

# Partners

## Part 22

It was hard for Dev to stand still. The waves of energy were thumping against her skin producing a sensation that was a mix between an itch and a slap and it was growing more painful every second.

She fought the urge to jerk, concentrating on taking deep, even breaths and holding herself still.

“Hang on.” Jess uttered almost right in her ear. “Gotta stop soon.”

Just as she said it, they heard yells, and an anguished scream and then low throbbing thump that blasted against the rock wall and sent them all flying back down the tunnel, slamming against the far wall and reeling to keep their respective balance.

“Holy shit.” Mike grunted, grabbing hold of the wall to keep his head from crashing into it. “What the hell was that!”

“Their super cooker.” April wiped a trace of blood from her nose, which had come to a full halt against the rock wall. “Blowing up I guess.”

“Let's go.” Jess headed back to the wall and pulled her long blaster, coming around the edge of the rock as a roiling ball of black grit and dust boiled through the entrance to the big chamber and overwhelmed them. It was thick and pungent, full of particulate and almost impossible to breathe in.

Dev instinctively closed her eyes, as she half turned away from the particles. She heard Jess curse, and she shaded her face, forcing herself to look as the air around them turned into black unpleasantness. She took a quick breath and followed her partner's dim form as they charged through into the chamber, hearing chaos and loud bangs inside.

It was a nightmare. Lots of loud noises, and crackling sounds, and Dev was hard pressed to keep up with Jess as she bolted across the floor and dove for cover behind the big table in the center. It was half overturned, one corner crumbled into the floor and the trays of samples had scattered everywhere throwing the scent of synthetic dirt into the air.

Barely conscious of it, Dev felt a rumbling overhead and she looked up, seeing traces of fire in the device hanging over them, it, too, hanging partially down with electrical sparks popping out from every direction.

Not good.

On the far side of the room men were yelling. There were two behind a console, and five or six more in a pile near the far wall. They were all struggling, and that's where most of the yells were coming from and as the device above them flared it cast the group in stark shadows before it faded out again.

“Get security!” One of the men yelled. “He's loose! Damn it who took off the cuffs!”

A second later a low howl started sounding, and the lights in the corridor outside turned from white to red.

“Uh oh.” Jess peeked up over the top of the destroyed table, and spotted motion outside, coming fast. “Okay” She half turned to face the other two agents. “It's crunch time. I'm guessing our buddy Kurok is under that pile. Let's get him and get out, and get as many of the other side as we can.”

“Ack.” April pulled a second gun from another holster, her face lighting up with anticipation. “Bout time for some killing.”

“You got it.” Mike got off one knee and into a crouch. “I want lots of green dots on this one.”

Jess glanced at them, and then shook her head.

“Glad you asked me along, Drake.” April said, giving her a brief grin. “Been a hell of a first mission so far.”

“Dev, take this.” Jess handed her partner a blaster. “Stay here while we make a distraction. You wait and try and get it into his hands so we've got another vector.”

“To Doctor Dan?” Dev took hold of the gun and wrapped her fingers around it.

“Yup. He knows how to use it, and since it's keyed to us, it won't blow up on him.” Jess said. “Be careful.” She added, after an awkward pause. “Keep your head down.”

“Okay” The bio alt put a hand on her knee. “You be careful too. I don't want you to get damaged.” It was too dark to see Jess's face, but somehow, she knew her partner was blushing. Maybe because she was too, a little.

“Okay.” Jess turned a little. “I'll go first, cover me, then come on. Ready?” She asked, watching both the younger agents nod. “Let's go do what we do.”

It was time. She blinked, and focused and then in a flicker of motion surged up and over the table as the entrance filled with

half armored bodies. “Yeahhh!!”

Guns focusing on the pileup arrested their motion as helmets turned and saw her in mid air and all of a sudden a security response turned into an intense firefight. Blaster fire erupted everywhere in an instant and amid the darkness and the dust blue and green flares cast intense shadows.

Dev took a grip in the gun she had been given and watched the activity, half of her scared for Jess, half of her unsure of whether giving Doctor Dan the gun was a good idea.

She hoped he would really help them. It was so very unsettling to have seen his name, and his code in the consoles. As though he had worked there. But Jess seemed to have no reservations about him, and she supposed the one thing she could trust was Jess's judgement since, after all, she'd trusted Dev, hadn't she?

Yes, she had. She'd trusted her utterly, after only a very short time.

There was blaster fire overhead. She kept behind the table, with the air full of dust and debris it was very hard to tell what was going on, though somewhere nearby she suddenly smelled flesh burning and heard a hoarse scream.

The alarm outside changed, going from a low howl to a klaxon, and as she watched the other entrance filled with newly arrived bodies, behind half shields, all shooting inside. She felt a bolt come past her, and the heat made her blink hard.

It occurred to her that bad things could happen.

She edged around the side of the table and kept low to the ground, straining her eyes to see what was going on in the corner. She could see four people on top of the pile of bodies, their arms and elbows flying as they pounded what was underneath. Something they were hitting was moving, though, twisting and turning and through a break in the dense air and the fire, she caught a brief glimpse of pale hair and a familiar profile.

She felt a sensation of shock, as though she'd jumped into cold water.

It was Doctor Dan.

They were hurting him.

Without thinking any further, Dev turned everything over to instinct. She scrambled out from behind the table and raced across the floor, hopping suddenly as a bright flash headed towards her.

The blaster fire hit the floor and vaporized a pile of dirt, but she was past it, tucking the gun under her arm as she reached the struggling group of people and grabbed the nearest one of them and yanked backwards as hard as she could.

He came tumbling off the pile and smashed into her, but she hopped out of the way and let his body roll past her as she moved forward again to grab the next person.

Hands grabbed her though, and she twisted, pushing her elbow into the dimly seen form behind her and hearing a gasp from the motion. She ducked past the figure's arm and it triggered programming, as her body responded automatically and pulled her adversary to the ground.

Then she went back to her task, and hooked an arm into the arm of a man hitting something, turning and using leverage to pull him up off the stack and over her own back, to thump on the ground.

“Dev.”

Dev turned and saw a hand extending from the pile and she grabbed it, hauling backwards and yanking the owner of the hand with her, sensing something coming at her from behind.

She ducked and went to one knee, as a bolt came right over her head, sizzling into the now unraveling pile and sending body parts exploding everywhere. A hand bounced off her as she got her hands on Doctor Dan, who was turning over and reaching for her at the same moment. “Doctor Dan!”

“Sh.” He looked bruised and in great discomfort. “Let's get under cover.”

“Are you okay?” Dev asked. “I think you are bleeding.”

“Probably.” Doctor Dan wiped his hand across his head, and it came away with a dark stain. “Now I remember all over again why I switched to science.” He muttered, ducking instinctively as something came hurtling over his head. “Move, Dev. Before we get squashed.”

They half crawled, half scrambled, ducking bolts and running bodies as they got behind the big table, hearing more screams and something exploding.

Dev got the gun from under her arm and handed it to him as they crouched behind the fallen cover. “Jess said to give this to you.”

He covered it with one hand and looked past her, then his eyes met hers. “She did, eh?” He managed a faint smile. “Hmm.”

“Yes.” Dev said, slightly confused. “She said it would be good to have another person on our side.” She ducked as a blaster hit slammed into the table, and sent a shower of synth dirt over them. “This is very difficult.”

“Yes it is.” Dan exhaled. “Far more than I thought it would be.” He looked past her again, then drew up the gun and leveled it, cocking his head a trifle as he aimed and fired. “Take that, you stupid bastard” He watched the bolt slam into one of the running figures. “So is there a plan to this, Dev?”

“They were going to distract everyone so I could get you the gun. That was about it.” Dev said. “Jess didn't say what was supposed to happen next.”

Doctor Dan, surprisingly, chuckled. “Some things never change.” He said. “All right, let's go help. Stay behind me if you can, Dev. I don't want you to get damaged.” He cautiously lifted his head up over the edge of the table and got both arms clear, leaning on the surface and cradling the blaster in both hands.

With the smoke now billowing out of consoles, it was almost impossible to see what was going on, or who was shooting at who. But Doctor Dan was taking aim and letting off short blasts of plasma,

Dev wished there was something she could do. She spotted Jess and came half up on her knees, her eyes going wide as she saw her partner being slammed against the wall by three of the half armored men and one of them raising a blaster to shoot her.

She really didn't understand what happened next. One moment she was kneeling at Doctor Dan's side, the next moment her hands were hitting the back of one of the half armored men and she was pounding on him, yelling her head off as she yanked on his arm as she attempted to pull him over and away from Jess.

He struggled, but she was past thinking about it and she pulled him away, and tossed him across the floor where a blue bolt intersected him.

His body exploded into several pieces. In the glare, his face was shocked, his helmet coming off and his eyes protruding from their sockets as he died.

Dev jumped over the flying leg that came her way and headed for her partner again. She picked up a piece of the table and swung at one of the guards holding Jess, feeling a sense of ferocious rage that shocked her – but not enough to make her stop.

She saw the man raise his gun towards her and she batted it out of his hands, whacking at his chest and head and anything she could aim at to make him get away from Jess. He went down and she leaped over him, heading for the third guard.

