

Partners

Part 23

Daylight found them skimming over ruffled gray waters, warily eyeing a dark black line off in the distance heading for them.

Dev had just settled back into her seat after a short nap and she had a ration box clamped down next to her as she studied the met report. Behind her, Doctor Dan seemed to be sleeping almost standing up, and Jess had just leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes for a while after driving while Dev rested.

She felt okay. It would have been excellent to have slept a little longer but the irresistible urge to close her eyes was gone and she felt like she could keep going as long as she needed to now.

Her chair was still a little warm from Jess's body, and she smiled as she leaned back in it, checking their course and reviewing the results of her most recent scan. There was nothing around except the other two carriers, even the waters they were cruising over seemed empty of most life.

They had left the land far behind. Nav was reporting they were just a few minutes shy of crossing the invisible line that divided her side and the other side, and she directed the scan downward to review the ocean bottom below.

Yes, there it was. She traced the line on the bottom that marked the intercontinental plate, remembering her lessons about the geology of the planet downside they never saw. There was a certain sense of relief as she crossed over it, even though she knew it really did not keep anyone from following them.

It meant they were that much closer to.. Dev paused and considered. Was the citadel home? Had the creche been home? She tapped the word into comp and waited for it to come back, studying the results with interest. What was home, anyway?

Home was a place of refuge or residence, apparently. It was a place one belonged to, where they kept their possessions and where they did a significant part of their daily living.

Well. Dev pondered. That, for her could be either place, or, in fact, this carrier. She'd done a significant part of her daily living so far sitting right in this very seat, but she was pretty sure that wasn't really what was meant.

Ah. 'Archaic – home was often not a place but philosophical location, where one would feel at ease and at peace, a comfort of the heart.'

Hm. Was there any place that fit that for her?

Dev heard a faint sound behind her and she glanced in the mirror, seeing Jess shift a little in her chair. Her eyes were closed, and she was using one of the thick jackets as a blanket, her head resting against the padded surface of her swiveled back chair.

The lights were dimmed inside the carrier, only the consoles emitting a low, faint blue glow but she could see Jess's even, slow breathing and she felt herself relaxing as she watched. One of the few peaceful moments she'd encountered thus far in her short sojourn at Interforce, she realized, had been curling up with Jess to sleep and she wished they could do that now.

Even without the sex thing.

Dev sighed, and returned her attention to the console, setting up another scan with slightly different parameters and letting it start. The course Jess had given her would take them north of their base, almost to Quebec City, and then south, but first there was this storm to get past.

There were no ice caves to hide in, she noted mournfully. Perhaps they would get to the outer edge of the lonely escarpments past Quebec before the storm caught them, and shelter there. She adjusted the thrusters a little, and regarded the output of the scan, glad to see nothing on the horizon aside from the threatened met.

Her ear bud crackled slightly, and she pressed it a little more firmly into her ear. "Repeat?"

"Tac 1, Tac 3." the soft response came back. "This is Mike."

"Ack." Dev responded in a low tone. "Status?"

"Nominal." He responded. "Reporting low band chatter, sea level based, northwest."

Dev checked her own comms, seeing the faint signal. "Ack." She said. "Ident?"

"Negative." Mike said. "Fishing boat, maybe."

They'd outflown the only fishing boat Dev developed a personal interest in. They were days behind them now, and she didn't think getting involved with another boat would be an excellent thing to do. What would Jess do, though? Would she

want to see what was out there?

Dev frowned, shifting her attention from the comms to the reflection and back. Jess wanted to get back to the citadel, that was for sure, and diverting could get them in trouble with the weather. She wondered if she should wake her partner up to ask.

But Jess looked so tired. Dev wavered another moment, then clicked into comms. "Tac 3, Tac 2, Tac 1. Divert ten degrees northwest, long scan, report."

There was a brief silence. Then the comms came to life. "Ack." April said. "Ten degrees, at mark."

"Ack." Mike sounded distinctly relieved. "Signal locked, parsing." He reported. "Stand by."

Dev adjusted her own course and nodded, feeling a sense of relief, and also, of correctness. She picked up her dispenser of tea and sipped from it, then set it down and selected a seaweed cracker from her ration and put it in her mouth.

She wasn't sure, really why Jess didn't like them. They were crunchy and slightly spicy and they went well with the tea. It also provided some contrast to the fish roll, which tended to be a little bland.

Another sound made her look up again, but this time it was Doctor Dan, who came over to her and sat down on the side of the console, holding a ration kit. "Good morning, Dev."

Dev smiled. "Hello." She greeted her mentor. "Are you in less discomfort now, Doctor Dan?" She asked. "After your rest?"

"Oh, somewhat, yes." He sipped his tea. "It's been a very long time since I've had to deal with being kicked around like that, no doubt about it."

His voice was soft, and a little hoarse. Dev studied him from the corner of her eye, noting the painful looking bruise along one of his cheekbones. "Why did they hurt you?" She asked, keeping her voice very low to avoid waking her sleeping partner.

"Mm." Doctor Dan pondered the question. "Probably because I was doing my very best to make trouble for them. They don't like that you know, Dev. I wasn't being very correct to them."

"Oh." Dev listened to the scan results, then restarted it when it came back empty. "I guess we were doing that too."

"You were." Her mentor agreed. "Doing a damn fine job of that, in fact, Better than I did. But that does usually end up with someone getting into a bit of discomfort."

"Like Jess's back."

"Mm." Kurok nodded slowly. "But that.. the original hurt, Dev, that was a very wrong thing." He added, gently. "It made me very angry to see that, you know, because what you are doing, this work, involves a lot of trust."

"Yes." Dev said. "It would be like you hurting one of us."

Doctor Dan went very still, his eyes staring at the steam from his cup for a long moment before he looked back up at her. "Yes, its that kind of trust." He answered quietly. "You have to trust, that the things I do to you are not going to hurt you."

"I do." Dev responded. "We all do." She added, half turning to look seriously at him. "Not everyone else."

Kurok put his cup down and laced his fingers together, resting his chin on them. "Why? Why me, and not others, Dev?"

Oh, that was a good question. Dev shifted her eyes to the window and looked out at the choppy sea, almost a black color frothed with white as it passed under them. "I don't know." She finally answered, a little unsettled. "I just feel like you wouldn't hurt me. I always did.. we always did. I talked to some of the others, and to Gigi.. you remember Gigi?"

"Yes." Doctor Dan smiled at her. "I do remember Gigi."

"She said the same thing. That when you went down, you.. " Dev paused. "Sometimes you wondered. But with you we never did." She heard him sigh, a little. "We always thought you cared what happened to us."

"Mm." Doctor Dan made a low noise in his throat. "I do care." He answered softly. "In a way, Dev, all of you are, to me, as though you were my children, the ones I never had myself."

Dev smiled, and her eyes lit up.

"So maybe that's what you feel, when you feel that way." He concluded. "What happens to you all matters to me, even though sometimes I know those things can sometimes be bad, and unhappy things."

"Bad things happen to natural borns too." Dev said, after a pause. "Like what happened to Jess." She reached out and touched his hand, where another bruise was evident. "And to you."

"That's true." Her mentor returned her smile, then it faded. "When bad things happen, it's hard for natural borns to trust other people, because it could happen again. But I think Jess does trust you."

Dev nodded. "She knows I care about what happens to her." She answered readily. "And I do, but Doctor Dan.. " She glanced at the console, and adjusted a setting. "I think that made me do something very incorrect. When I saw them hurting Jess, I .. " She hesitated.

"You hit them." Doctor Dan said. "I saw you."

Dev nodded. "Yes. I did. That was incorrect, wasn't it? I remember the programming for that."

"Ah." Doctor Dan opened his ration box and removed the fish roll inside, setting it on the console and fishing the crackers out with it. "That's a complicated question, Dev." He opened the crackers and ate one. "Because you understand your basic programming, and you know that was in there."

"Yes."

"Well, it was." Doctor Dan leaned back a little, against the side of the control area. "But when I was preparing you for this work, I did do some changes to that programming, because I knew you might end up in a situation like that one, and I wanted you to be able to respond to it."

Now, that was a surprise. "Oh." Dev murmured. "You did."

"I did." Kurok bit into his fish roll. "Because I think you realize Dev, that I used to do work very much like this."

"With Jess's father."

There was a long pause before he answered, and his face twitched a little. "Yes." He finally said. "I didn't know you knew that."

"Jess found out before we left." Dev sensed some serious discomfort on his part. "They sent her some of her father's things, and one of the things was a picture."

"Of us?" Doctor Dan said, after long breath.

"Yes."

He sat quietly and finished his roll without saying anything else for a few minutes. Dev finished hers as well, and waited, since she could see he was thinking hard about something. She checked the console, and the chron, and calculated it would be another ten minutes or so before they were close to the signal's location and could see anything.

