

Partners

Part 24

It was dark, and cold, and the walls were covered in condensation. Jess was standing at the end of a long, damp corridor with her hands braced on either side of a small doorway.

The rest of the group were stretched out along the hall on the other side of her, waiting in silence, for the return of Dan Kurok.

“Where the hell is he?” Jason uttered, speaking over Dev's head to Jess. “He cross us too?”

“No.” Jess didn't wait for Dev's reaction. “He's square.” She didn't even sound angry about the question. “If he's taking his time, maybe that's a good sign. He got further.”

Jason leaned back against the wall then he slowly let himself slide down it, coming to rest with his forearms on his knees. “Okay, maybe.” He sighed. “Fuck, I'm tired.”

Jess pushed off and thumped against the opposite wall, deciding to join him in sitting. “Park it, Devvie. We might as well take a break for a minute.”

Dev sat down next to her, wrapping her arms around her knees. “It's difficult to wait.” She said. “I hope Doctor Dan is okay.”

Jess squirmed over a bit, until her shoulder was pressed against Dev's. “He knows where he's going.” She assured her partner. “I knew Bain had some back channels, behind ops and that office he used, but they were locked down.”

Everyone had settled down and now that she was sitting, Jess hoped Kurok would take a few minutes more as it would at least give her a chance to come up with some kind of plan once he did come back.

Dev exhaled softly and the sound, then, distracting her and making Jess turn and focus on her. “Hey.”

The bio alt returned her gaze. “Hello.”

“You okay?” Jess asked, in a barely audible mutter.

Dev didn't answer for a moment, then she cleared her throat. “I think so.”

“Think so?” Jess asked. “That thing in the room bug you?”

Dev's pale brows twitched.

“The mine messing up the..” Jess paused. “Everyone in there getting blasted?”

“That bothered me, yes.” Dev finally said. “It felt very incorrect, when that happened.” She leaned closer to Jess. “I feel like I hurt them.”

“Mm.” Jess grunted softly. “Why'd you open the door?” She asked, in a mild tone. “Back there? They were safe in there.”

Dev stared at her in silence for a bit. “You were being attacked.” She said finally. “You were in danger – they would have made you dead.”

Jess nodded. “That's right.” She said. “You put me above them. I bet you never thought for a second before you opened up that hatch.”

“I didn't” The bio alt murmured. “That's incorrect, isn't it?”

“No. It's absolutely correct.” Jess put her head against Dev's. “There's an us and a them, Dev. Us is you and me, and them is everyone else. Hope you don't want to change that.”

Dev sat there breathing for a few moments. “Are you saying it's correct that I would want you to be safe, even though that meant all those sets, and everyone else were made dead?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Dev stared at her in total absorption.

“Really.” Jess responded, with a faint smile.

“I don't think that's what they intended with my programming.” The bio alt ventured.

“But?”

Dev frowned. “What but? Is this one of those ass things again?”

Jess started to shake, and she lifted one hand to cover her face.

Her partner sighed after a moment of this. "It's true though." She said, a touch mournfully. "I valued your safety more than I did theirs, or even mine." She acknowledged. "So I guess whether it's correct or not is sort of a non question."

Jess shifted a little. "I would have done the same thing, Dev." She said, quietly. "So don't sweat it. We don't really have the time or space to worry about it now anyway."

Dev thought about that, pondering if she was, in fact worried. She decided she was really too tired to be worried and just wished the whole thing was over. She could talk to Doctor Dan about it afterward, surely he would be able to tell her what the truth of it was.

Then, between one breath and the next, the lights went off and they were plunged into total darkness.

Jess surged to her feet and the rest of them followed, as she found the door opening by touch and without pause backed a step and kicked out at it, impacting the panel with a sodden crack.

"Hope that wasn't your leg." Jason commented.

Jess kicked the door again and this time it flew inward, and she followed it, all in such pitch darkness not even a shadow showed. "Let's go!" She called over her shoulder.