He turned as she approached and his gun hit her metal piece, sending it flying from her hands.

Then she was grappling with him for a minute before a loud sound happened next to her and then the man was just taken out of her grip and slung against the wall like a bag of silica packets. She ducked to one side and then was grabbed herself, but there was a friendly feel to it and the next second she had Jess's voice in her ear.

“Nice! Let's go before we all croak.” Jess pushed her forward and let out a startling sound that was high pitched and clear, in a pattern that made everything in front of them shift.

Bodies moved. Somehow, Jess knew the difference between the good and the bad ones, as she hauled them all back toward the tunnel and pointed her blaster up over her shoulder, firing an intense, long burst at the device hanging over the table as a dozen enemy soldiers pelted toward them.

The device slowly lit up and then abruptly flared, and as they reached the back corridor a heavy, crackling sound suddenly filled the chamber and then yells followed it along with a booming roar that nearly blew them into the opening and flowed past them to rattle the stone.

The ceiling started to come down, on the room, and on them, and rock slid and pummeled them as they twisted and turned and fought their way through it to let it fall behind them and block anyone from following them.

“Shit!” Mike yelled, as a rock nearly smacked him in the head. “Did that thing blow up?”

“Hope so.” Jess replied. “That was my intent. Now move!!!”

They half rolled half stumbled around the corner and pelted down the rocky tunnel, as it filled behind them with debris, hauling up for an instant as a dust cloud puffed at them and turned their dark suits grayish white

“They aren't following us.” April concluded. “At least not this way”

“Let's get out the other way, and see if we can make it out of here.” Jess said, in a short, gruff tone. “Doctor Kurok – you okay?”

“I'll live.” Doctor Dan replied. “Don't get me wrong, but I'm very surprised to see you all here.” He commented. “Gratified, but surprised.”

"I bet." Jess turned as she walked, glancing at April and Mike, who were now silent and covered in soot and burns. "You two all right?"

"Not bad for my first firefight." Mike held up a hand, which had a scorch from fingertips to elbow. His jumpsuit was penetrated, and there was some blood there. "Got four of them."

"Three here." April said. "But no hits." She added, with a touch of pride in her voice. "But I tell you what, Drake – I've never in my life seen someone move like you do."

"I have." Kurok said, dryly. "But not for a good long while."

Jess wiped her hands off and gave him a brief smile. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should." The doctor said. "Thank you all, by the way. It was getting pretty gritty in there." He ran a hand through his dust streaked hair, and there was a visible circular bloody bruise on his wrist. He was dressed in a nondescript jumpsuit, but there were rips and gashes in it that also showed blood.

"You need med?" Jess asked, briefly.

"You have med?" Kurok turned the question on her. "If not, then no." His eyes twinkled just slightly.

It was dark in the hall, and it was hard to see what was really true and what was just bluster. Jess understood that though, and she smiled to hide a grimace of her own as she twisted the wrong way. "You okay, Dev?"

"Yes, fine thanks." Dev was physically unhurt, but her head was filled with wondering about her attack on the people who had been hurting Jess and Doctor Dan. She knew she had programmed not to do that. In fact, it was echoing in her head right now, bothering her as she tried to keep her footing on the uneven path.

Bio alts were not supposed to hurt natural borns. The programming was very, very clear. Even with the overlay of the tech stuff, and all that it was one of the first programming basics they all got on their very first session.

Dev remembered it. She remembered coming up from it, and looking at the programming tech, and feeling almost ashamed, because of how powerful the lesson had been and how clearly it had been made to her it was a rule never to be broken.

And here she had just broken it. She had hurt a natural born. She had caused another to become dead.

She wasn't sure if she was in more discomfort about that, or about how little discomfort she'd felt in actually doing it

"What if they know we're here?" April asked, after a minute's silence, as they walked quickly along the dark tunnel, using just the barest hint of light to lead the way.

"They know you're here." Kurok said. "That second klaxon was the intruder alert. The first one was just for me."

"Figured that. I know at least one of those guys recognized me." Jess said. "Just makes it more interesting." She slowed as they reached the end of the tunnel and approached the half cloaked entrance to the cabinet cautiously.

With the edge of her gun she moved the cloth aside, pausing to listen hard. Everyone went still behind her. Jess moved forward at a slow pace and put her hand against the inside of the cabinet door, pushing gently against it and opening it out into the lab.

It was dark, and still as they'd left it. Jess emerged into the room with the rest of them following, and she went right to the outer door and stopped to listen again.

Still quiet. She opened the door and they all flowed out into the hallway, turning quickly right and bolting down the corridor the way they'd originally come.

Then the klaxon burst into blaring alert and all around them echoed the sound of running feet and Jess knew they weren't going to get out the way they got in. She led them down a side corridor as they heard a patrol coming up towards them and going by instinct she ducked past a long, tall wall mounted ladder and saw a service hatch next to it.

Yells went up in the next hallway, and she heard the overhead in battle language, theirs, tracking them. Not good.

One touch on the blaster and the hatch burned open. She kicked it in and wormed her tall form inside, pressing her body flat against the wall as the rest followed her. She shoved the hatch shut and burned it closed, running a melt point along all three edges.

Then she indicated the narrow, panel filled space that had barely room for Dev to walk in, with lights and tracers on either side of them. "Careful. Most of that's live."

"Nice." April muttered.

"No one's gonna chase us through here then huh?" Mike eased forward and took point. "We know where we're going?"

"Where are we trying to go?" Doctor Dan spoke up. He was just behind April, with Dev and Jess behind him.

“Going for the wet.” Jess said. “Know a route?”

Kurok glanced over his shoulder at her. “The wet. Should have figured. We've got a Drake with us” His lips twitched, almost unwillingly, into a faint smile. “I know a route. Not going to be easy.” He tucked the blaster in the back of his belt and motioned Mike back. “Let me go in front, if you don't mind.”

“Sure.” Mike amiably changed places. “You know this place?”

“I helped build it.” Doctor Dan replied, in a very wry tone. “But that's a long story we don't have time for now. So just follow me, and hope I remember this place as well as I just boasted I did.” He moved cautiously forward, turning sideways to ease through the electrified walls.

Dev glanced at Jess, whose brows twitched, but otherwise didn't react. Instead, she tucked her own blaster away and put her hands on Dev's shoulders as they moved forward, Mike turning sideways as well, but April managing to edge through with just a fingerspan clearance on either shoulder

It felt good to have that touch on her. Dev could also pass easily between the walls, but she felt Jess twisting behind her as it became too close for comfort.

It was warm, and she could feel the electricity on either side of her raising the hair on the backs of her hands. “I'm glad we found Doctor Dan.” She whispered to Jess, hearing her partner laugh very softly under her breath.

“Me too.” Jess whispered back.

“He knows this place.” Dev's voice went even lower.

“Figured he might. The stuff you got on the other side came from somewhere.” Her partner uttered, her lips very close to Dev's ear. “It's okay.”

Dev nodded, falling silent. Jess surely knew what she was doing. Maybe she could talk with her after. If they came out of this undamaged.

“You all right?” Jess's breath tickled her earlobe.

Dev took a breath. “Yes.”

“Thanks for whomping on those guys for me” Jess said, casually. “Shoulda seen the look on that one bastard's face when you body slammed him. Cracked me up.”

Dev didn't answer, feeling a very uncomfortable twisting in her gut thinking about it.

“Okay.” Doctor Dan called back at that moment, making her push that aside. “We need to climb.” He pointed at a wall mounted ladder that extended up into the darkness, seeming to go on forever. “No way to get thorough on this level.”

“Then lets get climbing.” Jess said. “Sooner the better before they sweep in here and figure out where we are.”

“I'll go first.” April didn't wait for comment, but got her hands on the rungs and started moving up.

“Let's hope they havent' found the carriers.” Jess murmured. “Or it's going to be one hell of a long, very cold swim.”

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It was a long climb. Jess realized after a few minutes that whatever she'd done to herself was going to make the effort extremely uncomfortable but she sucked it up and pulled herself up after Dev stolidly.

Pain was relative. Where she'd been injured now felt like a knife had been stuck into it again, and she felt like she'd maybe broken a rib again.

But there was no med, as Kurok had pointed out, and no option so she pushed it to the back of her mind and just kept going. So far, she thought, things were going better than she'd expected. They'd gotten in, found the new tech, found out it wasn't all it was cracked up to be, found Kurok, rescued him, and were now trying to extract.

Really, could have been a whole lot worse.

Not to mention she'd gotten to see Dev go a little crazy on her behalf, the look of intense fury so out of place on her cute face that laughing at it had almost lost her a hand.

Jess glanced up, to see her partner swarming up the ladder ahead of her, moving easily and lightly up the rungs, the line of her jaw visible as she watched Mike ahead of her.

Damn she was good looking. Jess let the thought distract her, glad she had something to think about besides how much danger they were in and how much her body hurt.

She wished they were somewhere else. She wanted a few days just to hang out with Dev again and she was pretty sure they weren't going to get that anytime soon. Jess sighed, dredging up a memory of the taste of hopping shrimp and how it felt to

have Dev kiss her.

