded her of being under heavy G in the creche.

She felt her body adjust to that, shifting and positioning to resist the force almost automatically.

The only light was the faint ones from their gear, and the green ring behind them. Dev concentrated on following Jess, aware of the two agents behind her as they moved along the curved wall of the tube, deeper and deeper into the tunnel until the outer ring and the grid was invisible, and they were coming closer to the intake raceway that sucked the water through turbines they could feel vibrating under their hands.

It was amazing. Dev suddenly felt like despite the strangeness and the imminent danger, being there with the others and working this very difficult task was good and right and she was glad she was doing it. She released one glove and moved it over as Jess did, aware that her partner had paused, and looked back at her, only a slight reflection of her helmet light revealing her eyes.

Dev smiled inside her mask, and saw her partner smile back. Then Jess turned her head and moved further down the tunnel, pausing after about a minute and waiting for the rest of them to catch up.

Jess lifted her hand up and pointed towards a smaller tunnel, half hidden by the curve of the main one. There was a scoop at the edge of it, sticking into the flow and redirecting part of it into the smaller tube, and Jess transferred into it smoothly, this time laying on her belly on the bottom of the curve.

It was still more than wide enough to accommodate her, but she kept her head down and squirmed forward in a side by side motion Dev tried hard to copy. Now that the pressure of the water was behind her rather than at her side, the task was easier, and she got the sense too that the flow was lessening.

Then they came around a slight curve, and Jess stopped.

Ahead of them was a solid ring of light, this one faintly purple. Jess turned as they came up next to her and released one hand from the tunnel, closing her fist, then opening it and fanning her fingers before closing them again.

Scan. Programming kicked in. The ring was a bio scan, like the one they used in the citadel. Dev eyed it, remembering what Jess had said about the ones there, and how they could kill you if you weren't correct.

She doubted any of them were correct right now. She suspected if they passed over the ring, they would be seriously damaged.

Dev studied it. The inner ring was smooth, there were, of course, no control surfaces available but in the green glow, she could see a flush mounted panel behind it, with tracers of lights flickering over its surface. It seemed clear to her that if she could reach it, she might be able to do something useful.

It also occurred to her that of the four of them, she was of least value, and shortest association.

Without further consideration, she released all four magnetized surfaces that held her and let the water yank her forward, so suddenly that even Jess's excellent reflexes couldn't react fast enough to stop her. A flash of green went past her, and she felt a strong tickle of scan, but then she was through it and activated the magnets to grab on just past the ring.

Excellent. Dev took a moment to look back, a little startled to see Jess's face outlined in the green light, so close to the scan she could almost see it reacting to her presence. Her partner's eyes were wide and shocked, and her body was tensed as if she was about to lunge through the ring after her.

So Dev held up a hand, and waved it, then she moved over to the panel and started to examine the surface. Anchoring her knees firmly, she reached inside one of the leg pockets on the over-suit and removed her portable scanner in the water bag she'd sealed it in, and activated it with some difficulty due to the rubber and her gloves.

The scanner evaluated the system and returned results to her. She observed them, and felt another layer of programming surface, as the codes and outputs slowly came into focus and her understanding. She tuned the scanner and reversed the polarity of its beam, slowly matching it to the panel's algorithms.

It was difficult. She could barely see the scanner's screen, and the water was thrumming against her, making her waver in the flow.

She glanced to her right, seeing all three agents crouched just on the other side of the ring, watching her intently, and oddly, she felt herself blushing.

Then she returned her attention to the scanner. The codes weren't matching and she frowned, searching in her programming for hints of what to do. It occurred to her that the mission was counting on her to be able to do something useful, and she felt very uneasy about failing in that.

For a long moment she studied the scanner, then she recalled the change she had made to find the fish. She recalled that program in the device and put it in debug, reviewing the code she'd used. It wasn't the same, but there was something there that she felt might be interesting to try.

She made note of the code block and went back to the panel scan, instructing the device to change its matching pattern, referencing her previous block and after a moment, the lights tracing on the panel changed.

That was interesting, she hoped, in a good way. She returned the device again and rescanned, and then reversed the polarity of the signal and the lights stuttered, then went out. She turned her head, and saw the green ring sputter, then morph to a lower, light yellow color.