"Well." Doctor Dan rested his elbows on his knees and nibbled on his crackers. "I didn't expect that, Dev, but yes, it's true. I was her father's partner, way back when." His face looked quiet, and thoughtful. "So you see, I knew very well what I needed to prepare you for."

"Yes." Dev agreed. "The programming is excellent, Doctor Dan. I've known everything I needed to." She indicated the carrier. "Especially about this vehicle. It's been difficult, but I could do it."

He smiled, a warm sweet smile that made her smile back. "Thank you, Dev. It's always nice to have your work recognized, isn't it? I don't get that opportunity often."

Dev knew a moment of delight, seeing her mentor's unexpected reaction to her words. Of course, she knew what that was like, to have your work praised, and yet somehow she never thought... She looked at Doctor Dan again. "Thank you." She said. "I'm really glad I got this assignment."

"Even though it's so hard?"

Dev nodded. "Yes. It's hard, but it's good work." She glanced in the mirror then looked back at him. "And I'm glad I'm getting to help Jess." Another glance in the mirror would have shown her a pair of interested blue eyes watching, that had now gained a faint twinkle in them, but Dev focused her attention on her mentor. "That's been really good."

He grinned a little. "You like your partner."

"Very much." Dev assented immediately. "Jess has been so nice to me, and she's so excellent at this work."

"Mm. She comes from a long line of people who were very good at this." Doctor Dan said. "Sometimes natural borns have traits, like sets can have, and they inherit them from their mothers and fathers in the same way that we develop sets to have certain talents in the creche. You understand?"

"Yes. Is that how she does the fish thing?" Dev asked. "That was a very big surprise. There were some people in the citadel who said Jess was a fish, but I didn't think they meant that so literally."

Doctor Dan looked thoughtful. "That was a big surprise to me too, Dev. I can tell you, having pulled him out of a number of underwater situations, that she did not inherit that from her father. It must be something that was being modified slowly through generations in her family. It's very interesting and I hope I get a chance to talk to her about it when we're done with this part of the mission."

"It's amazing. I think Jess is amazing, and I'm so glad I got to do work with her." Dev got it all out in a rush, feeling a warmth on her face and a slight feeling of confusion. "I really like her."

"Yes, I know you do." Doctor Dan's smile broadened. "I'm glad." He patted her knee. "No matter how hard this gets, Dev, remember that part. It's the really important thing." He told her. "It's very important to be able to take good care of our friends, right? So that's why I changed your programming a little, so that you'd be able to do that if you had to." He hesitated. "Don't ever feel incorrect about helping people you care for."

"Yes." Dev felt a true sense of relief. She didn't like thinking about being so incorrect. "So it's okay for me."

Kurok nodded. "It is okay for you, because we're asking you to do very difficult things that most bio alts don't get to do." He clarified. "So don't worry about it."

Dev nodded at once. "It's like the sex thing." She said placidly. "Right?"

Doctor Dan chuckled unexpectedly, putting his box down and rubbing his face with one hand. "Ah, well, yes, I guess it is, sort of." He sighed. "In that, it's all right for you to do things that your creche mates will not get to do, because of the work you're involved in."

"Good." Dev was satisfied. "Thank you for telling me that."

He patted her shoulder and went back to his fish roll, chuckling a little to himself and shaking his head.

"Tac 2, Tac 1"

Dev touched her ear cup. "Tac 1 Go."

"Scan complete, standby to synch." Chester reported. "Check tab 2."

Dev engaged the comp and retrieved the scan from the other carrier, reviewing it and matching it against her own. She was of Doctor Dan peering over her shoulder, and moved aside a little to give him a better view. "We heard a comm signal." She explained. "We weren't sure what it was."

Chester's scan showed only a ghost profile. She compared it to her own, and tuned the comp a little more, warping the sine waves and resending the probe.

Doctor Dan peered at the screen and tilted his head just slightly to one side, his eyes narrowing a little. "That looks old." He said. "Reminds me of the remote base stations they used to run on the coast, before they put the sat relays in." He looked thoughtful. "Hm."

"Hm." Jess's voice startled both of them, and they looked up to see the tall agent coming to stand behind Dev's chair, draping her long arms over the top of it. "Sorry. Couldn't sleep through people complimenting me. What's up?" She gave them both a wry grin.

Dev blushed, wrinkling her nose as she sorted through the surge of emotion. "I'm sorry, did that cause you discomfort?"

"Nope." Jess peered at the screen. "We pick something up?" She eased around the other side of the chair and leaned against it, her elbow resting on Dev's shoulder.

"A signal." Dev pointed it out. "It's just an echo on Chester's scan but I can see the sine of it." She traced the line with one fingertip. "It's not very strong."

"No." Jess shook her head. "What did you say it looked like?" She asked Doctor Dan.

"Local signal hub." He answered succinctly. "Used to be a lot of them in relay, before we had topside."

Jess regarded the readout and then she keyed in met and brought up the storm front, her eyes flicking from one to the other rapidly. "Okay. I don't want to leave this unseen, but we're out of time. Let's do a water level overfly of the coordinates, then take us up and to the north, Dev. Get over that line of clouds."

"Yes." Dev got her restraints in place, as Jess pushed off and went back to her seat and did the same. Doctor Dan collected the remainder of the rations and stowed them, moving back to his position in the drop rig and strapping down. "Do you think it could be another fishing boat?"

"Maybe." Jess got her targetting systems up and synced, powering the forward guns up with a light touch. "But I'm not going to take any chances. Someone paid Sigurd to skunk us."

"Seems an easy answer to that." Doctor Dan said. "We know they were looking for you for Gibraltar."

"Seems like, but I'm not sure it is them." Jess said. "We saw some funny things in the white. Found a cavern full of jacktards pretending to be Interforce that were gunned down but not by us." She got her gloves on and settled into her chair, leaning back and letting her eyes focus past the screens.

"Rivals?" Kurok suggested.

"Don't think so." Jess tightened her restraints. "There's something out there I think we've been missing. Tied into the leak we had at base, and how they've been able to penetrate us pretty much at will lately."

"Hm."

"They got all the way into our shuttle base after you." Jess reminded him. "A dozen security sweeps and we can't find someone who has the intel and access to allow an attack force of that size to get all the way in to our pad? Really?"

Doctor Dan eyed her thoughtfully.

"And they knew you were there." Jess tuned the guns. "Dev, bring us in." She settled herself. "Let's make sure we don't leave some loose end at our backs that ends up burying a knife in it. Have had enough of that this year already."

Dev got the carrier off auto nav and took control of the engines, giving them more power and feeling them respond as she brought the craft down to wave level and cleared the light layer of fog, giving them a clear view at last.

In the target zone they could see a small rocky island, and as they approached, craft launched against them. "Here we go." Jess flexed her hands. "Bet they didn't expect us."

"Bet they didn't" Doctor Dan said. "And we didn't expect them either." He added. "Whoever 'they' are."

**

Flying the carrier into battle was very different then just flying it from place to place. Dev felt her peripheral vision expanding as she tried to take in everything around her as she bent their course downward, skimming the tops of the waves as they bore down on the island.

Two blocky forms were headed right at them at equal speed and she felt the weapons systems draw power as Jess took aim, then scan blared back at her with solid green blips and comm crackled urgently. "Jess.."

"Yep, I see it." Jess lifted her fingers off the firing controls but didn't remove her hands from them. "Broadcast our ident."

Dev did so, blasting out the signal that defined their craft type and serial number across a wideband.

"Incoming, incoming.."

"That's Jason." Jess keyed comms to sideband. "Tac 1, Tac 2, Tac 3, stand down. Potential friendly."

"Potential?" Doctor Dan was watching the screens with interest.

"You never know." Jess keyed to main comms and selected one of the emergency short range channels they used. "BR270006 calling BR083003, copy." She listened to the crackling. "Jason?"

Blast of static. "Holy shit! Jess!"

"Definitely Jason." Jess felt their speed slow as they closed in with the two oncoming carriers.

"They are damaged" Dev commented. "Twenty five percent power output, and very fractured external skin."

The two carriers eased off and now, at this distance they could see the ravaged exteriors. "Jason, go back and land. We'll follow you in."

"Who you got there?" Jason's voice came back at once. "Scan's nothing but scrap in this thing."

"April and Mike and their techs." Jess said. "Me and Dev, and the doc." She watched the two craft carefully, seeing them shift off axis and try to hover on jets that were visibly sputtering. "We're just coming back from the other side."

"Op codes are correct." Dev reported. "But those machines are severely non optimal." She started a calibration scan, moving away from the erratically shifting craft. "There are three persons onboard. One in the closer carrier, two in the other one."

"Okay Jess... back." Jason's voice crackled through. He sounded exhausted. "Fucking glad it's you."