“Pst.”

Jess only barely stopped in time, her shoulder bumping Dev's leg. The climbing had stopped and now she looked up to see Kurok slowly easing into a duct that ran along the top of the wall they'd been climbing up and she was relieved to see her climbing was over for a while. She climbed up another rung and felt Dev's hand come to rest on her shoulder, a friendly bit of warmth that made her smile, if only briefly.

Far off, she could hear klaxons. “Bet they're running all over the place looking for us.”

“Yes.” Dev responded quietly.

They moved up a few more rungs as April disappeared into the duct, settling near the entrance to let the others get a bit further inside. Jess glanced at Dev's face as they remained momentarily still, and saw a tension there that seemed new.

“Hey.”

The pale eyes tracked to hers. “Yes?”

“You okay?” Jess put a hand on her arm as she prepared to move off the ladder. “You look pissed off.”

Dev paused in mid motion and looked at her partner, one pale eyebrow lifting.

“Never mind. We'll talk later.” Jess heard a loud bang behind them and she guided Dev forward and scrambled after her, getting the hatch cover closed just as running footsteps sounded loud and echoing below, expecting and hear the sound of hands and feet on the first set of rungs on the ladder. “Move it people.”

“Heard em.” Mike said.

Jess waited for Dev to get a bodylength down the duct before she turned and sealed the hatch with her blaster, leaving a square of blackened metal that sent a wave of heat out that made her blink. She reversed herself and swarmed after the rest of them, realizing the tiny space and cramped motion was even more annoying than the climb.

Ugh. Jess caught up to Dev's heels and now they progressed with silent speed, heading towards a T junction she could just see the outline of ahead of them. She could hear sounds below and behind the duct they were in, and briefly hoped the space was important enough to prevent the enemy from just vaporizing it.

She could feel air pushing against her though, and figured it was part of the ventilation system and when you were primarily below ground, that was, in fact, important.

They hit the corner and started to the right, and the duct started to slant downward. At first the pitch was gentle, then Jess could feel gravity tugging at her, pulling her forward as the angle steepened.

It was also getting darker inside and colder, and as Jess reached out to touch the duct wall, she felt moisture on it that faintly stung her fingertips and as she got a few bodylengths further she felt herself slipping and knew where they were headed.

Instinctively she reached out and grabbed Dev's ankle. “Turn around.” She said, as her partner reacted. “Go feet first.” She released her hold and braced her arms on either side of the duct as she swiveled herself around and watched Dev do the same. “Okay, go.”

It was dark past her and the sounds of the others had faded a little. Dev slid a few feet more then she shot forward as the angle steepened further and without hesitation Jess shoved herself after her. She let gravity take her, but got her gloves on and used friction to control her speed so she didn't overtake her partner.

An explosion sounded to their rear, and Jess yanked her hands in as she felt a pressure wave building behind her. She caught up with Dev just as a rumbling roar vibrated the walls of the duct and bright light erupted behind them and cast sharp shadows ahead.

They reached a sharp turn just as the blast wall hit them, and then they were falling as the duct turned straight down, just barely ahead of the fireball. Jess kept her head tucked down and tried to ignore the heat against her neck, as they passed outside the duct and were in free fall in the air.

Everyone was early silent. She could smell water strongly, though, and she crossed her legs and tucked her arms around her body. “Dev, cross your ankles.” She risked a call out.

“Yes.” Dev sounded nervous.

Then they heard in succession three splashes and judging the depth by the sound, Jess reached out suddenly and caught hold of Dev's shoulder, pulling her closer and wrapping her arms around her pilot just in time to get her secured before she sensed the impending impact and they hit the surface of the water.

Ice cold. The brined chill invaded their suits immediately as they plunged downward. Jess released one hand and clamped it over Dev's mouth and nose, unlocking her legs and kicking hard against the downward motion. She felt Dev start to

struggle and kept a firm hold on her, as their plunge slowed.

The chill faded a little as the water got trapped in her suit, and they started upward as a cloud of bubbles exploded around them. Jess kicked harder and blinked a couple times as the water stung her eyelids, and then they were reaching the surface and their heads emerged in the air.

She released Dev's mouth but kept hold of her as she shook the hair out of her eyes, looking around in the dense gloom and spotting motion nearby. "You okay?" She asked Dev, keeping her mouth close to her pilot's ear.

Dev coughed a little. "Yes." She finally said, after clearing her throat.

"Good." Jess turned on her side and started swimming, heading for the edge of the huge pool they were immersed in. Cavern walls rose around it, and there was no obvious exit, the water touched the rock on all sides. "Not sure we just didn't slide out of the frying pan and into the fire though."

Dev paddled for a moment, then memory kicked in past the thrumming shock and she remembered how Jess taught her to swim. She moved from a hesitant motion to a more confident one, as she followed Jess through the water to the far wall where the others were gathering.

In a moment they were all face to face. "Now what?" April asked, keeping her voice very low.

"What is this place?" Mike asked. "Collecting tank?"

Doctor Dan had one hand on the wall and he was rubbing his eyes with the fingers of the other. "Desalinization sump." He looked around the cavern. "They're on to us. They flooded the exit." He pointed at the wall across from where they were. "That leads outside."

"How deep?" Jess asked.

Kurok studied the wall. "Fifty feet. Which, on one hand probably saved our lives, but on the other..." He cleared his throat. "And it's at least three hundred feet through the flooded tunnel to the outside."

Jess nodded. She stripped off her water kit and handed it over to him. "Put that on." She said. "Everyone else, gear up." She turned at a faint echo then ducked as overhead flood lights came on, bathing them in stark brilliance. "Move. Fast."

The first blaster fire hit the wall a second later, as everyone got their gear in place and Jess shoved them towards the far wall.

Kurok grabbed her arm. "What about you?" He asked, watching her intently. "If you think I'm leaving you back here, you've got another thing coming, Jesslyn."

Jess smiled briefly at him. "I'll be fine. I can hold my breath."

"No one can, that long."

"I can." Jess ducked a sizzling burst. "Move it or it's gonna be a moot point." She grabbed both Kurok and Dev and shoved them underwater, as she heard a power launch land in the water at the far end of the cavern. She ducked her head under and pitched downward, into the dark depths of the water.

Dev had her mask on but she was half turned in the water, watching Jess with a worried expression on her face. Jess smiled at her, aware of the tiny bubbles of air trickling from her nostrils.

They were sinking down in the water and she spotted the outline of the luminescent tag on April's blaster. Going horizontal in the water she pushed her two charges forward, and swam after them with easy kicks.

Above them, she could hear motors approaching and she angled lower, watching April and Mike watching them approach. She lifted a hand and circled her finger, pointing at the almost invisible, flooded entrance tunnel below them.

Kurok and Dev kept looking back at her, and as they all reached the tunnel level, Kurok turned and made to lift off the mask he was wearing, signaling that he would share it with her.

Jess pointed at the tunnel insistently and pushed him towards it. The pressure was building on her chest, and she let a few more bubbles slip out before she realized Dev was swimming towards her, a determined look on her face.

She grabbed Dev and tried to turn her around but her partner pointed at her mask, and looked adorably worried about her. Jess sighed, but when she looked past the bio alt she saw the rest of the group headed in her direction with determined expressions.

Jess released Dev, and held her hands up in a stopping motion. She hurriedly emptied her lungs of the rest of the air and felt her body twitch, as it sensed what was coming. She consciously contracted her chest and, as Kurok reached her and Dev grabbed for her arm, she coughed out the last free air and let her lungs expand, drawing in the icy cold water in.

It was a shock, as it always had been right from the very first time she'd done it, back in the day, back when she was just a

kid and had no idea what she was doing until she'd done it.

It was almost pain, a rush of tingling ice as the water filled her and her lungs struggled to react, switching from their normal function to one so different. But after a moment it was done, and she felt the familiar sense of effort in drawing in liquid rather than gas, that drag on muscles not often used for this purpose.

Jess blinked again and felt the clear inner eyelid slide down over her eyes, allowing her to focus and just in time, because the sound of underwater sleds cut through them and they were out of time. Jess pointed urgently at the tunnel and started towards it, sweeping them all ahead of her as they got out of their own way with wide eyes still staring at her.

There was no time to consider the implications. Jess increased her speed, and herded them all ahead of her as they entered the tunnel and started through it.

The sleds caught them halfway through and Jess turned, pulling her blaster out and hoping the sealing held as she pointed it and fired. The energy burst lit up the tunnel, outlined their enemy and fortunately didn't cause the weapon to blow up in her hand. She locked her knees together and moved her body in a smooth motion, aiming at the nearest sled and firing.

She could hear the weird sizzle as the blaster fired through the water, the seal at the muzzle allowing the energy out. The beam hit the sled and it veered off, slamming into the wall of the tunnel as the other two sped up and came at her.

She could hear the roar of the ocean coming closer. The sleds had light fins, and were mech models, not intended for surf and she sped up herself, ducking a blast that nearly hit her head and glanced off the roof of the tunnel.