Her eyes met Jess's and Dev had to shrug, lifting one hand and then returning it to the scanner. She shook her head, then sucked in a startled breath when her partner released her hold and sailed through the ring, without taking her eyes off Dev's.

It was over in an instant. Then Jess was grabbing hold next to her, a grin visible behind her mask. She touched the plas front of it to Dev's and gripped her neck, squeezing them together.

It almost made Dev lose her hold. But then the others were alongside and Jess released her, giving her a pat on the side of her head. She looked at both April and Mike, and they both held up one hand with a thumb pointed up at her.

Dev figured that was good. She returned the gesture, then tucked her scanner away and got ready to follow Jess along the tunnel again now that the way was clear.

It was good. She'd done the correct thing.

**

Jess held them up just short of the end of the tunnel. The water emptied into a large open space and there was enough light ahead for them to see each other by. Holding a hand up for caution, Jess removed a small reflective square from one of her leg pockets and positioned it, looking carefully up and to all sides to see what was outside the tunnel edge.

Satisfied, she swarmed outside onto the wall, pausing for a long moment to gauge any reaction, before she lifted a hand off the tank and motioned them forward.

Once on the wall, the pressure of the water stopped, and the absence of the thrumming pressure was almost as startling as it's start had been. Dev clung to the wall with one hand and a knee, looking around at the big space with interest. There were grates on one side of it, big and on the bottom. But on the wall there was a ladder mounted, and that's where Jess was heading.

It was still mostly dark. The light from within was a beam focused on the grates, leaving the rest of the space in shadow with only the occasional reflection moving against the wall and across their bodies.

Jess reached the ladder and paused, motioning them to stay against the wall. She removed her fins and clipped them to a ring on her suit, getting her boots on the ladder rungs and moving quickly upward.

Dev watched her, seeing her approach the top of the ladder and remove one hand from the rungs and put it on her blaster grip. She felt motion next to her and saw Mike and April doing the same, both of their eyes glued on their leader.

But Jess released her grip and continued moving upward, the upper half of her body rising up out of the water. When only her boots remained in view, she reached down and motioned them up, and then disappeared completely above the surface.

For a moment, no one moved. Then Dev realized they were waiting for her to go first, and she did, not bothering putting her boots on the rungs just pulling herself up with her arms until she broke the surface, looking quickly around for Jess.

Her partner was standing in a small, open space with her gun out but her body relaxed, apparently just waiting for them to join her. Dev climbed up and over the small wall at the top of the ladder, and let herself down on the other side, moving to the left to let the others out.

She removed her mask and let it hang around her neck as the breather ran out of water to convert, and drew a breath of air that was full of chemical smell and old moisture, abruptly replaced by Jess's scent as she found lips touching hers with gently insistent passion.

"You." Jess whispered in a barely audible tone. "Are a rock star." She straightened and took a step back as April emerged from the pool and climbed into the drainage area.

Dev resisted the urge to try and look up what a rock star was. She busied herself getting her gear sorted out, watching Jess and following her lead in draining the water from between the layers of her suits. It ran away down the drain in the floor and she checked her scanner, glad to see it hadn't come to any harm during their underwater entrance.

When they were all secured, Jess motioned them forward, then turned and lifted her gun from her hip, adjusting a setting, then firing at the ground they had been standing on.

Instantly, it was dried, as their suits had already done likewise.

Jess led them through a short corridor and into an area that held lockers lining both walls. Just as they reached it, the sound of a door opening made them all plaster themselves against a dark area to one side of the door, watching as two men entered and went over to different lockers.

They seemed disgruntled. They removed suits from the lockers not very different from the ones Jess's team were wearing, only they seemed bulkier and well worn. The men climbed into the suits and headed for the same place they'd come out of the tunnel from, cursing as they picked up a set of fins from the ones lining the walls.

"Going to fix your hack." Jess whispered into Dev's ear. "Hope you remember how ya did that for the way out."

"I do." Dev whispered back.

Jess smiled and ruffled her damp hair. "It's a good sign. They're not on alert." She kept her voice very low. "This is one of the first development centers on their side. Tech's not razor edge, they don't figure this a target. It's just research."

"You thought they'd go check that." April breathed. "That's why you dried the floor."

Jess nodded. Then she removed a plas from her pocket and put it against the wall. Faint tracings showed up, and she indicated a path on one of them. "We're here." She said. "We need to get here, so Dev can synch in and find out where the targets are."