Yeah. "Tac 2, 3, stand by to land on that rock pile." Jess instructed. "Drop in on the east side."

"Ack."

"Ack."

Dev carefully trimmed her landing jets as she followed Jason's carrier in, close enough now to see the horrible damage. One engine wasn't functioning at all, and there were rents across the back and side of it, all the way to the pilot's area that had taken out part of the clear plas as well.

Worse than she'd done her first flight, in fact. Dev checked the register and confirmed the second craft belonged to Elaine and Tucker, and that Jason seemed to be alone in his. She wondered what that meant, and hoped it didn't mean something bad had happened to Brent.

Though it seemed likely, since things right now were so difficult.

But her fears were unfounded, as she gently settled the carrier on top of a pile of rocks near the water, and spotted Brent's powerful form climbing up from the waterline to meet them.

He was dripping wet, and there was a fish in one hand, large and silvery and still twitching. He looked over at them as they settled on the uneven surface, and as Dev extended and balanced the skids, she saw a look of relief on his face

“Now let's see what the hell's been going on.” Jess released her restraints and stood up, slapping the holster with her hand blaster on it to her flight suit before she headed for the hatch. “Set up a long scan, Dev. Don't want to get caught with my ass on this rock pile.”

“Yes.” Dev started that up, as she heard the thump of the hatch opening and a blast of cold, wet, salty air blew in. She watched Jess and Doctor Dan emerge from around the side of the carrier and walk towards where Jason had gotten his carrier safely landed, meeting up with Brent as he approached the offgassing machine.

She finished setting up the scan and released her belts, pausing to stop and get her jacket and put it on before she headed for the outside. The ramp was only partially extended, as the rocks were preventing it from fully deploying and she carefully transferred her weight from it to the slippery rocks as she got outside.

The line of dark clouds were moving ominously closer, and she fastened the jacket's catches as she made her way across the rocks. April, Mike, Doug and Chester caught up with her as they reached the others, where Elaine and Tucker had also arrived to hear Jason starting to explain what had happened to Jess.

“Fucking disaster.” He sat down on a rock nearby. They were standing in the center of a cleared area, down close by the water where waves were crashing up with increasing intensity. “Big ass fucking disaster. We started getting weird ass scan not long after you left.” He rested his elbows on his knees. “Three, maybe four hours. Everyone thought it was just some strage met or something, but we kept losing long range scan, and then short range was going in and out. So Bain asked me and Eli to do a standard patrol.”

Elaine also sat down, bracing her hands behind her. She had a painful looking burn on one cheek, and had been limping. “So we did.” She said. “Six hours, until we saw a big storm coming in and figured we should get back inside before it got to us. On the way back to the base, all hell broke loose.”

Jess was leaning on a tall boulder, her arms crossed over her chest. She remained silent however.

“We were about a quarter hour out from the pad when we started getting squirts on the emergency freq, but they didn't make sense. Power outages, things going crazy, the pad roof opening... couldn't tell what was going on but then we got into visual and we knew.”

“We knew.” Elaine echoed him. “We could see the tonks blasting at the side walls.”

Jess looked grim.

“So we came in from the west and went to work.” Jason said. “Did the best we could, figured we were making some headway when the storm came out over us and ... we ducked ot of it but they didn't.”

“They kept attacking.” Jason confirmed “Every system we has was being blasted by met and they just kept flying.” He glanced at Jess. “Someone mighta mentioned they came up with that instead of that grow shit.”

“They're connected.” Doctor Dan remarked quietly.

Both agents looked hard at him.

“Its some kind of energy transforming system.” Kurok said. “Originally transfering hydro to photosynthesis, but someone found out how to use it to change EMF polarity and let it slide past instead of disrupting.”

Everyone was briefly silent, watching him with intent eyes.

“Sorry” Doctor Dan said, to Jess, after the silence had become uncomfortable. “What with everything else we really didn't have a chance to talk about it.”

“Anyway.” Jason continued “We were trying to find a way around the storm when we heard you incoming.” He looked at Jess. “Whatever the hell was going on just got crazier then. We saw Bain get out.” His expression only twitched a little, but the effect expressed his feelings about that more explicitly than words would have.

“Yeah.” Jess said. “So then what?”

“They got the base sealed.” Elaine said. “Complete lockdown, and no matt'r what those bastards wanted they weren't getting in. So we took off.”

“Lockdown.” Jess murmured. “No comms?”

“Nothing. Sealed like a virgin outsider.” Jason confirmed. “Wouldn't respond to emergency, to squirts, idents, nothing. We got out of there before they came back with something bigger to blow the doors open with. Headed out after your trail – but then we went headlong into all of them trying to get back.”

“That was a long ass fight.” Elaine chimed in. “If they hadn't been tweaking these things we'd be vapor right now. As it was, we only got away because they got some kind of recall and took off.”

“Probably was Bock, calling them in to skunk us at the pole.” Jess spoke quietly into the wind ruffled air. “He's dead. I killed him after I found out he turned us over to them.” She added, watching their jaws drop. “I've seen North. If Ten looks like that, we might as well go hunt p.. “ She caught the frown on Dev's face and paused. “I mean, scrounge. Maybe take over the pole again and see what we can live on.”

“Bock.” Elaine spoke the name slowly. “He was the hole?”

“He was a hole.” Jess confirmed. “In more ways than one.” She added drolly. “Though.. he didn't start to be so much of an ass until lately.” Her expression turned thoughtful, and she glanced at Dev. “In fact, not until after we came back from that second run.”

Jason exhaled heavily “Anyway we just barely got to this place, and we've been hanging out here trying to fix these damn old busses enough to get back home.” He paused. “Whatever home is now.”

“Well.” Jess regarded the incoming weather. “With that coming in to hit us, I think you should leave the damn things here and come on ours. We managed to get through our mission mostly intact.” She regarded the three other carriers. “Let's lift, and find some shelter other than this rock.. which is.. what... Bermuda shoals?”

Jason nodded. “Sounds good.” He stood up. “Glad you made it.” He waved his hand. “Let's pack up and get moving, Brent. Sorry we wasted your time fishing.”

“Sokay” Brent regarded the fish with his usual glum expression. “No idea what to do with it anyhow. Figured we'd do it raw.” He glanced at Jess. “Though I heard you can cook em.”

“I can. Just not now.” Jess sighed. “Hell. Maybe if Ten is a graveyard I'll take you all back to Drake's Bay with me. Make my family's day.”

Doctor Dan snorted lightly under his breath, his lips twitching. “I see not much has changed there.”

Jess produced a brief grin, then pointed to the carriers. “Let's go.”

Tucker and Brent went to grab kits and everyone else headed for the three carriers, Jason letting them all go ahead as he dropped back with Jess. “Hey.”

“Hey” Jess repeated.

“You sure about that space doc?”

“Yeah.” Jess nodded. “He's okay”

“You figure out what his background is?” Jason persisted. “There;s some weird stuff we heard about him and with all this scamming bullshit going on, don't want to take a piece of it back with us. He can get lost between here and there, you know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean.” She kept her voice down, watching the scientist and his protege heading for her craft. “Yeah, I found out what his deal was. We can talk later about it, but he's okay.”

“He was us?” Jason persisted.

“He was us.” Jess confirmed. “Matter of fact, he was my dad's partner.”

Jason almost tripped and went sprawling, saved only by Jess grabbing his arm and steadying him. “What?”

“We'll talk later.” She gave him a slight shove towards April's carrier. “G'wan. We got enough troubles without inventing any from him.”

She got back onboard as Dev was spooling the engines up and she sat down with a sigh. “Dev, lift, then when the rest of them hold and give me full power. I'm gonna blow up those crates.” She settled into her position and keyed up the guns, pulling down the restraints and buckling them in an absent motion.

She was glad they'd found Jason and Elaine. Of all the agents at Ten, she liked them the best and she had the most confidence that they weren't part of the problem.

At the last minute, Brent scrambled onboard and hit the hatch lock. “Hullo.” He grunted, looking uncomfortable. “Jase said to fly with you.”

And, Jess had to smile inwardly, he was one of the few who would challenge her judgement and act to protect her even if

she had no need or want of it and know she wouldn't likely shoot him in the head in response. Not that Brent was an agent, but he was big, and muscular, and he'd take orders from her.

And he wasn't a bio alt, whose creator was, in Jason's mind, still suspect.

Dev turned around and smiled at him. "There's a seat up here." She indicated the jump seat next to her console. "But please hurry as we are starting to get wind alerts."

Brent looked a smidgen happier, stowing his kit in the locker and going up to join Dev in the pilot's station. He pulled down the jump seat and extended his legs forward, strapping himself down and exhaling. "Hey."

"Hey." Dev responded. "I'm glad you aren't damaged."

He had a few scrapes on him, but he half grinned in response. "Yeah, back."