Two return shots came past her from the other direction, and the two chasers dove for the tunnel floor. Jess sucked in water faster, the strain of the mechanics of breathing liquid adding to her already protesting body's discomfort.

She pointed the blaster down and got a shot off, as she kicked against the wall to avoid a return hit from the sled's gun. Another shot came past her, then a second, and as the sled aiming from her tried to avoid it, a wash of surf came in the tunnel and shoved it sideways into the third.

Jess turned in the water and got her arms flat against her sides, letting her body settle into a rhythmic motion that caught up to the rest of the team as they reached the end of the tunnel and headed for the protective grid. Just short of it the water rippled, and then a blue light burst into being, outlining the metal and pulsing its own warning.

Everyone hauled up shy of the metal and they turned, as the sound of more chasing sleds echoed loudly behind them.

Trapped. Jess ran her eye over the grid. It wasn't scan, just plain old electrified with enough current to turn them into octopus crisps. The squares were small, probably large enough for them to get through but one current wrong would send them into the rippling blue light before any chance of avoiding it.

Mike and April looked at her, as Jess cautiously approached the glowing surface, holstering their blasters for now.

Dev settled against the floor of the tunnel, her heart thumping so fast it was shaking her. She felt very overwhelmed, and programming or not all her confidence had slipped away leaving her scared and unsure of what to do.

So she watched Jess, moving around in the water without any gear at all on, breathing water.

Nothing in her programming had prepared her for that. Even Doctor Dan was watching her and his eyes were wide too, his head shaking a little back and forth almost unconsciously.

How was she doing that? It was like someone going out into space without a suit.

Unable to fathom it, she turned and regarded the grid. She could feel the power running through it from where she was, and realized belatedly that they were trapped behind it. A motion caught her eye and she turned to see Mike and April turning and facing the tunnel, drawing out their guns and preparing to fire.

Light blazed down from the chamber, and she could count four, and then six big lamps approaching them. Doctor Dan floated next to her and took out the gun Dev had given them, putting himself between her and the coming lights.

He looked over at her and gave her one of his kind, sad smiles, reaching over to pat her on the shoulder.

Dev turned to look for Jess, finding her near the bottom of the tunnel, just short of the grid, examining something on the surface there. She pushed off from the wall and swam over, watching in fascination as her partner's mouth opened and she sucked in water, her shoulders and chest moving visibly.

Jess looked up as she approached and pointed at the ground. Dev settled to her knees next to her partner and looked at what she was looking at, which was a box welded into the tunnel surface. Jess pointed at the box, then pointed at the grid, then shrugged her shoulders in question.

Dev looked at the box. Then she turned and looked at the tunnel wall, then tipped her head back and looked up. She pointed at the ceiling, where a half round duct was visible, then followed it with her finger as it stretched back towards the inside.

Jess moved suddenly, grabbing her and throwing her down as blaster fire hit the bottom of the tunnel next to them, sending



a wave of almost heat over their bodies as they tumbled in the water, drifting dangerously close to the grid.

Mike and April returned fire, but the inside of the tunnel lit up with counterfire, as the ten sleds barreled towards them. Jess grabbed Dev's lower leg with one hand and turned to drop onto her back, reaching up and triggering her blaster pointed at the ceiling just past her partner's ear.

Dev flinched as a rolling blast of water hit both of them, and before either could react they were shoved against the grid with an audible crunch. Instead of being blasted into a crisp, they were just bumped and bruised, and Jess managed to get her hands on the metal and pull herself through and into the open sea.

The sleds arrived a second later, and slammed into the grid.

The rest of the team opened fire as they swam rapidly towards escape, and for a long moment the entire tunnel was filled with criss crossing blaster beams.

Then Mike, April and Doctor Dan came rolling out into the sea, Jess aimed her gun inside and fired off a pinpoint shot, and the grid reactivated and shorted explosively as it arced across the sleds jammed against it's surface.

The power of the blowout scattered them and sent them tumbling through the water, bouncing off the rocks that lined the channel as they fought to regain control of their motion.

Jess was the first to do so. She quickly whirled in mid motion and headed for Dev, who had managed to get a grip on a piece of rock and was looking around in a dazed sort of way. Just past her the agent spotted Mike and April, and furthest away, Dan Kurok.

As she reached Dev's side she looked back at the entrance to the tunnel, and saw it half energized, sputtering and flashing as the sleds, or what was left of them, drifted apart and bodies drifted without internal motion.

Well, that gave them a few more minutes. Jess pointed at the surface and started swimming upward slowly, taking a route parallel to the coast.

Fifteen minutes later, they were surfacing in darkness, only the sound of the surf around them. Jess had led them to a small pinnacle, and they clung there catching their breaths. Or in Jess's case, exchanging hers as she spent a moment expelling all the water in her lungs, prepping herself for the effort as she lifted her head out of water and did the exchange.

So there they were, heads just above the surface, lips blue and shivering, four of them staring at Jess as she coughed and hacked and nearly ended up dry heaving as her body reluctantly resumed processing air.

"They'll be after us in a minute." April said, after a long moment of silence.

"Yes" Doctor Dan said, in a weary tone. "Everyone all right?"

Jess rested her arm on a rock and her head on her arm. "As all right as Im' gonna get." She said, her voice a hoarse rasp. "Carriers' are half a mile that way, around that point." She indicated the darkness that blanketed everything. "Gonna be a bitch getting there."

"Yeah, thought that was a different direction we were going in." Mike said, quietly. "Guess we better start swimming before they figure out what happened in that tunnel and launch a patrol."

"Sorry about that." Kurok spoke up. "There's a cross tunnel there that would have taken us under the rock all the way along the rock along the coast but it was closed off. No way to get into it when it's flooded like that." He now, carefully, looked at Jess. "That's quite a trick."

Jess coughed. "Yeah, I'm a hit at parties with it." She looked around. "Maybe we can get out and go overland." She examined the coast, only barely seen in the night.

"Tumbled rocks. Be a hike." April said.

"It's mined." Doctor Dan said, briefly. "Probably not a good.." He fell silent as another sound came over the waves. "Ah, they're on the way."

A boat's engine rumbled, getting louder as they listened. "Okay." Jess said. "We should go down again. We've got enough charge in those cannisters to last 48 hours." She coughed again, pushing away from the rocks as she prepared to duck under the surface again. "Keep the slope on your left hand side. We'll make our way near shore."

The sound of the boat got louder, suddenly and they scrambled to get gear in place and get under the water. Dev settled her mask and tried to ignore how cold she was, when suddenly, the noise triggered something in her. She reached out to Jess and grasped her arm. "Wait."

"What?" Jess moved closer. "You all right?"

"That sound is something I remember." Dev said. "It's..." She pulled her scanner out and lifted it above the waves, waiting for the water to drain before she popped the cover and booted it up. "I think I..."

A light pierced the darkness, sweeping around.

“Better think fast, Devvie.” Jess said. “We’ve come to far to get splatted this easy.”

The scan came back. “Look, Jess.” Dev showed it to her. “It’s the fishing boat.”

“The fishing boat? What fishing boat?” Jess peered at the screen, rubbing her salt irritated eyes. “You mean.. you don’t mean Sigurd’s boat? The one we stole?”

“And brought back.” Dev said. “Yes, it is.. it has the same profile.”

The other agents and Kurok were clustered around, peering over Dev’s shoulder along with Jess. “What does it mean?” April said. “What’s it doing here?”

“Good question. Along with, who’s driving it?” Jess said. “In either case, that boat’s something we need, and maybe cover enough to get us back to the carriers. So we’re gonna find out who’s in it the hard way.”

Kurok cleared his throat. “Maybe they’ll pick someone up floating in the water.” He suggested.

“Not one of us voluntarily.” Jess said, briefly. “We stole the boat last time.”

“Not one of you, but maybe me.” Doctor Dan said. “Some old scientist washed overboard of something.” He added. “Worth a chance, isn’t it?”

“What if it’s already been commandeered?” Jess said, after a moment’s silence.

Doctor Dan smiled. “Then I’m no worse off than I was, and I can likely distract them long enough for you all to get away.”

“What makes you think we’d try?” Jess smiled back at him. “But you can distract them long enough for us to climb onboard.”

Kurok chuckled a little “Deal.” He took off his underwater rig and handed it to her. “Good luck.” He slipped off the rock and started swimming towards the sound and light of the boat.

“You too.” Jess said, just loud enough to be heard above the surf.

When he swam out of site she settled the mask around her neck and regarded the rest of them. “Let’s go.” She said. “I’m not going to wait for them to make a decision, whoever they are.”

“Right.” April got her rig adjusted and disappeared under the waves. Mike was right behind her, and they both moved off in the direction Kurok had gone.

Dev and Jess regarded each other for a minute in silence. Then Jess moved forward and tilted her head, giving Dev a long, warm, passionate kiss. When she backed off, her pilot’s lips looked far less blue, and her expression looked far less bleak. “C’mon. When we get out of this, you and I are going to find a place and lose the world for a good long time.”

She put Dev’s mask in place and took her hand, putting her own mask over her face and slipping under the surface with her partner in tow, the last sounds she heard the clanging of a bell, and the sound of changing gears.