Mike nodded. "That looks like a remote scan station."

"It is. We'd never make it to central." Jess pointed at a part of the map. "Behind six or seven layers of bio. But I think the'd keep Kurok as far away from that as they could anyway, so we might get lucky."

"You think he's here?" April whispered. "Why here?"

"It's far away from their science center where we'd expect him to be, and my guess is, the project they want him to cough up data on is here." Jess said. "They want him to duplicate her." She indicated Dev. "The other side. They don't like bios. They buy them from our side, but they killed the program way back when."

"But would the other tech be here too? The met blaster?" Mike asked, glancing around. "Why here?"

"Isolation." Jess folded the map back up and stuck it in her pocket. "No one heard of that new tech. Not a whisper. So either it's all coming out of here, or I've fucked up and we're going to die for nothing. Ready to find out?"

Both agents paused, then shrugged, and gave her a thumbs up.

Jess smiled. Then she eased around the lockers and triggered the door pausing a long moment before she slipped through and into the corridor beyond.

**

They were in the lower areas of the complex, Dev realized. She could hear machinery behind the walls, and the corridors had a rough, utilitarian feel to them that reminded her of the base at the pole they had recommissioned.

So far only two people had appeared in their path, and both times Jess had somehow found a place to hide them and they had walked on by without looking in their direction, busy about their tasks, or talking to each other.

They passed several staircases heading downward, and as they passed the door, the sounds of life trickled up towards them. Soft clashes and bangs and the clatter of metalware, and occasional voices, and once, a rapid thumping that made all three agents smile in a grimacing sort of way.

Then they turned down a long corridor that was more dimly illuminated, with doors on either side regularly spaced with vents in them that allowed the soft hum and clatter of machinery to leak out. Jess stopped about mid way down this corridor and paused in front of one of the doors, looking quickly back and forth.

They could hear someone coming. The sound of multiple sets of boots were heading towards them, from the top of the hallway they were standing in.

April and Mike drew their blasters, moving past Jess and braced themselves against the wall, cradling the weapons with their muzzles faced upwards, their eyes pinned on the direction of the noise.

Jess faced the door and put her hand over the lock, sliding a probe into the opening and half closing her eyes.

The noise got louder. Dev pressed her back against the wall on the other side of the door, admiring the calmness of her companions. Despite the relative newness of the two rookie agents, they were steady in their resolve, and ready to face off against whoever it was who was coming towards them.

Steady, too, were Jess's hands as she worked to pick the lock, as the echoes got louder and louder, now voices were heard – rough and male voices that matched the heavy booted steps they could hear just around the next corner.

“Okay.” Jess pushed the door forward and stepped in, reaching out to grab Dev and pull her in with her, as Mike and April spun and joined them getting the door shut just as the oncoming group cleared the turn in the hall and came down it.

Two men were inside the room and they stood as the four of them entered, one reaching back for a console keypad just as he was blown apart by April's blaster.

Mike took the other one out, his fire crossing April's fire in a neatly matched sending of death.

“Nice.” Jess had pulled Dev out of the way, now she released her and crossed over to the console. “See what you can get, Dev. Let's get this trash put in the disposal.”

Dev sat down at the half circle of comp and put her hands on it, looking from one end of it to the other and waiting to see what, if any programming surfaced. There was a session open on one of them and she tapped in a common query, regarding the screen intently as the results came back.

The syntax was unfamiliar. She tried again, this time changing the query slightly. When the response came back this time, it was still wrong, but the error message triggered a memory.

“Any luck?” Jess was wiping her hands off on a piece of fabric.

“Not yet.” Dev murmured, her eyes tracing the letters on the screen. Why did it seem familiar? Was it the.. She paused and concentrated hard, closing her eyes.

“Dev?”

Jess's hand was warm on her back and distracting but she thought about the message and then realized why she knew it.

“Oh.” She opened her eyes and typed in the request again, changing the order of the words. This time, the response came back readily and she exhaled, shaking her head. “I'm not sure if this is good or not, Jess.”

Jess leaned next to her and looked at the screen. “What's wrong? It's answering you isn't it?”

“Yes.” Dev went a level deeper, using a routine she dredged out of her earliest school memories. This brought up a page of code and she let her eyes run over it, feeling a strange sinking sensation in her stomach as the code triggered further programming and she understood the system she was using.