Dev got them underway, feeling better about the mission now that she knew for sure that not everyone in the citadel had become dead. She'd developed a mild liking for the other tech, and though they had gotten along pretty well before all this had started.

She handed him over a set of ear cups and got the carrier to altitude, pausing and rotating as she sent power to the guns. A moment later, the carrier vibrated as Jess fired, blowing first one and then the other damaged craft and sending pieces of them flying off into the roiling ocean.

"One way to get a new bus." Brent commented. "Damned piece of crap."

Dev took them into a tight curve, then headed north west, running a long scan to determine if they were going to make the coast before the storm caught them, nudging the throttles forward and taking them to full speed.

They crackled through the sound barrier just as a thunder boomed overhead.

**

They made the coast with a minute, literally to spare. Dev dove at full speed towards the cliffs, already losing some control as lightning exploded around them, both Brent and Jess yelling advice at her and pointing to barely seen gaps in the stone wall through the blinding rain.

She saw the slot canyon and turned the carrier on it's side going through it, not entirely due to it's narrow width. The sudden motion made her passengers yelp and grab for handholds, giving her a moments peace to get the jets under control and fight off the violent gusts of wind.

She hoped the others were behind her as she barreled through the gap, spotting the crooked entrance to what seemed to be a cave on the left hand side wall. She aimed for it, dropping down and cutting the engines as a lightning flash blasted the top of the carrier, waiting a breathless five seconds for the charge to dissipate before she kicked in the landing jets.

Then they were inside. It was a bare crevice and there were cracks and gaps letting in torrents of water, but the wind cut out and gave her control to land near one wall clearing space behind her as the two other carriers piled on hot on her tail.

The storm rolled in on top of them and there were so many lighting strikes it blinded scan completely, and nearly deafened all of them until she cut the sensors and shut down everything hard.

Power was crackling everywhere around them. It was worse than the first storm she'd felt outside Quebec, and Dev had all she could handle to make sure the systems were safed and the guns deactivated. She saw Brent activating the heavy shield that slid down by gravity alone over the windows wrapped around her station and the entire craft was vibrating with the force of the thunder booming overhead.

"Holy crap." Brent said.

"Indeed." Doctor Dan had gotten away from the drop rig, and it's associated floor plate opening and he was now seated on the back shelf they used for sleeping, tucked against the back of the carrier. "Forgotten how much I don't miss weather in space."

Dev was glad the shield was down as something thumped against the carrier with enough force to make it move on it's skids. "Thank you." She told Brent. "I'm not really used to all this weather either."

Brent snorted, giving her a baldly skeptical look. "I can't freaking imagine what you had to fly through up there then."

That was, she supposed, a compliment. "Mostly sims." She admitted. "They emulated weather but not like this."

He studied her. "No shit, that first time out with us was your first real gig?"

She nodded, giving him a sheepish little smile.

"Fuck." Brent shook his head in bemusement.

"I'm going to make sure those other two landed okay." Jess had her jacket on. She got her hood up and sealed a moment

before she hit the hatch, then jumped back and half turned as a blast of lightning outlined the opening in brilliance.

“Maybe not.” Doctor Dan dove across and slammed the hatch shut, throwing his arm over his head as another blast nearly came inside. “Bloody hell.”

Jess had her hand shielding her eyes as she blinked furiously. “Shit.”

Dev got up and went over to her, putting a hand on her arm. “Jess, are you damaged?”

“Over flash.” Her partner shut her eyes and dropped back into her seat. “What the hell is going on with this weather? This something else they’re cooking up, Doc?”

“Not that I know of no.” Doctor Dan cautiously picked his head up, and then moved back to his makeshift seat. “One thing we learned the hard way, eh? You can’t screw with mother nature.” He studied Jess. “You all right, Jesslyn?”

Jess kept her eyes closed, still seeing the after flashes against the inside of her eyelids. She felt a moment of narrowly avoided massive stupidity, and the warmth of Dev’s fingers on her shoulder was guiltily comforting.

After a brief moment the warmth increased, as she felt Dev’s hip press against her shoulder, and cautiously she opened one eye halfway, and peeked up. To her relief, though there was still an after flash, she could make out Dev’s features as her pilot looked at her with that deep, intense concern. “Well you don’t have two heads. I’m probably okay.”

Both of Dev’s eyebrows hiked up.

“And I could see that, so it seals the deal.” Jess leaned back in her seat and relaxed a little, opening her other eye cautiously and very glad they had most of the internal lighting off. “That was a dumbass thing to do. Thought we had more cover in here.”

“We were talking about weather before.” Brent spoke up. “Gettin worse. You said it. Ain’t nothing like this I remember from when I was a kid.”

Jess considered that, thinking back to her childhood on the coast, and the days and days she’d spent outside on the water.

“No, me either.” She said. “Met said, back at Ten, storms were increasing. Problem is no one knew why.”

“Figure this was what Syd drove through?”

Doctor Dan cleared his throat “Syd?” He said. “From North?”

“Used to be.” Brent glanced at him. “Oh right. Happened after you were gone.”

Kurok looked from him to Jess and back, his fair eyebrows lifting in question.

“They took out North station. Seven of them got out, two made it to Ten alive. Barely.” Jess supplied. “Probably now it was a waste of time, and waste of Dev’s heroics.”

“They destroyed the base?” Doctor Dan repeated “Both of them?”

Jess heard the note in his voice, and smiled grimly to herself, knowing that ferocious urge to retaliate down to the nth degree. Kurok was one of them, all right. No matter how long he’d spent up on that station, or what he’d done up there, that loyalty was baldly evident. “Yeah. With that energy weapon, we think.”

Kurok exhaled. “Stupid.”

“Comms out.” Brent commented. “Saw the other two safe land though.” He added, after the awkward silence had gone on too long.

“Thanks Brent.” Jess remained where she was, closing her eyes again. “Guess we should just stay put and wait for the worst of it to pass.” She ran a few things through her console, bare responses from the few systems Dev had left running. They had at least an hour to wait, she figured, before they could move out again, go west, and south, and come in to the citadel to see what was left.

If anything was. The idea of moving on to Drake’s Bay was becoming more real, and now she had to consider the idea that bringing a squad of Interforce home might also make it the other side’s next target.

Never let the other side have the last blood. Wasn’t that the rule? Jess let out a slow breath.

The rain redoubled it’s thundering roar, and the booming overhead was almost continuous. They all fell silent and sat quietly, listening to the noise. Jess checked the met screen again and then she shrugged, leaning back and composing herself to grab a power nap.

Funny how that was so easy now. She was in the middle of a death storm on a mission from hell with at least three strange people in her bus and she felt her body relax as though she was back in the citadel in her own bed. When Josh had been her driver... hell, even before she’d have been gulping kack and taking stims the whole damn time.

There was something tremendously fucked up going with her. But a nugget of pragmatism shrugged it’s shoulders since

really, what was there else to do?

She heard Kurok settle himself on the shelf, apparently with the same idea. "Just get as much rest as you can.

She spoke up. "Not much else to do until this passes."

"Yup." Brent grunted agreement. "Anyway bad news can always wait."

Dev set the long range scanner up to do a continual sweep, then she tilted her control chair back and let her muscles relax, her peripheral vision catching sight of Brent getting as comfortable as he could on the jump seat.

The carriers weren't really meant for comfort. The seats were functional but mostly unpadded, the other surfaces hard and unyielding. It was meant for relatively short missions, even the food stocks were generally set for no more than a week.

But if you were tired enough, you could sleep and Dev felt that stealing over her, the thrum of the rain becoming almost hypnotic. She half turned her gimbaled chair so she could directly see Jess's station, and after a few minutes watching her partner rest, let her own eyes close.

**

Thunder was still rumbling as Dev brought the carrier in a wide arc to the southwest, coming up on a line roughly close to the one she'd used the last time they'd approached the citadel, when they were coming back from Drake's Bay. They'd received no communications from the facility and Jess was standing behind her, hand resting on her chair as she watched the craggy slope approach.

"Crap." Brent grunted. "Place looks dark."

"There are no emissions from the facility." Dev confirmed. "Scan shows no pattern."

Jess sighed. "Dev, go for the side entrance I told you about the last time." She was already in her battle suit. Now she went to the area near the hatch and added her long blaster to its leg holster. "I'm sure this is gonna suck. Brent, tell the other two to drop after me, and we'll meet just inside that hatchway.

Brent was trimming the comp responses and squirting them to the others. He nodded, and continued his work.

It was raining outside. There had been no response to their secure channel squirt, and no reaction to their presence. Jess had, generically speaking, a bad feeling about all of that and she'd steeled herself to find inside what they'd found in North base.

Then. "Jess." Dev started. "Incoming message, singleband, on base frequencies."

Jess darted back over to her and studied comms intently. "Huh."