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The light beam penetrated the water, sending a spear of green tinged white almost far enough to hit Jess. She finned clear of it, then went still as she felt the tickle of scan on her skin.

The other agents felt it, and hands went to blasters instinctively. Jess watched the light outline Kurok’s body for a long moment, then she turned in the water and headed for the far side of the boat.

As they passed under the hull the engines rumbled audibly, and looking up Jess could see a faintly circular motion starting. So they were turning towards Kurok. Who was taking a big chance, being casually brave in the way they often were who were part of the corps.

It’s only life, right? Jess focused on a low rock outcrop just past the boat and when she reached it she turned, studying the position of the boat and sorting through her options. Only life, and it never paid to plan too far ahead because crap like this happened and you just had to go with it.

Jess pointed up at the hull, making climbing motions with her hands. The eyes watching her looked doubtful, but the heads nodded and she started upward with a quiet, sinuous motion.

Her throat hurt. It felt raw and sucking in a breath of air sent prickles of discomfort across her chest. Jess grimaced and swallowed, knowing she’d be paying for her little party trick for a good long while. She put the pain aside and studied the hull above her, now closing in as the boat moved slowly across the surface.

Big engines churned the water, making it hard to see, but she caught sight of the side, and the flushing panels for the big tanks and headed for them.

Chancy. Right between the engines. But she knew where they lead. Jess pointed to the hatches, which were in the open position allowing water into the holding tanks, and the rest of them nodded. Useless right now to tell them how tight the timing would need to be- she just made a sign for them to stick close behind her and went for it.

It was fast, and hard and as she banged through the open hatch and into a tank full of irritated fish she had to wonder how good an idea it was to begin with.

As her hips cleared the opening she whirled in mid motion and caught the edge of the hatch, reaching back through and yanking Dev past her, as the two other agents caught hold just as the engines increased power and they swung around, slamming Jess into the tank wall.

Mike lost his grip and his body went into the prop wash, as April grabbed him by the belt and held on. Jess reached back through and added her own hold, pulling April into the tank and getting a good grip on Mike's arm.

April had the sense to get out of the way. She released her hold and swam clear, coming to rest next to Dev holding onto the back tank wall.

Mike got hold of the edge of the hatch and pulled himself in, turning as he cleared it to make sure he still had all his bodyparts. He shook his head and floated free, banging against the tank wall as he checked his legs.

Jess turned her light on and sent a beam through the tank, seeing the reflection as thousands of eyes were mirrored back at her from the nearly full tank.

Damn good thing Mike hadn't gotten cut. Jess spared a grimace for the idea, then she pointed forward and started to swim towards the other end of the live fish hold.

Above her, she could hear the tackle being retracted, and hoped it meant that Kurok was onboard. There was too much metal for her to hear any voices, but she could hear muted tones of what might be yelling. That could be good, and could be bad for them.

The fish parted as they swam through. It was a mixture of catch, some larger specimens with a host of smaller ones, a lot of cod mixed with some barracuda, and a few small sharks. Jess ignored them as they moved through, nothing was close to their size and likely to want them for lunch and the bulk of bio hid their human signatures to any average scan.

She was aware of Dev swimming gamely at her side. A sideways glance, though, showed her a very tense look on her partner's face, and it occurred to her that she might be pushing the bio alt past her abilities, given she'd been less than a month on the job.

But Dev's jaw was clenched in a stubborn way, and now that they were in the holding tank she was taking brief moments to look around at the fish they were swimming through with a hint of curiosity.

Then she seemed to sense the attention and her eyes met Jess's, a brief smile appearing on her face as she licked her lips.

Jess felt a flush of warmth flood her skin, and was glad the mask hid her blush. Crazy. Ridiculous for her to react that way given how long she'd been on the job and all those years of learning control.

Dev took hold of her arm suddenly and she jerked her attention back to her partner, then realized they were about to crash into the wall. She put a hand out to stop them and waited for the rest to catch up, light from the deck filtering down through the heavy hatch cover and painting them in greenish blue stripes.

Jess slowly moved to the surface, staying flat against the wall until her head emerged into the small space between the top of the tank and the hatch. The others emerged a moment later, and they remained quiet and still, listening to the sounds now very audible through the deck of the boat.

Dev pulled the mask off her face and let it sit around her neck, glad to have her head outside the unrelenting chill of the water. The air was cold too but it seemed somehow less so than the water, and she blinked a few times, and drew in breaths of air that were filled with brine and fish scent.

It was so strange to think they were inside the tank, on the boat. She remembered being on the deck, and the polar bear, and now she wondered who was on the boat and what had happened to the fishing people.

"Bring it up!" A loud voice yelled. "Hurry!"

The hydraulics cut in and they felt the boat shift as it pulled something up.

Jess listened to the boots crossing to watch, and when they faded, she eased the service hatch up a trifle and peeked out. A moment of watching, then she pushed it all the way open and pulled herself up through it, clearing the way and rolling out of sight behind the big bait lockers.

All the men on the boat were on the far rail, watching the crane pull in something in a net. She couldn't see any faces, but a quick scan of the profiles didn't trigger her memory of any bad guys and when the other three joined her, she stayed

crouched where she was, holding her hand up for silence.

The crane was swinging over when powerful flood lights suddenly lit them from the cliffside, and then the roar of engines sounded over the waves.

“Kill your engines. Prepare for boarding” A loudspeaker pealed out. “Remain where you are or you will be shot.”

Jess exhaled. “Gonna be one of those days.”

“Going to be?” April asked, with a quizzical expression.

The crane came to rest with its net on the deck. It was wrapped around a man shaped figure, but the crew ignored it as they scattered to stations, yanking open the big weapons chest against the back wall and arming themselves.

“Stay still.” Jess watched the action, as the crew returned to the rail, all of them with their back to her as they waited on the approach of the heavy armored cruisers.

Every crewman had a weapon. There was a surge of motion suddenly, and a familiar figure shoved his way to the rail and stood, hands planted firmly on his hips as the boats approached.

Dev smiled, recognizing the captain. “Look, Jess.”

“I see.” Jess managed a brief grin herself. “Old bastard. Knew he was too tough to get squashed in ice.”

The first destroyer swung to, floodlights hitting the side of the fishing vessel and whitewashing it in glare. “Stand to.”

“Kiss my ass.” The captain yelled back. “What the hell d'you want?? You're scaring off the damn fish!”

The man with the repeater stared at him in silence. “You're in restricted waters!” He finally yelled. “Prepare to be boarded.”

“Like hell!” The captain yelled. “You put a foot on here I'll blow it off!” He brandished an old, scarred blaster. “Show me on what chart it says this is restricted? It's just an old shoal!”

“He's got guts.” April said, mildly. “They could blow him out of the water in ten seconds.”

Jess braced herself against the wall and rubbed her eyes. The tension was ratcheting up in her and she felt her body starting to twitch. It took a lot of effort to stay pressed against the side wall, behind the steel separator that was between them and the rail the crew was lined up against.

“They could, but they're not.” Mike said.

“They won't.” Jess peered through a rope hole in the wall. “They depend on fish loads just like everyone else does in the big pop centers. Piss off the independents and you end up eating limpets and scraping algae.”

“They have leverage.” April nodded. “The elders taught us about that, back home.”

The destroyer motored closer, and swept the deck. “We're looking for a man overboard. Have you seen them?”

Sigurd laughed. “So now you want my help?” He said. “Get lost! There's nothing here but fish, buddy.” He waved the blaster at them. “We've been here for hours. Didn't see any man overboard. Overboard of what? That rock?” He pointed at the pinnacle.

The boat came even closer, and Jess could see them sweeping the deck with scanners, and she pressed back, turning her body sideways to them. “Ready.”

“See them.” Mike aligned himself next to her, as Jess tucked her head down a little behind the bait chamber.

“What the hell are ya doing?” Sigurd yelled. “Stop that!” He released the catch on his blaster audibly and then fired off a blast, making the other vessel erupt in angry chaos. “Keep your filthy tech to yourself!”

Someone else fired on the other side, and the next minute bolts were going everywhere, hitting the metal deck and deflecting.

“Hold!” The other ship captain bellowed. “Hold your fire!”

“Assholes!” Sigurd called out. “Consider your dock closed for us!” He waved a hand at the crew. “Pull in the nets! Let's get out of here.”

The crew burst into motion, heading for the big net wheel in the back and holstering their weapons to grab tackle around the deck. The hydraulics kicked in and the crane arched over to open up the back hatch of the tank, as the net started to retract and bring its catch into the hold.

The net the crane had brought onboard was forgotten, near the front of the deck and apparently empty and lifeless. The destroyer idled nearby and didn't move away, the scanners sweeping them despite Sigurd's threat. But as the net came aboard, and the shining bodies of fish started to disappear into the hold, the scans faded.

"Find other waters." The captain of the destroyer ordered. "We won't hold fire next time, hear me?"

Sigurd made a gesture at him, his arm outlined in the lights on the back of the deck with its rude symbol. The captain watched the ships slowly turn and start quating in a searching pattern, keeping themselves between the shore and the fishing vessel.