“And?”

Dev took a breath and started hunting in the system. “Let me see what I can discover.”

Jess clapped her on the back and straightened up. “Dev's in.” She told the other two agents. “You find their schedule?”

Mike came over and handed her a plas, taken off the wall on the far end of the room. “Shift change in about twenty minutes.” He replied. “Not much time.”

“This stuff's old.” April commented. She had one of the floor to ceiling consoles open and she was examining the machinery inside. “You were right, even have some digital converters in here.” She crouched down in front of the system. “I saw some stuff like this in what was left of Cheyenne mountain.” She looked over her shoulder. “My clan sheltered there a few times.”

Mike came over to join her. “Yeah – that's not too much newer than the stuff we kicked in the ass up in the ice.” He studied it. “Why the hell didn't they upgrade this place?” He turned and looked at Jess. “If this is where their hotshot stuff comes from?”

Jess shrugged. “Hopefully we won't have an opportunity to ask em.” She went to the door and stood against it, listening to the sounds outside. There were more boots moving through, and she could hear people talking, After a moment she relaxed as the discussion filtered through as one about fishing and the next supply run due in.

Nothing about intruders. Nothing about weird things happening to the perimeter defenses. Nothing about three Interforce carriers huddled just out of sight outside.

So far, it seemed they were undetected. Jess was still nervous though, since such an easy penetration raised immediate concerns in her gut. Was it really possible they'd flown in, landed, and inserted without tripping anything?

Huh.

“Jess.” Dev called over, softly.

Jess left the door and ambled over to the console, letting a hand rest on the back of the chair Dev was seated in. “What's up.

Found something?"

The screen was full of characters. Dev touched the surface with one finger and indicated two lines. "There's nothing in here about a new weapon."

Jess exhaled. Maybe that was why it had been so easy. Wild goose chase.

"However." Her partner said. "This is a damage report on a part of the facility, and the damage appears to match what you saw at North base."

"Yeah?"

"A central point of explosion, with a three hundred sixty degree radius." Dev asserted. "This report is just a recap of equipment that needs to be replaced and a complaint that six persons were damaged during the event." She tapped in some codes, and the report appeared, in plain lettering that Jess could read. "There."

Jess studied the images and the text. "Seems the same." She murmured. "Are there labs around that area?"

Dev brought up a schema and wiremap of the site, her typing growing more confident. She indicated a semicircle around the damaged space. "These are research facilities."

Jess tapped it with one finger. "That's where we'll start." She said. "What's this?" She indicated a round chamber on the other side of the facility, one she hadn't seen in their research. "The intel didn't show that."

Dev sent a request to the system. Then a second. But the response was the same "There is no information on that area." She told Jess. "Just that it's secured."

"That's where we'll end, then." Jess said. "Close it out, Dev. Let's get moving."

Obediently, she did, getting up to join the agents heading for the door. What else she'd found for now she kept to herself, hoping it didn't mean what it seemed to.

It always was right to get all the information first, wasn't it?

**

Late watch, and the halls were busier than expected. Jess pressed her companions back into an alcove for the fourth time, waiting for voices in a cross corridor to die down, only to have another set grow louder.

"Time's ticking." April uttered almost soundlessly.

"Getting blasted would make the time go faster." Jess remarked back. "Immediate gratification, yeah?" She cocked her head and listened. "Okay let's go." She eased out into the hall and kept flat to the wall of it, moving quickly along the angle towards a side corridor about twenty feet down.

Halfway there a door opened and in a flicker of motion a man was emerging into the hall, turning to close the door behind him and then back around to head right towards them.

April bounded forward and took him, getting him by the throat and breaking his neck in a swift motion as Jess bumped the next door she passed and, feeling it move, shoved it open and stood back as April dragged the body over and dumped it inside.

It was dark in the room, and Jess spared only the briefest of looks before she closed the door silently and they moved on. They got to the cross hall and turned right, spotting the door to the damaged area at the end of the hall, blocked off with warning signs.

It was quiet and dark here. None of the rooms they passed showed any signs of life and Jess ignored the barricaded door as she went to the lab door across from it and listened hard past it.