Brent craned his neck to look. "That's base." He said. "Took em long enough."

"Should I make a standard contact?" Dev asked. "The signal is correct." She waited for Jess to nod, then keyed in the frequency. "BR270006 to base. Copy?"

There was a brief silence, then comms lit up. "BR270006, centops. Stand by for class a scan."

Jess nodded. "That's right." She said. "Brent, tell the others what's going on."

Brent nodded.

"Mm" Doctor Dan had eased up on the other side of her, his hands on the back of Dev's chair. "Hopefully finding us inside won't trigger a destruct sequence."

Jess eyed him. "Was that a joke?"

"Maybe." Kurok produced a faint, wry smile.

They felt the scan, heavy and intense, passing slowly through the craft, leaving behind a tingle that had an almost slimy consistency. Jess tried not to hold her breath, her hand flexing as the scan passed through the chips in it, causing a deep itch.

"What is that?" Dev asked Doctor Dan, in a low tone.

"Full genetiscan." He replied briefly. "They'll match that to the files, to make sure whoever's on this carrier is safe."

"I see." Dev adjusted her ear cup. She could hear the faint hum of the radio subcarrier and tuned it a little, waiting for a response. "I'm glad someone's there, at least."

"Hm." Doctor Dan grunted.

"BR270006, confirmed. Please have your flight approach emergency entrance 12 south, be aware there is no facility."

"That doesn't sound good." Brent said. "Bay must be trashed." He cocked his head slightly. "That sounded like Mike."

"It did." Jess said. "Dev, the south 10 is down near the base of the mountain there." She pointed at a now visible half round opening near the ground. "Hatch is open. Usually they don't use that for things this big. Just send the collecting trucks out that way."

"Okay." Dev dropped their altitude to almost ground level and started a slow approach, tuning scan as they angled around the barren rock surface and came in line with the entrance. She turned on the front floodlights and engaged the landing jets, aiming for the very center of the bare opening. "There does not seem to be much power on."

"Scan was on emergency beam." Brent said. "They must be on batts."

Jess drummed her fingers on the back of the chair. "Hold up, Dev." She said, her eyes sweeping the inside of the cavernous entry. "Tell them we see some obstruction – and we're going to find an alternate entry."

Dutifully, Dev relayed the message.

"You can see inside there?" Doctor Dan asked, in a quizzical tone.

"No. Well, yes." Jess said. "I can see inside but I don't really see any blockage. I'm bluffing."

"BR270006 – there is no reported damage in the entry. Please proceed." Comms crackled overhead, as Dev piped it through, half turning to look at her partner in question. "Also, Jason wants to speak to you on sideband 5."

Jess picked up a headset and put it on, tucking the ear cup into her ear. "Jase?"

"What's the deal?" He asked. "You think we won't fit?"

"Something doesn't smell right." Jess answered honestly. "Why that bay?"

"Only one clear enough?"

Maybe. Jess studied the bay, calling up in her head where it was positioned in the citadel, and what led to it. "Go on and enter. I'm going to go park on five deck." She put her hands on Dev's shoulders. "Take us to that place I showed you first." She told her pilot. "Jase, if they ask, just say I didn't think we'd all fit. Keep in comm synch though."

"Ack." Jason clicked off, and then April's carrier moved slowly ahead of them, towards the indicated bay with Mike's coming in behind her.

Jess watched them approach for a minute, then squeezed Dev's shoulder. "G'wan."

Dev gently eased them across the harsh and stony ground on the back side of the citadel, the rain pattering noisily against the stone and running down in rivulets down the slope and on down further to the lowlands that merged into the inland sea just out of view.

"Centops, this is BR270006. We are sending Tac 2 and Tac3 ahead." Dev spoke quietly into her comm. "We have propulsion damage and are not certain of close in steering."

Both Doctor Dan and Jess turned and looked at her in surprise.

"Nice." Brent nodded. "Last thing they want is a bus slamming in there."

"Acknowledged, BR270006. Stand by."

Dev fired the side jets and slowly brought the nose up, running through some steering tests in apparent random that ended up with the carrier lifted up several levels and coming even with a small, half ledge midway up the slope. "Is that the one?" She said. "I didn't want us to get in trouble for refusing to do what they were saying."

"So you lied to them." Jess looked amused.

"Yes." Dev nodded. "We know how to do that."

Doctor Dan chuckled softly under his breath. "We don't teach that. It's part of what makes us human." He took a step back. "Are you going to go in that door?" He asked Jess.

"Yes." Jess went over and resumed her long rifle, going to the hatch and seating the rest of her weapons more firmly. "Put me down gently, Dev. I don't want to use the drop pack they'll pick up the plasma ejection." She flexed her hands. "If I get in, I'll open the big door and you can land."

"Want some company?" Doctor Dan asked.

"After I open the door. It's keyed to me. Seeing yours and Brent's body parts flying off into the mist isn't on my schedule at the moment." Jess could sense the wall coming closer and she put her hands on either side of the hatch, waiting. "Open when ready, Devvie."

"Ah." Doctor Dan grunted softly. "You're the safety officer."

Jess turned her head and looked at him, a faint smile on her face. "Senior agent. If they haven't re keyed it. We'll find out in

a minute.”

The hatch opened, and a blast of cold rain smacked her, sharpening her attention before she jumped out of the carrier, landing on the nearby rock ledge with a faint skidding motion. She could feel the edge of ice in the downpour and quickly went to a small angle in the rock and stepped inside it, bumping open a scan plate and putting her hand on it.

Now, one of two things would happen. Either she'd get blasted half to hell, or the door would open. Jess was tired despite her nap and she didn't really want to be blown out into the rain.

She felt the tickle against her left palm, the remedial scan finding the chips embedded in her and keying to them. After a long pause, she heard a soft click, then felt a vibration where her shoulder was pressed against the stone and then an opening appeared to her left, outlined in lurid blue.

Deep scan. She drew her breath and stepped inside it, feeling the penetration to her very core. There was no way to fake this out, it did a walk of the entire DNA chain and she swore she could feel it do just that as it wound inside her and the bio scrape held her in stasis until it was done.

Either you passed, or you died. It was an isolated system, not hooked up to centops, and only the principal and the sec comp who keyed it knew whose codes would work and those two were never command level. An obscure and somewhat cynical check and balance.

Abruptly the scan broke off and released her, and she started breathing again. Apparently Bain's note hadn't gotten to security nor been deemed official, and she was still a grunt.

Jess smiled grimly, as she drew her blaster and very slowly moved inside, feeling the change as her vision flattened and sounds become sharper and more clear. A small hallway dog legged to the right and she slid into it, listening hard.

It was cold, and damp, and only emergency lighting was on. She didn't hear anything other than faint mechanical, so she moved further in, getting around the dog leg and into the larger area beyond.

It was empty and silent.

The emergency bay was generally shut down and unused at the busiest of times. There were a few lockers against the wall, that had gear and weapons in them, and at the far end past where a carrier could park there was an entrance into the ops level of the station.

Everything might be on the up and up. Jess went over to the manual controls of the large external door and triggered them, opening the casing and exposing the very old fashioned and completely hand operated chains that opened the hanger bay. She unlocked them and holstered her blaster, cautiously starting the process of ratcheting the bay open.

Rain spattered in immediately, along with a powerful beam of light from the front of the carrier waiting patiently outside. Jess got the door opened enough to let Dev land, and the landing jets flared as her pilot slid inside, cutting off and dropping the carrier to its extending skids in very short order.

The hatch popped open and both Kurok and Brent hopped out “Jase's screaming for ya.” Brent said. “They tried to slam the door shut on them, that new kid got their bus halfway out and blocked it.” He gave Jess an appreciative look. “You called it.”

“Yeah.” Jess sighed. “Sometimes I hate being right.” She climbed up inside the carrier and went over to where Dev was shutting down the engines. “Hey.”

“Hold on a moment.” Dev uttered into comms. “Jess..”

“Yeah, I know.” Jess picked up a headset and put it on, keying the coms to the backup board. “Finish shutting down.” She pressed the ear cup to her ear. “Jase?”

“Fuckers!” The agent bawled in her ear. “Where the hell did you go? We're hauling ass across the rocks, fuckers were in there waiting for us with blasters. April let off a barrage and we got out while they were picking up their own heads and asses.”

“Keep coming along the ridge line to the big gray rock. Check behind it.” Jess sighed. “Thought this was too easy.”

“So they got this place.” Jason was still fuming, sounds of the storm surrounding him. “Lazy ass jacktards let em take it.”

“Kids with you?”

Brief silence. “What? Oh.” Jason coughed a little. “Yeah everyone's here. You said that big rock? What ... oh.” There was another silence. “I see it. Be there in a minute. Out.”

Jess put the commset down. “Shitcakes.” She sighed. “Well, at least the place probably isn't a smoking hole.”