Now powerful lights were coming on at the shoreline, and the waters were churned and illuminated, outlining anything below with piercing light. A shout went out, and a loud double thump sounded, then a low rumble that erupted into a booming roar that exploded up through the surf and sent a shockwave outbound that rocked the fishing boat violently.

But the crew took it in stride, and once the end of the net was aboard Sigurd yelled for the helm to turn around, and take them on an outbound course to the west. The crane rumbled over head and two of the crew attached it to the big hatch, standing back as it swung the big portal closed.

The destroyers and their explosions faded off behind as they moved away from shore and into the waves, as the fishing gear was lashed down and the crew gathered near where Sigurd was standing, his arm braced against the steel hull, the blaster cradled in his other elbow.

Silence fell, only the whistle of the wind, and the slosh of the sea heard over the rumble of the engines.

Jess judged the distance, then she pushed off from the wall and stepped around the bait locker, with the rest of her little gang behind her. She stopped a few body lengths from the rest of the crew, her hand resting on her blaster. "Dev." She said. "Go check out your buddy."

Dev slid out from her shadow and trotted across the deck, kneeling down next to the net.

Sigurd studied Jess. He moved away from the control station and came over to her, the blaster cradled in one arm not quite pointed at her, but not quite not. He stopped just within reach and tilted his head to look up at her, pale eyes as cold and hard as hers were. "Know why I'm here?" He asked, after a moment of silence.

"No." Jess answered, honestly. "Last time we met you abandoned me and this tub to a trap in the ice. Didn't expect we'd be meeting again."

Sigurd nodded. "So I did." He glanced around. "So I was paid to do. Didn't expect to see you again either. Or this boat. But you brought it back."

"I did." Jess agreed. "Never considered otherwise. Runs in the blood."

The fisherman shifted a little, the gun easing to one side. "Well." He glanced around. "I don't like owing people." He scowled at her. "I screwed you over, and you repay me for that by leaving me a boat, with a profit, and enough god damned black diamonds to retire on. You suck, Drake."

Jess smiled, with only a little humor. "You're welcome." She caught the looks of the crew, which were far more friendly than she remembered. "Hope everyone got a cut."

The captain nodded. "You didn't ask me how I knew where you were."

"Don't care how you knew." Jess pointed at the horizon. "Need to drop us off past the western turn. We'll swim in. No sense in risking this tub."

"Then we're even." Sigurd said. "I drop you, we're done."

"Yes." She turned her head. "He okay, Dev?"

Dev was helping Doctor Dan sit up. The scientist looked more than a little battered and there was blood on his head, but he lifted a hand in her direction and waved it.

"All right. Let me get this thing pointed right." Sigurd handed his gun off to one of the crew. "Siddown for a few minutes. I don't want those goons to catch on." He climbed up to the control bridge, leaving the agents to take his advice and sit down on one of the equipment lockers.

Doctor Dan came over to join them. "Well." He looked around. "Unexpected."

Jess nodded. "It's not over." She said. "We've still got to get to the carriers and get out of here." She made space next to her so Dev could sit down. "I'll feel a hell of a lot better once Dev's got her hands on the throttles."

Dev managed a smile.

One of the crew approached, with a drink container and a stack of cups. He offered them the cups in silence and they took them, holding them as he poured something steaming into them. "Agent." He addressed Jess. "Sorry about the ice."

Jess lifted the cup in his direction then brought it to her lips, the half spicy scent of seaweed tea reaching her nose as she sipped it.

“We heard about the bases.” The man said. “One of them from North was a cousin.” He turned and left them, as the fishing vessel started a slow, almost meandering arc that took them away from the brightly lit search site, as another explosion reached their ears.

“They’re going to end up blowing up something important.” Doctor Dan said, his hands wrapped around the cup he’d been given. “But at least it’s keeping their attention.”

No one asked anything. Jess slowly drank her tea, aware of Dev’s body leaning against her, glad of just these few minutes of stillness and peace.

She was tired and she hurt. She could see that April and Mike were equally exhausted, though neither had said even a word of complaint. She knew Kurok was hurt, and she could see Dev was stressed. And now they would have the challenge of entering the water again, then finding a way ashore unseen, then finding their carriers and hoping like hell they were still hidden and their two techs were safe, and not dead.

All that to worry about, not to mention finding a way home from deep enemy territory when she knew every soldier they had would be hunting them, and then, if they did manage all that, having no idea what she was going home to.

Ugh.

She sipped the hot tea appreciating the warmth on her sore throat, knowing that no discussion of anything would take place before they were safely in the carriers, and that was all right by her, since it gave her some time to think about what they’d done and try to understand it.

The boat started motoring around in a searching pattern of its own, as though it was looking for fish. There was some chance they were still under surveillance, and Sigurd was taking no chances as he meandered slowly west, heading for the promontory headland their carriers were hidden behind.

At least, she hoped they were. She didn’t think she could trust Sigurd to take them home. Though. She glanced at Dev. At least if he did, they’d both get some rest. The thought of curling up in bed with her partner was so enticing, she almost wished...

No, she didn’t. Jess finished her tea and stood up, adjusting her oversuit and preparing it to go again into the water. “Be glad to get these off and get something dry on.” She commented. “We’ve got a medkit in the bus, Doc.”

Kurok smiled wryly at her. “I think we should get as close to shore as we can.” He said quietly. “If the tide’s out, there’s a rock wall – if they can pull up against it we can stay dry.”

“You know a lot about that place.” April spoke up.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan agreed. “I was born there.” He leaned back against the wall. “Grew up there, until I became part of a project that ended up with me changing sides.” His lips twitched. “But that’s a story for another time.”

“Wow.” April said, with a note of respect in her voice. “That must be quite a story.”

“Mm.” The pale haired man made a sound in his throat, glancing at Jess and then looking away. “It was.”

The crew stayed away from them. They worked at their tasks, and got the nets ready, just going about their jobs as though there weren’t five strangers sitting on their deck, and patrols watching their movements.

A few minutes later, one of the women came on deck, with a pot of something and a stack of worn plates. She put it down on the locker and offered April a spoon, then walked away, disappearing back down into the interior area of the ship.

“This safe?” April indicated the pot.

“Is anything?” Jess handed out the plates, and the utensils piled on them.

“Good point.” The younger agent dumped portions of the fisherman’s typical fish stew on the plates and then sat down and started in on hers. “Better than that stuff at the pole.”

Jess took a mouthful and had to agree. She watched Dev from the corner of her eye, as the bio alt stolidly worked through the stew and gently nudged her with her elbow.

Dev looked up at her in question.

“Want more tea?” Jess asked.

“No, I’m okay with this.” Dev pointed at the stew. “It’s warm.” She added. “But I agree I will be very glad when we can change into something dry.” She seemed to perk up a little at Jess’s continued attention. “I’m really glad the fisher people came out okay.”

“Me too.” Jess agreed.

“But they said they left us there on purpose.” Dev frowned. “That wasn’t good.”

"They got paid to." Jess scraped up the last of her stew. "It happens"

"Then why are they helping us now?" Dev whispered. "It's confusing. Couldn't they be being paid to do bad things now too?"

"Anything's possible." Jess also kept her voice very low. "But Sigurd's shackled with the same ten ton ball of honor that I am. When we were with him before it was a handshake deal. He had no pact with us, just did it as a favor to his old uncle. Must have been a lot of cred, to get him to walk away from this thing."

Dev frowned.

"When I brought the boat back, I put him in deep debt to me." Jess went on, in a casual tone. "Both in cred, and in honor and he's got to pay that off."

"Oh. He has to?"

"Has to."

"I see." Dev finished up her stew. "I am going to speak to him then." She put the plate down. "I want to see if he got my note." She ducked past Jess before the agent could react, and headed for the control center, moving past the crew and mounting the steps with stolid confidence.

Jess put her plate down and paused, not sure if she should follow or not. She glanced at Doctor Dan, who was sitting quietly having finished his meal.

"Not what you expected, hm?" Kurok inquired.

"No." Jess admitted.

"Me either." The scientist sighed, shaking his head. "Me either."

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Dev opened the door to the control area, pausing when the men inside turned to look at her.

Two of them immediately headed her way, but the captain lifted his hand. "Leave her." He growled. "Take off." He added, gesturing to the door. "I can handle this crate."

The men walked past Dev, making a point of staring at her as they went by. Dev merely looked back at them, waiting for the door to close and taking a moment to enjoy the lack of cold wind.

Sigurd kept his hands on the controls, but one eye on her. "So."

"Hello." Dev came over and stood next to the console. "This was a very pleasant thing to drive. I liked it."

The captain's eyebrows hiked up. "You drove it?"

"Yes." The bio alt agreed. "I had to."

Sigurd eyed her. "So. You're a jelly bag brain?"

Dev nodded. "I'm a bio alt." She said. "I don't think I have any jelly in my head though. There's not much room with all the programming in there."

"That's freaking strange." The captain commented. "I never would have pegged you for that."

Dev took that as a compliment. "Well, I didn't expect you to let us die in the ice. So I guess you really don't know about people, do you?"