Dev scrambled after her partner, holding one hand out ahead of her to prevent her from crashing into anything. The only thing she could hear was the scuffling of their motion and the rasp of Jess's skin against the wall ahead of her. "Jess?"

"Sh." Jess ducked past something unseen and reached back to grab hold of her hand. "This is behind Bain's office." She said. "Let's get through it and go take centops."

"Sounds good." April said. "No sense hanging around in here."

"No sense worrying about scan either." Jason said. "Let's just kick the ass of anything we find." The sound of him drawing his blaster and setting it was loud against the rock walls, and then the small space they were in was filled with a lot more noise just like it.

Dev just stayed by Jess as she started forward, unlocking a door just in front of them and swinging it open. She paused and listened, then she turned on her hand light and shone it around, picking out the staid interior of the office Bain had used when he'd been in the citadel.

Empty, and dark. They moved across it and went to the door, where a lifetime ago Jess had talked to Bain about her promotion, reaching the door just as thunderous explosions rocked the walls around them.

"Oh, that's not good." Elaine sighed.

Jess paused at the door and waited for them to join her, then she unlocked her blaster and raised her other hand, pausing, then letting it fall.

Jason moved past her in silence, bumping the front door to the office opening and passing through with April and Mike right behind him. Elaine stayed next to Jess, and the techs stuck together and brought up the rear as they all emerged into the outer hall.

Here, there should have been security guards, but nothing living was there and they moved on through the outer chamber and then through the main hall door into the sector corridor. Far off they could hear more explosions, and very faintly, shouting.

Jess and Elaine kept up a watch as they moved quickly through the hall, coming around the curve and into the main space where the air was already getting stuffy. "Handlers off." Jess commented. "Dev, run your box, see what's coming at us."

Dev and the rest of the techs already had their scanners out and going, the screens reflecting in ghostly silver and outlining their faces. "There are life forms heading in this direction." Dev said. "They are moving fast."

"Not as fast as we are." Jess urged them forward and they caught up to the rest of the agents, as they came around the circular wall that pointed them into the operations center. The big door was dark and open, and they went through and then stopped.

It smelled of blood, and burned flesh. Jess shone her light around and went still, seeing mostly destruction all around them. "Shit."

"Unsalvageable." Jason remarked. "Let's move on."

"Let's move on." Jess repeated, turning and leading the way out of the room. "Sounds like they're running. You figure the bay?"

"Yep."

“Let's go.” Jess took the lead now and they broke into a run, heading down the hall and down ramp towards the carrier bay, as the sounds of fighting grew louder.

A moment later the corridor was filled with fast moving bodies and Jess felt her senses tingling, as she swung her blaster around and targetted the first of them. “Ware!”

“Got em!” Jason let off the first blast, and then ducked as one came back at him, and then the hall was full of blaster fire, lighting up the shadows as they bounced off the rock walls.

“Down!” Jess yelled at the techs, before she nailed a bad guy in the jaw with her elbow and took him down, using his body as a shield as a long yellow beam nearly blew him apart.

April was hugging the corner of the wall and aiming past it, letting out long bursts and then drawing back as fire hit the wall next to her. The enemy they were firing at were wearing full armor, and their bulky, hardened figures were deflecting the blasts as they poured forward.

Jess got down behind the dead soldier and propped her gun up on his hip, ignoring the blood and burned plastic all around her. “Dev! You down!”

A hand touched her thigh and she nearly hit the roof, stifling a squeak as she only just stopped herself from whipping around and clobbering her partner. “Grahba... oh good.” She wrenched around and fired, catching one of the enemy in mid leap about to land on her. The blast shoved him sideways and she ducked and felt the impact on her shoulders, but she shoved backwards and sent him against the wall.

“Clear!” Mike's voice rang out, and Jess grabbed Dev by the arm and hauled her up as they started down the hall again. There were three bodies on the floor and Jason and Elaine were shooting over the rest of their heads as another three of the enemy were retreating before them, firing as they went.

Jess studied the pattern, then she stopped and ducked behind the curve of the wall. “Hold up!”