“Yes.” Dev was just climbing out of her seat. “I told centops we had mechanical difficulties, and they advised we were no longer on scan. I suggested it might be the angle we had to hold at.” She turned and regarded her partner solemnly “They

did not call after that.”

Jess sighed. “I’m going to have to shoot them all to get into bed with you aren’t I?”

Dev blinked a little, then issued a hesitant half grin.

Jess grinned back and motioned to the hatch. “Sooner I start the better.” She put her hand on Dev’s back as they walked down the carrier ramp and back into the bay to join the others. “Let me go wave them in and shut the door.”

She ducked out into the rain and shaded her eyes, spotting six jacketed figures bolting along the rough ground headed towards her. They were hidden from the oversight above by a ridge of rock, and a minute later they gained the hatch and pelted inside.

“Fuckers!” Jason hissed as he rambled to a halt, his jacket shedding rain everywhere.

“Uh huh.” Jess closed the manual hatch and looped the chain around the mechanism. “Keep it down. I’d rather them not be sure where the hell we are for the moment.”

The rest of them shed their jackets and then gathered around her. “Did you know that was going to happen?” April asked, checking the blaster seated at her side.

“Still not sure what did happen. Not sure if it’s that this place is taken over, or they think we’re outlaw.” Jess told her, in a calm voice. “Though based on the fact the hatch let me in its starting to look more like we got bad guys inside.” She glanced around the cavern. “Not that you can see much in any case.”

“Emergency power.” Doctor Dan remarked, as he finished a circuit of the bay. “Could just be manual ops.”

“Could be.” Jess exhaled. She went across the bay past the carrier to the inner hallway and pulled out a panel, peering inside it. “Perimeter system is active, according to this.”

Dev squirmed in next to her and peered at the old tech with interest. There was a very basic representation of the citadel, faded tracings of hallways and chambers, with dimly illuminated rings here and there. “This is the central place, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Jess put her fingertip on a spot near it. “Problem with that is, if we go through any of these gates they’ll know where we are.”

“That’s a bad thing?” Brent asked.

“If someone other than us is in charge up there? Yeah.” Jess rested her hands against the outer walls of the console. “You know how centops is. They’ve got the big overscan that shows them where everyone in the cit is.” She pondered the problem. “I’m sure they’re on their way here now.”

“If they know where it is.” Jason folded his arms across his brawny chest. “Not everyone did. If they’ve taken over, no guarantee anyone told them about this.”

“No guarantee they didn’t. Depends what jacktard was in ops.” Elaine sniped. “Glad Sandy’d already bought it she’d have had them waiting outside with an antipersonnel mine.”

“Well.” Jess left the hatch and went to the small and nondescript door that would lead further into the citadel. “No sense hanging around letting them have time to figure it out. Let’s go.” She cautiously palmed the lock and felt it give way under pressure from her shoulder, moving outward and letting into a tight, enclosed space. She eased into it and cleared the way for the others, moving forward into the chute like corridor until she was at the far end.

There was a turn to the left, and then another, the walls melding at the end of that from the natural gray rock to the smooth surface of the inside of the citadel.

She drew in a breath, and the air smelled familiar. Clean and sterile, with a hint of mech on it and a faint tinge of salt air, this far down, this low in the facility. No stink of battle, or of burning, she noted.

Another ten minutes walk east, and she’d encounter the rough hewn hallway that led to the intake cavern, and on the far side of the corridor they were about to emerge into was the entrance to the lower spaces where the bio alts lived.

Jess paused, and considered that, as the rest of her little gang filled up the hall behind her. She’d been down there maybe once, maybe twice just on a fam tour years back, and remembered very little of it.

Cautiously, she approached the opening, it’s slanted gap blending into the walls and making it invisible when looked at from the outside. She paused just short of it and listened, but there was no sounds trickling in, no motion or even a far off klaxon. A gentle touch on her back nearly made her gasp, but she bit the inside of her lip and looked back over her shoulder.

Dev was there, her pale hair distinctive in the shadows. She held up her portable scan. “There are people approaching.” She whispered. “They have weapons.”

“Mm.” Jess glanced at the screen. “Yeah. That’s no good news.” She moved forward and slipped into the outer hall, finding

it dark and empty. Not surprising since these were the very lower levels of the facility and only really frequented when something needed fixing, or you wanted to get to the cavern.

Jess had always been after the latter, and had found the entryway to the manual chamber years back but never bothered wondering what it was for until she'd been taken there the night she'd made senior. She'd always figured it was a storage space, for the gear they used on the outside.

Everyone did. No one was encouraged to ask about it. She looked down the long, empty corridor and started walking quickly along it, spotting the first distinctive outline of scan at the other end.

"Pst." Kurok hissed softly, and pointed at a dark, sealed doorway to the right.

"What?" Jess looked at it. "We go in there, they'll have us cornered. It's a storage chamber."

"It isn't." Doctor Dan went over to it and opened a panel. "At least, it wasn't." He amended, peering at the circuitry inside. "You used to be able to get down into the bio alt living quarters from here."

Jess studied him with interest. "What does that get us?" She asked, one eye watching the scan console. "They're probably in there scared crapless."

"Well." Kurok keyed in a few codes. "That's probably true. But they're far less likely to shoot us than the people on their way here. So unless you'er prepared for a very long and probably lethal firefight in the hall, let's see if we can find another way into central."

With a faint click the door opened. They slipped inside and Jess got her hand light on, shining it around a bare and apparently abandoned chamber before Kurok shut the door behind them. "Not much in here."

"No." April got her own light on and stepped to one side. "There's a portal there. Looks like it hasn't been used for a while... but that..." She stepped closer and peered at a looming piece of mech and her nose twitched a little. "What is that?"

"Processing unit." Doctor Dan said, quietly. "That's the outer wall skin there. This is where they handled bio alt dead." He fell silent, then went to another door on the far side of the chamber. "This should be a lift." He touched a palm pad and lights came on in the chamber, low and stark.

Dev eyed the big machine, feeling a chill come over her. She remembered the processing she'd witnessed and felt a desire to get as far away from the device as she could.

"We're out of time.." Elaine had been listening at the door and now she took a step back, drawing her blaster. "They're coming in."

"Keep trying Doc." Jess joined her, and Jason took up a position next to the processor. "We'll keep em occupied."

"I'm sure." Doctor Dan muttered, as he pecked at the console. "Damn it."

Dev and Brent peered at the controls from either side of him, while the other techs plastered their backs against the wall. They'd just gotten into position when the door blasted open and then the room was filled with plasma fire.

Jess dropped to her belly, her eyes taking in the attack squad and absorbing the clothes and the stance and freeing her trigger finger to pinpoint them. She took out the first one and then blew an arm off the second, her body halfway protected by the step she was sheltered behind.

It was loud.

The attackers were yelling, in battle language that wasn't theirs and they had full armor on and it was a mess. Jess heard April let out a yell and saw a figure flying past her, but she squirmed around and put herself between the bad guys and that door and just kept firing.

The armor took a lot of hits, but Jason kept up a crossfire in counterpoint to hers, and after a few minutes the door closed again and they were inside with six dead enemy bodies, a room full of plasma smoke and the smell of burned flesh.

"Everyone okay?" Jess asked, after a brief pause.

"Yeah." Jason came out from around the processor, going to the door and swiftly opening it to peer out. "That was ridiculous."

"Bullshit." Elaine grimaced at a long burn down her arm. "But now we know. It's them."

"It's them." Jess got up and rolled a body over, examining the full armor. "Any luck, Doc?"

"Yes and no." Kurok said. "I got the door to trigger, but ah.. most of us can't go through it. It's keyed to organisms with biosynaptic control collars."

Dev reached up and touched her neck in reflex. "Like mine?"

Doctor Dan studied her somberly. "Yes."

Dev went to the door, hauling up as Jess got there ahead of her. “No she can't.” Jess said, her body blocking the door. “We've got no idea what's down there. They could all be compromised.”

“They could be.” Kurok agreed in a mild tone. “Nevertheless, she's the only one of us who can go.”

“They're going to come back.” Jason remarked. “I can hear an alarm.”

“Yeah.” Elaine pulled her head back in. “Lot of boots heading this way.”

Dev regarded her tall and irritated obstacle. “Jess.” She could see her partner was in discomfort. “I think I could do good work in there.”

“You do good work everywhere.” Jess studied her intently. “But you've got no idea what's down there.”

“That's true. But if I go, I'll find out.” Her partner responded in a mild reasonable tone. “And if I can get to the control sets, I can let you all in.”

Jess was aware of Kurok's eyes on her, but he remained silent as she weighed the risks.

“Incoming!” Elaine yelled, getting back from the door as Jason and Mike grabbed the dead bodies and jammed them against the inside of it.