Sigurd turned his head fully and looked at her. "You wrote in my log."

"I did." Dev put her hands on the console, flexing the fingers a little as the chill left them. "I wasn't sure what happened to you and your family, but I hoped you made out okay, and I wanted you to know that."

"Why?" The captain asked. "We screwed you over. Left you to croak. Hoped the ice crushed you and this tub, and they promised me they'd replace it."

"Yes, I know. But I still hoped you made it out okay." Dev said. "A lot of people try to hurt us. I was taught to expect that."

He sighed. "Great." He said. "Enjoy that hopeful attitude while you can cause life's gonna beat it out of you." He glanced at her again. "Anyway, those bastards double crossed me and we ended up running for our lives from em. My fault. Paid a kid for it." He looked out at the water. "So get out of here, okay? I gotta figure out where I can set where they don't know I'm letting you off."

"Okay. Goodbye." Dev touched the console and turned, retreating from the control surface and heading for the door. "Good luck."

“Yeah, you too.” Sig said, without turning around.

Dev closed the door behind her and climbed down the steps, passing the two crew members who immediately clambered up past her. She started around the corner only to crash headlong into a tall body coming the other direction, and bounced back, trying to catch her balance. “Oh!”

“Ah.” Jess grabbed and steadied her. “There you are.”

“Here I am.” Dev agreed. “That discussion was not very successful, but I'm glad I had it.” She told her partner. “I was in discomfort thinking those people had all died. I'm glad they didn't.”

“Since they just saved our asses, me too.” Jess leaned against the wall and stuck her hands in her pockets. “Be glad to get back in our bus though.”

“Me too.” Dev echoed her words. “Its been a day full of much discomfort.”

“No kidding.” Jess sighed.

They both fell silent for a bit. Then Jess cleared her throat. “You did a hell of a job in there, by the way.” She indicated the way they'd come. “Didn't have a chance to say anything before.”

Her partner leaned on the wall next to her. “It was difficult.”

“Very.” Jess said, giving her a sideways look. “Cold?”

Dev nodded. “There was a lot of under the water things.” She said. “I was just thinking how nice a hot shower would feel.” She admitted.

“Mm. Yeah it would.”

They were both silent again, for a moment. Then Jess draped her arm over Dev's shoulders and simply stood there, as the fishing boat made it's lazy circle and started to drift towards the promontory. The waves were building and it made the vessel rock as it slowed, the lights outlining white tinged waves all around them.

“Storm coming in.” April came over to stand next to them. “Heard the crew talking about it. They don't want to stick around.”

“We don't either.” Jess said. “Another ten minutes and he'll be close enough to that wall. Let's get ready.”

They gathered on the port side of the deck, staying behind the bait locker as the boat maneuvered back and forth, setting out their nets and then moving clear of the lines, slipping sideways in the water as they turned to view the set. Then, casually, Sigurd turned the bow around and as he did, the lights on the boat blinked out and five dark clad figures hopped onto the seawall.

Then the engines revved, and the lights came back on, and the boat moved around the promontary as it laid out another line of nets, rocking in the waves as from the darkness, one of the destroyers appeared, splashing them with floodlights.

Jess led the way across the seawall, broken in spots and dangerous. She got to the end of it as they heard the destroyer engines, and jumped off onto the rocky beach they'd landed on.

One turn of the lights and even the carrier's camouflage skin wouldn't help them. Jess bolted across the surface and led the way to where they'd left the craft, coming around the corner of the rocks and knowing a moment of perfect relief as she spotted the faint outline in the reflection of the destroyer's floodlights.

The other two agents split off and got to their rigs as Doctor Dan followed Jess and Dev to theirs, Jess barely leaving enough space for the hatch to open without smacking her in the face as she palmed the lock.

Battle lighting was on inside and the hatch shut behind them as they entered. Dev went to the pilot's station and strapped in, undoing the catches on her watersuit and peeling it down off her shoulders and exposing the clinging undersuit beneath it. She started her preflight checks, getting ear cups settled and reflecting that she was gladder to be sitting down in her seat that she could have possibly imagined.

Jess stripped her outer suit off to the waist as well, glancing over to where Doctor Dan was fastening the restraints around him on the drop rig. She got into her own chair and swung her panels around, hearing the rising hum as Dev powered systems in the faintly blue lit darkness of the inside of the carrier.

The front window went from opaque to clear, and she could see searchlights moving in the darkness over the water. “Dev, give me power please.”

“Yes.” Dev shunted batteries to the weapons systems and got the engines online. “Tac 1 to Tac 2 and 3, status?”

“Tac 2, ack.” Chester murmured. “Two to go.”

“Tac 3, ack.” Doug waited his turn. “Ready.”



“Dev, get ready to lift. I think your fishy buddies could use some help out there.” Jess got her targetting systems aligned and leaned back in her seat, very glad of the support and wishing for some painkillers. Now that she was sitting down, it was getting harder to push the pain aside, and she took a deep breath then released it, forcing her concentration.

“One moment.” Dev got her power grid aligned and stripped her gloves off, dropping them to the carrier deck as she curled her hands around the throttles. “Ready.”

“Go go gadget.” Jess said. “Hang on.” She advised Doctor Dan. “I learned that the hard way.”

Doctor Dan tightened the restraints on the rig and leaned against it, giving her a brief nod in return. “Anything not water's good for me right now.”

Jess studied his face. “You gonna last?”

The scientist regarded her with a wry expression. “I have broken ribs.” He said. “If one of them doesn't puncture a lung, I'll be fine. Thanks for asking.” He ended that with a slight grin, seeing the grimace of sympathy on Jess's face. “I wouldn't cooperate with them and they didn't like that.”

“You went with them.” Jess said, not quite asking the question.

“I did.” Kurok answered. “They wanted me. I wanted to see what they were up to. Neither side got anything positive out of it since they wouldn't tell me why they wanted me.. aside from hinting they wanted me to teach them how to create something like her..” He moved his head in Dev's direction. “And..” He sighed. “In the black humor department they somehow forgot what business I was in before I went upside and ended up shocked and enraged when I killed a few of them after they spent a few hours applying electrical leads to me.”

“That what we busted up?” Jess knew what that felt like, and acknowledged a moment of true sympathy for the man. Now that she had time to just sit quietly and look at him, she realized he probably had more than broken ribs.

“I figured I might as well see what all the fuss was about as long as I was being beaten up for it.” Doctor Dan relaxed against the drop frame, letting his hands rest on his thighs. “And yes, they'd just caught up with me when they suddenly realized I was the least of their worries.”

Jess let her head rest against the padded chair. “Glad we found you.”

Kurok smiled. “I'm glad too.”

Dev boosted fast, up and over the ridge of rock with the other two carriers right behind her and as they headed over the water they spotted the fishing boat facing off against the destroyer, dodging a bolt of blaster fire. “Jess!”

“Yeah, I see em.” Jess swung the targetting system around and drew a bead on the enemy vessel. “Jacktards.”

“They have seen us.” Dev said. “I think they're going to shoot.”

“I think I'm going to shoot first.” Jess locked on and fired a long burst. “Take us right at em.”

Dev nodded, and complied, sending the carrier at almost water level past the fishing vessel right at the destroyer. She saw the energy suck a moment before Jess cut loose on the forward guns, stitching across the side of the ship in a barrage that brought a thunder of explosive eruption that lit the night sky for a brief moment.

Then the water boiled, and the destroyer was gone. Dev flew the carrier through a dark cloud of smoke that dispersed as she bent their course into a tight curve, feeling the welcome pressure of g force against her body. She slowed the carrier as they approached the fishing vessel, and peered at it. “They seem intact.”

Below them, the bell on the ship was ringing. Dev piped the sound inside, as the other two carriers lifted and joined them. They hovered briefly, until the fishing vessel started back around to pick up their nets, several figures on the rail visibly waving at them.

Jess chuckled. “Now they owe us again.” She safed the weapons. “Dev, take us due west, stick to the coast, stick to the waterline. Tell the kids to follow us.”

“Will do.” Dev transmitted the instructions, then plotted her course and swung the carrier around to point and engaged the engines.

It felt so good to be sitting down in her space. Dev wished she'd had time to completely change, but the warmth inside the carrier was penetrating her chilled skin, and she adjusted the temp a bit upward, as the shivers had almost worked their way out of her body.

It occurred to her then that they had likely done well with this mission. Some big important thing had been destroyed, and they had Doctor Dan with them. She and Jess were both functional and she hadn't wrecked the carrier this time. Excellent, really.

She just really hoped there was someone left for them to report it to.

“Keep a tight eye out, Dev. If they pick us up this is going to be ugly.” Jess got up from her position and opened a locker, pulling out a dry shirt and pulling it over her head. She got one for Dev and moved forward, putting it down on her console. “Put that on. You must be an ice cube.”

Dev had just finished engaging the autonomic systems, and she lifted her hands clear and picked up the fabric gratefully. “Thank you.” She said. “It was really cold in that water.”

“Yeah.” Jess patted her shoulder. “I’m going to heat up some tea. My throat’s killing me.”