Dev went to the door that was blocked and studied it, bending her head a little closer and sniffing at the scent coming from it. She straightened and returned to her team mates, tucked behind the angle that prevented them from being seen by anyone in the hall they'd just come down.

The lab door opened to Jess's pick, and they slipped inside, closing it behind them. Inside it was cool and dark, and Mike quickly lit his hand light and moved to the center of the room. April followed suit, and they moved in a circle, revealing the contents of the room.

It was a lab no doubt. Dev recognized a lot of the equipment at once, and she went to the comp station and sat down at it, programming kicking in hard as she picked up a pad and keyed it on. "The room over there smelled like it did in the base." She commented softly.

"The burned smell?" Jess asked. "Or do you mean there's dead bodies in there?"

"Yes." Dev answered, looking up. "I don't know what is in there, but it's the same smell."

“Ugh.” Mike grimaced. “Hope we don't need to go in there. Training or not, my stomach nearly kicked my ass when we were recon over at North.”

April sat down at another console and started exploring it. “Looks like this place hasn't been touched in a while.” She lifted a hand covered in dust.

Dev nodded. “This program was last accessed thirty days ago.” She reviewed the screen. “I don't think this is what we were looking for. It's something to do with peas.” She half turned and looked at Jess. “They attempted to grow them under rad. It didn't work out.”

“Sure didn't.” Mike had been examining a tall rolling cart against the back wall. It was covered in trays. He held up one. “Looks like dead seaweed.”

Dev got up and went over to the tray, examining it. “That's synth dirt.” She poked a finger in it. “They worked with that up on station, but I didn't think they sent any downside.” She removed a curled, brown crinkly thing from it and looked at it. There were tiny shreds of substance at the bottom of the item. “Part of it worked. They got roots.”

Jess came over and peered at it over her shoulder, pressing her body against Dev's back. “Roots?”

“Roots.” Dev's sudden smile had nothing to do with the roots. “Plants put them down into the dirt, and suck up nutrients. Sometimes in the creche, they would hang them upside down and spray vitamins and things on the roots to make them grow better.”

The three agents regarded her with more than a touch of bemusement.

“Okay, well, anyway, let's go find the next lab.” Jess said. “Dead plants aren't going to do a damn thing for us.”

“Have you eaten fresh plants?” Mike asked Dev curiously.

“Yes.” Dev put the plant down and dusted her hands off. “They tested everything on us. Some of it was interesting in a good way. Some of it wasn't.” She added. “Sometimes people would get sick.”

“You did once.” Jess observed, as they abandoned the lab and headed for the door. “Didn't ya?”

“I did.” Dev agreed. “But most of it was pretty good, or at least, I didn't mind it.”

They fell silent as they reached the door and Mike and April put their backs to the wall on either side of it, while Jess tilted her head and listened. “Dev, anyone out there?”

Dev removed her scanner and set it to bio, reducing the power. “I didn't want the to see this.” She started a fast scan, half turning to direct the device along the outer hall they couldn't see. “There are two bio objects.” She said. “About twenty feet from the door. They are stationary.”

She shut the scanner down and pocketed it.

“Yeah I hear them.” Jess leaned closer to the door, as quiet settled around the four of them. She closed her eyes and shut her light off, and concentrated.

Her mind called up the hall outside. The T junction they'd come down, and the curving corridor going the other direction directly opposed to the destroyed room. The two men were near the door on the other side of the junction, and Dev was right, they were standing still.

Talking? Jess carefully focused her ears, imagining herself outside the door but invisible. She was aware of the faint movement of air against her skin from the door vents and on that bare breeze came words.

Two men, definitely. One of them was angry. She could hear the sibilant emphasis, and it suggested to her mind that he was using a pointed finger, and firm gestures. She made an image in her head about it, and then, hearing the hesitant responses, imagined the other person as lesser ranked.

Scientists. She caught a word, project. And then another, alkaloids. Jess leaned against the door and pressed her fingertips against it, absorbing the vibrations as she strained to hear what they were talking about. Then she heard footsteps, and she straightened and opened her eyes as they came rapidly closer.

Jess took a step back and braced herself, as the steps came right to the door and stopped. She heard the keypad being accessed and took a breath, jerking a little as Dev appeared next to her. “Don't get in the way.” She whispered, her body already tensing in anticipation of the kill.

“There's a cabinet there.” Dev whispered back. “Maybe we could hide and listen to them?”