No real choice. “Go on.” Jess said. “Be careful, huh?” She moved away from the inner door and took up a position in the angle of the alcove, taking aim at the door frame and putting a thin bead of plasma around it.

“I will.” Dev touched her on the side and moved to the door, as Doctor Dan keyed in something then gave her a nod. She went into the square space and felt scan take her, the collar on her neck twitching a little as she closed her eyes.

It seemed to get hot. She felt a moment of panic. Then the inner panel slide open and there was a step down and she moved over, and the panel shut with a bang.

She was alone.

Then she turned and a second door opened, and she was facing a wall of bodies, and a bright light blinded her.

**

Instinctively, Dev threw her hand up in front of her eyes and then closed them, half turning her head. “Ow.” She could see the flashes from the intensity of it on the inside of her eye lids. “Please stop!”

Then light shifted, and she heard voices, whispers that resolved into her short name. Cautiously, Dev opened her eyes and looked at the crowd, seeing row after row of bio alts, all staring at her.

“NM-Dev-1.” It was one of the Kaytees. “How did you get here?”

Dev blinked a few times and let her hand drop. “Hello Kaytee.” She said. “We just arrived at this facility. What's the situation?”

The bio alts were very upset, she could tell. She could now see anxious faces and there were smudges of dirt and bruises on the Kaytee's face.

There were three or four Kaytees in fact, and some Beeeyes, in the front. Behind them, she could see the other sets, some of them hurt, many with blood on them as well.

“Incorrect people came and did bad things.” The Kaytee closest to her said. “They made a lot of natural borns dead, and some of us too.” He showed his arm, which was covered in a clumsy bandage. “We can't get to med.”

“That's bad.” Dev said. “Are there many of them, the bad ones?”

“Yes.” A second Kaytee said. “They came in through the big bay, and the place where the shuttle comes.” He said. “They made the base systems incorrect.” He looked exhausted. “Nothing is working. There were some big explosions, and only batteries are up.”

Dev nodded. “They have a new gun.” She said. “I was at North Base. It made everything burned there.”

“Yes.” A Beeeye said. “That's what we heard.” He winced, and held his left arm with his right, closed to his body. “The natural borns made us come in here, and locked the hatches.”

“The bad ones, or ours?” Dev asked.

“Ours. They were afraid more of us would be made dead. Tech Super Clint made us come in here.” The Beeeye said. “We don't know what is happening upstairs. The systems are all down, but they put on the scan to keep the incorrect people out from here. They said no one could get in.”

“Yes.” Dev said, again. “I was upstairs, and I was the only one who could come through the door.” She pointed behind her. “We came in a secret way, and now I have to make it so the people who were with me can come down here.”

The Kaytee looked doubtful. "Will they hurt us? They told us to stay here and not let anyone in."

"It's some of the agents. My partner Jess, and also, Doctor Dan." Dev told him. "They want to fix things."

"Doctor Dan?" The name echoed back from many lips. "Doctor Dan's here?" The Kaytee asked. "They said the incorrect people took him far away."

"We rescued him." Dev said, knowing a moment of intense, personal pride at the reaction, and the widening eyes of these, her own kind. "He was far away on the other side. We had to do a lot of difficult things to get him back." She explained. "But we did, and he's here, in the other room."

"The bad people here said they would stop doing incorrect things if the natural borns gave them the one you are with." A Beeeye said, hesitantly. "The one you called Jess? They are very angry about that one."

"I know." Dev said. "We did bad things to them." She said. "But that was because they were keeping some of the natural born from here from coming back." She glanced behind her "But we have to let them in here or I think the bad people above are going to make them dead."

"If we let them in here the bad people may make us dead." The Kaytee said. "They already made a lot of us dead. We don't want to get hurt again."

Dev straightened up, the faint lights catching on the piping and insignia she was wearing. Her collar was covered and theirs weren't, and she wondered if they viewed her as one of them, or one of the other. "We have to let them in." She stated quietly. "It's the correct thing."

The group hesitated, many eyes going to the Kaytees as the most advanced of the sets among them. But it wasn't a Kaytee that finally spoke up.

"They may make us dead anyway" The Beeeye nearest Dev shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We should help Doctor Dan."

Now a lot of voices erupted, and heads nodded "We have to help Doctor Dan." One of the PeeAres said. "He will keep them from making us dead." He said. "He'll know what to do."

Dev waited, as the discussion went around. She knew she had no way of forcing the question, so she waited to see what the result was going to be. Before she took things into her own hands, because she had the programming for that, and it was her job.

She would help Jess and Doctor Dan, even if the others refused to do so.

Maybe the Kaytee knew that because he looked at her, and he nodded. "We should help Doctor Dan." he agreed with the majority. "And Beeeye is right. They might make us dead anyway."

They cleared the way to the control consoles, where three of the bio alts were just sitting and watching screens. Dev went up onto the platform and one of them moved to make room for her, letting her sit down. "They have systems locked upstairs." The man said. "We can't touch anything."

Dev pulled the pad over and examined it. Then she keyed in a routine and entered her credentials, waiting to see what would happen. One of two things were likely, either the systems would stay locked, or they wouldn't.

After a moment the screen cleared and gave her access, and she nodded and started keying in other things. "They did not check for access from here for someone with operations credentials." She commented. "That was not optimal for their objective."

The bio alts were all gathered around watching her attentively. "They did not expect any of us to have them." The Beeeye said. "You are the first."

"I am the first." Dev agreed. She called up the routine for the door and studied it, mindful of the need to hurry. She didn't know what was going on in the outside room, but she didn't think it could be good based on the thumps and bangs that were transmitting through the stone and metal between her and where Jess was. "Get away from that access and be safe." She ordered. "I am going to open it."

The bio alts all scattered to the walls and crouched down, obeying her as if she was a natural born, even the Kaytees. Dev altered the programming and recompiled it, then applied to the door, and an instant later there was chaos everywhere.

Dark clad bodies tumbled through the opening and fired back the way they came, then bigger fully armored forms came hauling through with a deflector sending blasts back over everyone's heads.

Instinctively she dove off the console and got behind it as the room filled with blaster fire, and falling bodies, and a lot of yelling. It smelled of burning substance and scorched stone and she tucked her head behind the panel and hoped Jess was okay.

She heard Jason say get down and she closed her eyes, pressing against the wall as she heard a powerful explosion, and the

vibration nearly sent her tumbling.

Screams broke out, and then, after another rattling explosion, she heard the sound of hatches sealing with a deep, ear impacting whumphing sound.

Then, abruptly, it was quiet.

“Fuck that was close.” Jason's voice broke it. “I get em all?”

Dev got up and hopped back up onto the console, freezing when she saw the floor covered in bodies. “Oh.” She blinked in the heavy smoke and felt her heart sink, as the impact hit her. “You... what did you do to them?” She asked Jason, her heart starting to race.

All the bio alts, the ones she'd been just talking to, were on the ground, limp, unmoving.

Jason was half covered in blood and he stared at her, then looked across the space filled with bio alt dead. “Sorry.” He answered briefly. “Didn't have time to code anything but us.”

Dev took a step back and bumped into the console, feeling like she was going to be very sick. She saw Doctor Dan starting to move towards her but a second later Jess was there instead, putting a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at her partner. “They let me open the door because I said they would be safe, and they believed me.”

“They sent a bunch of them in after us.” Jess told her, in a quiet tone. “We were out of options, Dev.” She looked around. “Check them. They might have just been coded out.”

“Do we really have time for this?” Jason asked impatiently, falling silent when Jess's blaster came around and targetted him. “Did you totally lose your mind?” He asked her. “They're bios.”

Jess stared at him, then looked at Dev, then looked back at him. “I might have lost my mind but not about this. Bios or not they're ours.” Jess said. “Check them.”

“She's right.” Doctor Dan spoke up. “You are responsible for them. It's in the contract.” He moved past Mike and April and went to the first of the bodies, lowering himself next to it. “They're not krill.”

“It's not going to matter if they catch us in here. We'll be feeding the krill.” Jason stated. “We don't have time for this...” He caught a motion and looked back at Jess, who had taken the safety off her blaster. “You're seriously going to shoot me?”

“Yes.” Jess said. “But for insubordination under fire this time.” She motioned the rest of the agents. “Check them.”

She stayed by Dev's side, as the agents started moving amongst the bio alts, and joined Doctor Dan in kneeling by their side. “If those were our grenades, they should have had them passive coded. I helped test the damn things.”

Jason shook his head and went to the group near the wall, stepping over the broken and obviously dead bodies of the enemy soldiers. Elaine had already knelt next to one of the AyeBees, touching the side of his face with relative gentleness.

Kurok looked up from a Kaytee. “They're hard down.” He said. “But I think I can probably bring them back up.”

Jess felt Dev's shoulders relax a little. “How long?”