Dev pulled the shirt on, the warm, dry fabric feeling wonderful against her skin. She released her restraints and stood up, pulling the water suit all the way off, storing it neatly on a hook and removing a standard jumper from her kit. She pulled that on and fastened the catches over the shirt, at once a lot warmer.

She rubbed her hands and sat back down, reviewing her course and checking the wiremap closely. The coast was rugged, full of cliffs and outcroppings and though the autonav was programmed to avoid collision, she didn’t want to take any chances.

There had been a lot of chance taking, this last while.

She could hear Jess moving around and getting her drink, and wondered how Doctor Dan was doing. A glance in the mirror showed her partner’s profile, but she couldn’t see Doctor Dan from where she was sitting. Then something caught her eye. “Jess?”

“Hm?” The agent turned around and came over to her, handing her a steaming cup.

“I think you did yourself damage.” Dev said, gravely. “There is blood on your back.”

“Yeah? Oh crap.” Jess turned her back to her partner. “Fresh?”

“Yes.” Dev put the cup down and got up again, touching Jess’ shoulderblade. There was a spreading stain on her shirt.

“May I look at it?”

“Sure.” Jess rested her hands on her console, feeling the brush of cool air as Dev pulled her shirt up, the pain now becoming evident to her since she had to focus on it. “Damned knife.”

“Traitor’s knives are sharpest of all.” Doctor Dan had half turned in the rig area and was watching.

“So true.” Jess said, after a moment. “There’s a kit behind the locker there, Dev. See if you can clean it off, and put something over it.”

“Yes.” Dev went to the locker and retrieved the aid kit. “Doctor Dan taught us to do this.” She smiled a little, and looked over at her mentor. “We would get hurt some times in training.”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan smiled back at her. “I remember it well.”

Dev brought the kit back and got the cleaner and some plas bandages out. She eased the shirt up over Jess’s shoulder and studied the injury. “Something has penetrated your back here.” She reported. “Also, it is very bruised. Right here.” She touched the edge of her partner’s shoulderblade.

“Is it the same place I got hurt last time?” Jess studied the console.

Dev regarded the skin before her, touching the scar now red and visible. “Yes.” She said. “It appears to have opened up?” She gently cleaned the place, aware of the sound as Doctor Dan released his belt and came around the weapons console to peer at the injury.

“Hm.” Kurok said. “Let me take over this, Dev.” He said. “I’ve had a little more experience.” He removed the pad and the clenser from Dev’s hands. “Have your tea. I think your lips are still a little blue.”

Dev was glad to step back and let her teacher take over. She scanned her boards again, then sat down in her chair, picking up her cup again and sipping from it.

She didn’t think her lips were blue, since she felt quite warm now. She settled her ear cups in place and started a comm scan, listening for the faint sounds of enemy radio. She caught the faint echo of the carriers behind them, and then she keyed in the sideband system. “Tac 1, Tac 2.”

“Tac 2, ack.”

“Stand by for nav synch.”

“Ack.”

Dev sent their course and lock, and waited for an acknowledgement, trying not to think too much about how tired she was. “Is it okay, Doctor Dan?” She asked, noting that the wound already looked a lot better.

“Oh, I think it’ll do fine.” Kurok murmured. “This was a really bad puncture.”

“Yeah.” Jess said. “dalknife, six inches, to the hilt.”

Doctor Dan stopped moving and craned his head to look around Jess's shoulder. “Beg your pardon?”

“Dalknife.” Jess said. “Must be new since your time. Carved from basalt rock, triangular, sharp as hell, but with burrs all along the blade so it carves you up like a seaweed milkshake.”

Kurok pulled his head back and looked more closely at the old wound. “That explains the triangular bifurcation.” He said. “That must have.. “

“Nearly killed me? Yeah.” Jess didn't sound upset about it. “I lost what felt like half the blood in my body before they got me into a chill kit and back to the tank.”

“Wow.” Doctor Dan seemed at a loss for words

“Yeah, that's what the meds at base said.” Jess sighed. “They're not really sure how I managed not to croak. Certainly Joshua meant me to.”

“Joshua?”

Jess glanced back at him. “My last tech.” She said. “My former partner, who went to the other side.” She eyed her own shoulder. “Thought it healed.”

“Mostly.” Doctor Dan said, in a quiet tone. “Looks like most of the internal is healed, but this outer part split apart... maybe in the fight.” He carefully applied a plas tack and eased the edges of the opening closed, putting a layer of goo over it and putting a bandage square in place. “There you go.”

“I banged it up at base when they went for you.” Jess recalled.

“I remember that.” Dev reached over and put a hand on Jess's arm, giving it a squeeze. “Against the door.” She heard a hail on comms and turned to answer it. “Excuse me.”

Jess straightened up and slid her shirt down, then she went over to her locker and got out of the water suit, trading it for a dry regular issue she eased over her now quite painful shoulder and fastened. She turned, to find Kurok watching her, with a quiet, grim expression.

She managed a brief grin, then she sat down in the gunners chair and relaxed, glad, at least, she hadn't done anything newly lethal to herself. Bruises, for sure, but that didn't involve external blood loss.

“You know.” Doctor Dan perched on the edge of the rig casing, just to her right. “I didn't understand, truly, what the situation with your former partner was, when they asked us to participate. They didn't explain and Alex didn't either.”

Jess glanced at him. His eyes were shifted slightly off her, a hard, sea ice glint to them. Dressed as he was, with that look, most of the scientist about him had faded away leaving something more primal in it's wake. “They just wanted it fixed.” She agreed.

“They said it was a trust thing. I didn't get it.” Kurok now focused on her. “I couldnt imagine what a tech could have done that caused that much upheaval.”

“Think I was some prima donna or something?” Jess's lips twisted into a droll wryness.

“No.” He answered quietly. “I knew you weren't. I thought it was political. It wasn't.” He indicated her back. “That wasn't. That was a personal betrayal on a level I can hardly comprehend.” He shook his head. “Not from.. not from one of us.”

Jess felt something long tense relax in her, unexpectedly. She watched him faintly shake his head, one hand slowly closing and unclosing, so very obviously remembering a time when he had been what Joshua had been, trying to fathom doing what he'd done. “Yeah.” She said. “You got it.”

Dev watched them both with deep interest. This was a side of Doctor Dan she'd never seen, and it was facinating, because as he said those words she felt the programming in her echoing them very intensely – he was aghast at the thought of that betrayal and she could feel that in her gut, in perfect echo.

He had said, one of us. That was the first time she'd heard him refer to himself that way, but it was true. She could see that now, see how he was more like Jess than anyone she'd known in the creche. More like Jess, and April, and Doug, and even Jason, back at the citadel.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan sat down in the equipment ledge, letting his elbows rest on his knees. “I do get it.”

Dev went over to the dispenser. “Would you like some tea, Doctor Dan? I think that clothing you have is still wet.”

He gave her one of his gentle smiles. “I would like that a lot, Dev. Thanks.”

Jess got back up and went to the gear locker, rummaging inside it. “Here.” She dug out a thickly woven overshirt and handed it to him. “That'll probably fit.”

“Ah.” Kurok touched the fabric. “Something from home, eh?” He glanced at Jess. “Haven't seen that pattern in a while.” He took the cloth. “Drake's Bay harbor shirt.”

Jess smiled in reflex. “Always keep one around for gale force conditions.” She was glad to shift the conversation to something far more mundane. “It's woven to keep wind and sand out.” She explained to Dev, who was looking curiously at it. “Next time we're there, I'll get you one.”

“It's pretty.” Dev reached over and touched the fabric. “I like the colors.” She added. “It reminds me of the cloth thing in the big room there.”

Doctor Dan looked up at her. “You've been to the Bay, Dev? I didn't hear about that.”

Jess took a cup of hot tea back to her station. “Happened after you went hostage.” She said. “My mother was in an air crash. We went to her processing”

Several conflicting emotions flashed over Kurok's face. “I see.” He murmured. “Sorry to hear that.”

Dev retreated back to her chair and checked the nav. Everything seemed stable, and comp showed no scans, and no targets, save the other two carriers. Nothing was following them.

She thought about the shirt, and about getting one if they went back. Maybe they would go there if the base was damaged, Jess had said, and Dev found that thought appealing. She had liked the place, even if people were strange, and there seemed to be discomfort about her, and Jess there.

“Yeah, well.. it was more an excuse to get out of the base, and see what I could do about coming out to find you.” Jess admitted, with a smile. “She and I never really got along, after I went.”

“Ah. I see.”

Dev glanced in the mirror, and saw that Doctor Dan had taken off the top part of the water suit so he could put on the dry shirt. The light inside the carrier wasn't bright, but she could plainly see the patterns on his arms, faded, but visible against his pale skin, a good portion of which was also darkened with bruises and crossed with thin red marks and cuts.

It seemed like he was in discomfort. But he put the shirt on and picked up his tea, and smiled back at Jess, his eyes gently twinkling in the overhead battle lighting.

It seemed like things were starting to be better again. Dev sipped her tea with a sense of lightening tension in her, and she settled herself into her chair as the feelings of uncertainty and doubt faded.

Really, it seemed like they could do anything.

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[Continued in Part 23](#)