Split second. Jess made a low sound in her throat and pointed her light to the huge cabinet, door standing half ajar. They other agents moved silently over to it and slipped in side, as Jess and Dev followed, getting the cabinet door shut just as the main door opened and the two men came inside.

They flipped the lights on and walked right past the cabinet, going to the console and standing over it.

The door shut to the lab, and Jess let her hand casually rest on her blaster. It was awkwardly close inside, but none of them moved, staying alertly still as the men started to talk.

Almost still. Jess leaned against Dev, who was standing next to her, and, invisible in the darkness let her chin rest on her partner's head. After a brief pause, she felt the bio alt lean back and a moment after that, a gentle touch on her leg almost made her forget what they were doing there.

They heard noises, then the sound of pad entry, and bodies seating themselves in chairs. No one spoke for several minutes, then they heard creaks, and the sound of a hand slapping metal.

"That is it. I told you, it was wrong." A deep voice said. "It's unstable. Look. It's right there, in the emitter results. How many have to die to prove it?"

"No one cares how many." A quieter, gentler voice answered. "Do you not understand, Gregory? They are past caring. All that matters is they can use it to destroy."

"They took our project!" Gregory shouted. "They took it, and put it to the wrong use, and now look! If they had just waited, we could have perfected it and it would have worked right!"

"And we would have ended up killing just as many people, is that what you wanted?"

"It wasn't a killing device." The loud man calmed, and seemingly turned to face the cabinet. "It was meant just to grow things."

The quieter man snorted. "Do you truly think anyone believes that? Oh yes, Gregory. Yes. A device to bring the light of the sun into a cavern and it will grow peas. Yes." He said. "And oh by the way, it also blows up everything for a half kilometer around it."

There was a brief silence. "It worked." Gregory said, shortly. "You saw it."

"So did Denst. He just saw a better use for it."

Jess nodded silently. The two inventions had come so perilously close together she'd wondered if they were related. Finding them one and the same didn't make her job easier, but at least, she only now had one target.

Two if you considered Kurok.

"Well, Denst is on his way here." The loud man now sounded resigned. "I'm sure he'll get what he wants out of us."

"One way or the other." The other man sighed. "Look, Gregory, I am sorry. It would have been a good thing, to be able to grow plants, real plants, downside once more. Maybe if it keeps blowing things up, they'll give it back to us, and we can try again."

"Maybe with a little more effort, they will get the bio matrix out of our visitor." Now the loud man chuckled a little. "Save us all a lot of time."

"Peh. Let's go get some dinner. Leave these damn labs for tomorrow."

Jess could feel Dev's ears prick, the gently rounded surface moving a little against her shoulder. They listened to the men close up something in the room, then go to the door and open it, shutting the lights and leaving. She waited until the echo of the door closing faded, then grunted very softly in her throat.

"What was that all about?" Mike whispered. "Who's Durst?"

"He's their equivalent of the old man." Jess murmured. "Okay, let's get out of here. Now we know at least we're on the right track." She eased the cabinet door open and paused, then slipped out into the dark room and going to the door. She could hear the footsteps fading, and she almost keyed the lock, then stopped. "Dev, scan again please."

Dev was at her side, and busy with her device. She ran a sweep, then another, edging the scope out a little. "It seems empty." She said. "However, there is a power fluctuation nearby." She showed the display to Jess, the light from it casting stark shadows on the ceiling.

Jess glanced at it. "We better get going" She opened the door and they moved out into the hallway, keeping flat against the wall as she moved past the intersection and along the labs on the opposite curve. The wall across from them was obviously damaged, big dents and protrusions marred the surface, and it was discolored.

The labs on this side of the half circle seemed to be still in use, faint lights showing behind the door frames and inset plas windows, and finally one on the very end that was labeled control.

Jess picked that lock quickly and they slipped inside.

They used their lights rather than turn on the overheads, and found a space that was in active use, with no dust visible. Mike

went to the desk and sat down, and April cruised over to a tall datastore, opening a panel in it and touching a screen inside. Jess went to the back wall where there were shelves, that had gear on them. She motioned Dev over, and pointed at them. "Check these out"

"This was the lab." Mike said. "Code name was Paprikash." He studied the screen. "Everything's locked down."

"Got any passwords?" Jess asked Dev casually.