Doctor Dan shook his head. “Don't know. No gear here.” He stood up. “We can leave them where they are. They'll just stay down.” He straightened slowly and rubbed his hands together. “Maybe this was the safest thing for them, Dev.” He came up onto the platform. “Are you all right?”

Dev took a deep breath, and released it. “Yes. I think so.” She could feel her knees shaking, and the feeling of wanting to throw up was easing, a little. “That was a terrible feeling, Doctor Dan.”

“I know.” He patted her on her other shoulder, since Jess had possession of the one closest to her. “So now what, Agent?” He asked Jess. “Now that we didn't get blown up, that is.”

Jess sat down at the console and started accessing things. “First thing is, secure that damn door.” She said. “This your login Dev?”

“Yes.” Dev sat down too, because she felt like she was going to fall down otherwise.

“Good work.” Jess keyed through systems, mirroring the ones from centops and hoping no one up there was watching. “Surprised they didn't close.. oh, okay I see what they did.” She chuckled softly under her breath. “Clever, Devvie Very clever.”

When Dev didn't answer, Jess looked over at her, surprised to see a few tears sparkling on her face. She was leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and her hands were folded together, tense enough to have her knuckles show through the skin over them.

Kurok sat down next to her and patted her arm and Jess felt a surge of emotion that made her forget completely about the console. She half turned away and then saw all the rest of the agents and techs headed towards her, now that the fate of the

bio alts appeared settled.

They were watching her. Jess felt briefly at a complete loss, all her instincts driving her to pay attention to the woman next to her and the cold hard knowledge of her training that told her she better do otherwise or risk losing control of the group. Jason had already called her into question, and though he'd backed down, she knew the barb had legitimate sting.

Damn it.

With a good deal of effort, she wrenched back around just as April reached the platform, forcing her eyes to reread the screen twice before the details registered.

"So what's going on up there." Jason braced his hands on the console and peered at the screen, apparently setting aside their previous disagreement. "That centops?"

"Yeah." Jess muttered. "Just standard scan... not sure what the hell they're doing they know we're here."

Mike and April sat down and started to key in screens, using general access that would be expected from the bio alt area. "Maintenance is offline." Mike said. "Power's about twenty percent."

Brent came over and wedged himself on the other side of where Dev was sitting and cleared his throat self-consciously. "Thanks for getting us in." He addressed the bio alt. "They were about to fry my ass in there."

"You're welcome." Dev answered quietly. "I'm glad everyone is safe."

Jess felt her hands start to twitch and she lost focus, not really caring what was on the screen in front of her. "Fuckers." She uttered. "I just want to get them out of here."

Jason patted her on the back. "Easy, Jesseroo. Don't lose your mind again on us. We'll get em out of here."

"They've got control of centops, and main ops." April concluded. "I can't get any parsing from there at all." She regarded the reporting stats. "Most of the systems are down. The bay is locked open, and it looks like there was a lot of boom in there."

"Ah." Jess said. "Yeah, that's the one big place we're vulnerable, if that big hatch is open. But we've got scan in the corridors.."

"Scan's off." Jason had been tapping on the pads. "Makes sense, or they'd be dropping like flies going through the halls."

Oh. Yeah. Right. "Well, then we can go through them too, if they haven't figured out how to reset it to block us." Jess said. "Anyone want to guess what they want? What they're holding out for?"

"You." Jason stated bluntly.

"That much for revenge?" Jess tilted her head and stared at him. "Get out of here."

"Ah." Doctor Dan cleared his throat. "That is one detail I managed to ferret out. Sorry I neglected to mention it I've been a bit distracted."

"Yeah me too." Jess finally turned away from the console and let her knee bump Dev's, getting a quick flash of those pale eyes and the briefest of grins in return. "So what did I do outside blowing out half a mountain?"

"Their ruling council was meeting in it at the time." Doctor Dan informed her. "You wiped out half the leading scientists and all their top politicians. Which I think explains, by the way, their interest in me." He added, in a musing tone.

The agents turned and stared at Jess.

Jess remained quiet for a short while. "I wasn't aiming at that." She muttered finally. "I was just trying to be a distraction so Jase could get those teams out."

"Shit yeah." Jason said. "No way were they a target we didn't even know they were there." He added. "Did we?" He looked at Jess. "Did Bain know?"

"Not that he told me." Jess admitted. "That facility wasn't even a specific target." She looked at Kurok. "We wouldn't have even published it, since we knew we had a leak."

"Mm." Doctor Dan grunted. "Alex said nothing about that. Possibly on purpose, if he thought they would try to compromise me." He continued, without any seeming emotion. "Certainly, the other four that went with me didn't last long."

"They tortured them?" April asked.

"No. They just killed them outright." Kurok replied. "Didn't have any use for them. They had no intention of negotiating they just wanted me and knew I would insist on coming with the others if they went."

"Did they know that? The guys that went with you?" Jason studied him intently.

"No. They weren't Interforce. Alex thought if he gave them some administrators it would pacify them." Doctor Dan patted

Dev on the back. "He held you and Jesslyn in much greater esteem."

"It could have been tables turned easily. I.. " Jess looked at Dev. "We could have been blown out fifty times in that. It was only Dev's flying that saved our asses." She got up. "So I've got two choices. Either turn myself over to them and hope they take me and leave, or we have to take the base back and hope it frustrates them enough to give up."

"And the reason they are interested in her." Doctor Dan concluded. "Is that Dev's been a greater success than any of us had intended. If I could replicate that success for them, it would solve a number of their problems."

Dev straightened up and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. "I tried to do my best." She murmured. "Was that incorrect, Doctor Dan?"

"No." Jess answered before he could. "Fuck them. You just do what you do. What happened wasn't your fault."

Dev looked at her, then at Doctor Dan, who smiled and nodded. "But many people took damage." She looked around at the still, silent forms of the bio alts, and the dead soldiers. "Is that really correct?"

"No time to argue about it." Jason tapped the screen. "They're doing a sweep, and if they have enough firepower they're just going to blow out that door. We're sitting ducks."

Jess absorbed all the eyes on her, and knew a moment of truth in her guts.

"Jess." Dev's voice was suddenly loud and next to her. "You weren't really considering allowing them to take you away were you?"

Jess turned her head to meet her partner's eyes. "If I thought they would just take me and fly off, and leave the rest of you alone, I would." She responded bluntly. "But I think they just set this up as a trap, and once they get me, they'll blow this place with everyone in it and if I'm going to die today, I'm not going to do it gagged and immobilized."

"So we really should have flown off back to the pole." April mused. "This is an end game."

"It's always an end game." Elaine said. "Didn't they tell you that in school? We're always expected to splat for the cause." She rubbed some dried blood off her hands. "Granted, we try not to splat in huge numbers. It drives the school crazy trying to replace us."

Jess looked at her, then scanned the rest of them. "So is that what you want?" She asked bluntly. "You want me to turn myself into them and let you all get out?"

They all stared back at her.

"That's not what I meant." Elaine said. "It is what it is, Jess. Don't get all crazy about it." She leaned against the console. "Let's just figure out what to do and get it done, before they blow out that door and make this whole scene irrelevant. You got a plan?" She looked pointedly at Jess.

Jess felt her shoulders hunching defensively and she stood and paced a little, ending up next to the big screen. She studied it, her mind completely blank until she realized she was going to have to turn around and say something because they were all waiting for her to.

She was tired. She was hurting. Her lungs were aching and she had no idea what the hell to do except just go run into central ops shooting or ...

Or what?

Slowly she turned and looked at Kurok. "There any way into the security hall except the blue corridor?"

Doctor Dan exhaled a little. "Yes there is." He said. "But I'm not sure what that gets you. Operations hall is closer to central than security is."

"There's a rig being held in Security we might be able to use to get past them."

"Wait." Jason held a hand up. "You'er not talking about that brain thing? The one that splatted Devon?"

Jess nodded.

"What is it?" Kurok asked.

A loud, hollow thump sounded on the other side of the wall. "Okay, we're out of time." Jess said. "Let's get to security sector. We might be able to pick up some allies there, depends on how far they penetrated in the maze." She got off the platform and headed for the inside corridor.

Dev instantly trotted after her, carefully stepping around the silent, slumped bio alts scattered around the room. She caught up to Jess as the rest of them also started moving, and had a brief moment to catch her partner's hand and squeeze it.

Jess looked back at her.

“I don't want you to give up to them.” Dev said, quietly. “Or if you do, take me with you.”

The pale blue eyes watching her suddenly warmed, and softened, just before the rest of the group reached them. She winked at Dev, then she waited for Doctor Dan to come up to the door, and then she gestured him forward. “After you.”

Kurok pushed the inside door open and passed through it, and they all followed, leaving behind the room full of silent figures and scattering of dead ones.

**

[Continued in Part 24](#)