Dev glanced at the console. "No." She said. "My programming says they change them often. There would not be much point." She went back to examining the devices, picking one up and studying it. It was roughly square, and covered in a grimy black dust that smelled of carbon.

Inside there was a flat plate, which was scorched and pixelated. She ran her scanner over it and touched one part, examining the gritty dust that came off on her fingertip.

The scanner came back blank. It had no idea what this was, which was interesting to start with. Dev set the scanner down and removed her multitool from her pocket, setting to work on the device and easing the sections apart.

"Be careful with that." Jess observed. "I have no intention of scraping you off the walls."

Dev paused, and glanced at her. "This is inert." She said. "But I will be careful."

Jess hung around for a moment more, then she went over to a cabinet and opened it. Then she blinked. "Well, crap."

April scooted over and peered inside. "What the hell?" She said. "Is that a tunnel?"

"Interesting." Dev had stepped to the side and peeked past Jess's elbow. Where the back of the cabinet might be expected here was a roughly cut hole in the rock, it's opening covered with a piece of cloth that half hung down exposing half the entrance.

It was interesting, and there was a damp, cold breeze coming out of it that held a hint of salt on it.

"Never look a gift horse in the ass, kids." Jess said. "Let's go see where this goes. If it's hidden in a cabinet, in the back of a lab that was doing black ops, chances are it goes somewhere we need to go."

"Not much here anyway without cracking the codes." Mike agreed, juggling his hand lamp. "That'll trigger an alert." He removed his blaster from it's holster and started forward, edging past the cloth and entering the tunnel. April followed him, after a quick glance at Jess, and then Jess motioned Dev to enter.

"I'll bring up the rear." The agent said, taking out her own gun and cradling it between her hip and her wrist. She closed the cabinet doors behind her and paused, pushing one open again a bit and then re-closing it just to be sure they would have a way back out.

Never paid to take those kinds of chances. Jess flicked on her light and entered the tunnel, stepping carefully along the uneven ground as she followed Dev's slight form.

A tunnel in a cabinet made no sense to her, on the surface of it. Though she knew there were a few hidden hallways back in the citadel, they were purpose built and formed the same as the facility was. This thing looked like some guy had hammered it out step by step with a hand blaster.

"Not much dust in here." April commented quietly.

Jess ran her hand along the wall and examined it. "No." She admitted. "They used this recently."

"Yeah." The other agent agreed. "But what's up with that? A tunnel into a lab?"

"Mm." Jess ambled up closer to Dev and ducked a little, as the tunnel got a bit shorter. She also got the sense it was going uphill, her thighs feeling the motion as she walked along. "No telling."

Mike paused up ahead, and held his hand up. He moved a pace or two more slowly, exploring with his light the ground on the right hand side of the hall. "Body."

Jess eased forward past Dev and came up next to him. Not quite a body, but a skeleton, the whiteness of the bones clear and sharp in the raw light from their handhelds. "Huh."

"Old." April commented.

Dev slipped in behind her partner to get a look. "We had something like that in our lab in the creche." She said. "But it was on a stand. They taught us biology with it."

Jess nudged the skull over, and displayed a hole the size of her hand in it. "Probably wasn't a teaching aide any time recently." She said, studying the untidy pile of bones, before she leaned over and picked one up, lifting it up and running her fingers across the surface. "Not as old as it seems."

April focused her light on it. The surface was clean and bare, but nearly white. "Doesn't make sense to find this here." She looked down at the rest of the skeleton. "That was an open entrance back there. No way they had this body here and didn't know it."

"Interesting." Jess tossed the bone down and dusted her hands off. "Let's see what else we can find."

They left the skeleton behind and continued along the hall, now noticeably pitching upward. The tunnel got a little wider and in carved pockets they came upon shelves, long abandoned and half collapsed.

Around them, there was an almost constant soft patter of rocks and pebbles shifting, but none except Dev looked around on hearing it. She hadn't been downside long enough to get used to being inside stone walls to where parts of them coming down on her didn't bother her.

Going along inside the tunnel, though, seemed like it was a good thing. Unless they came upon someone sneaking the other way, it looked like this was a good path to take to avoid being noticed.

There were tunnels like that in the creche, actually. Dev smiled a little, remembering them. The service access-ways where older bio alts worked, keeping the station working but also providing the youngers a way to sneak past the proctors and sometimes, if they were really lucky, get to snatch an extra ration from the mess area.

You didn't get to use them, so much, when you were out of basic but she felt the thrill of adventure all over again thinking of those odd occasional ventures of her youth.

"Sh." April drew against the far wall. "Hear that?"

Jess cocked her head to one side and lifted a hand to push her hair behind her ear. There was a moment of silence, and April flushed a little, then the sound repeated. "Air handlers." She said, after a pause. "Cycling, maybe."

"That's a lot of compression." Mike said, after a pause. "Almost sounds like..." He went silent.

Dev considered the sound. "It actually what it's like when you evacuate a chamber to space." She said. "That sound of rushing air just all at once."

The three agents regarded her somberly.

"But I doubt they're doing that here." Dev acknowledged. "Since there's a distinct lack of vacuum downside."

"Vacuum." Jess repeated. "Well, we're heading in that direction anyway." She edged forward and took the lead, one hand holding her light the other on her gun stock.

Dev hurried to catch up, as the other two agents brought up the rear. She stayed just behind Jess, and they made good time up the tunnel as the sound started to become very obvious, a periodic thumping boom that coincided with the bits of rock coming down around them.

It was getting colder, and as they moved up another steep slope a gust of damp, chill air came down and dusted past them, making Dev glad they'd mostly dried out.

They reached a level area and in the faint glare of Jess's light, they could see a sharp turn ahead. They slowed and approached it cautiously, finding another bend, and a larger open area beyond it, stretching out in the darkness.

Jess proceeded inside, shining her light around to illuminate a large natural cavern with a series of tables inside it. Though the booming sound continued, it still seemed a way away and she walked further inside and motioned the other agents to spread out.

Dev stayed at her heels, and followed her across to the center of room, arriving at the tables and bringing out her own light and scanner. They were covered with trays, and she scanned the closest of them. "This is bio."

"Yeahh." Jess walked slowly alongside the tables and studied the contents. "What is it?"

"Proto soil." Dev said, poking the substance with her finger. "I saw this in the creche in the labs. It's what they used to grow things." She ran the scanner over the next tray. "There is vegetable substance here." She dug in the dirt and extracted something, which she held up. "That's a plant."

Jess came over and looked at it. "Doesn't look like much."

"No." Dev put it back. "It's a bean, but it's dead. They tried a lot of stuff with beans." She made a small face. "I didn't like them a lot."

Jess studied the tray then she tipped her head back and directed her light straight upward at the ceiling of the cavern. There was something mounted there that was neither rock or natural, and she blinked a few times, trying to force it into focus.

Dev came to stand next to her, running her scanner over it and regarding the results "This is the same shape as the device on the shelf, but much larger." She showed the wiremap to her partner. "Do you think it's the device they were speaking of?"

“Yup.” Jess shut her light off. “Not taking that back with me.” She turned and headed over to where April was examining an output schema. She was halfway there when a loud bang echoed through the chamber and then several voices were heard along with footsteps, getting louder fast, and coming closer.

“Back in the tunnel.” Jess herded them out the way they came, everyone scattering fast as motion started in the chamber behind them and after a long moment, lights came on just barely missing their forms as they darted back past the bend and into the short hallway behind it.

A rising hum of power thrummed through the rock and Jess pressed her self flat against the rock wall, pulling Dev close to her as the sense of loose electrons made her grimace.

“Hair's standing on end.” April said. “Something's got a lot of juice back there.”

Dev shut down her scanner and removed the power pack, stuffing both in her pockets. She could feel the flow of power as an itch along her skin. “Feels like the rad showers upside.” She said, briefly.

“Yeah? Then I know why you like water better.” Jess closed her eyes. “Shut your eyes and let's hope this rock protects us from what ever the hell they're doing.” Running back down the tunnel wouldn't much help, she figured, and at least here they could have a chance to get some intel.

She felt Dev press against her left side and without thinking, put her arm around her pilot's shoulders. As the crackling energy surged around them, she heard voices yelling over it.

Dev stiffened. “That's Doctor Dan.”

Jess kept herself firmly in place, her eyes tightly shut. “Save us the trouble of finding him. Today's going much better than I hoped.” She commented. “Now if we don't all explode, it'll be perfect.”

**

Continued in Part 22