The team flattened themselves against the wall.

Jess saw the flicker as the enemy paused and waited. Then she turned and faced Jason who had ended up behind her. “They're drawing us.” She watched him nod. “Wanna step in it?”

He shrugged. “Choices?”

“Bad, none.” She let out a low whistle and shouldered her blaster. “Let's speed it up. Techs, stay down.”

Dev obediently crouched and felt the warmth as Brent and Chester came up next to her. She could see Doug dimly across the hall, and then there was rapid motion as Jess led the agents across the hall and into the opening where two corridors met, lighting everything up with blaster fire.

“This sucks.” Brent said, succinctly. “Want this shit to be over.”

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “This is definitely non optimal.” She watched anxiously as the agents disappeared from her view and then loud noises happened, bright flashes coming from around the bend of the corridor.

“Don't sound good.” Chester noted.

Dev had her scanner out and she watched the wiremap, shifting a little so Chester and Brent could see it. “Isn't there something we can do to help?” She asked, finding nothing readily at hand in her programming. When it came to ground battle, firefights, the agents were the ones who took the lead and the techs were supposed to, at best keep their heads down and stay out of trouble.

Well. “Let's go in there.” Dev got up and pointed to a half open hatch. “That's the cafeteria, isn't it?”

“What's left of it.” But Brent moved past her and they piled into the room, Chester getting his light on and flashing it around as the took cover from the stray bolts coming down the hall.

The room, though dark, was relatively undamaged and Brent went over to the wall panels to see what he could make of them.

“Not much we can do.” Doug had his head inched around the half open door, watching. “No guns, no guts no glory.”

Brent snorted. Tucker came over and sat down next to him, resting his elbows on his knees.

It seemed wrong. Dev kept her eyes on the wiremap, on the figure she knew was Jess moving through the halls, the outline almost obliterated by the energy flares from the blasters.

She saw Jess's outline jerk suddenly, and impact against the wall.

She felt strangely lightheaded. “Brent.” She turned and offered the scanner. “Could you hold onto this please?”

“Sure.” He took the instrument. “Dropped mine out on the... where ya going?”

Dev slipped through the open door and started down the hall, heading around the corner and through the next crossing, picking up speed as she approached the long series of archways that led to the shuttle bay.

She could smell smoke and burned electronics, and as she cleared the next entry she saw the battle, the enemy behind the blast doors and the agents pinned down in front of them, unable to go any further.

Jess was curled up near an overturned cabinet and as Dev headed for her she sensed a surge of energy coming at her and dove for the floor. "Look out!"

From behind her. The hall was filling with enemy, blasters raised.

Dev rolled for the far wall as she saw the agents start to turn and she slammed into the hard surface, as a bolt hit the rock right over her head.

A hand grabbed her arm and she was pulled along the floor, blaster fire almost singing her shoulder as she found herself hard against the wall, Jess's tall body in front of her.

Jess was yelling. The agents were firing, the enemy was firing back. Dev heard someone cough loudly, then Jess called out Jason's name.

There was no answer.

She felt everything slow down a bit, as the thought occurred to her that they were in very big danger, and it was likely that very soon they were going to be made dead.

Dev knew what that was. She hoped it would be fast, and that it wouldn't hurt, too much. She felt Jess press against her and she reached out to take hold of her partner, very glad she'd at least made a connection with someone, and got to understand what that love thing was.

She was very glad she'd gotten to know Jess. Gotten to do good work, and be as close to a natural born as one of her kind could be.

She'd gotten her mark, after all.

A loud, crackling boom filled her consciousness and she tucked her head along Jess's side, feeling her partner shift suddenly and turn to cover her, wrapping her arms around Dev and pushing her against the wall as a flow of energy passed over and through them, a flaring edge of pain that sent her to the edge of consciousness.

Then a thumping sound, and a blast of air replaced it, and the darkness blew out, replaced with piercing halo'd lights that made stark beams through the smoke now visible in the hall.

Jess released her and turned, sweeping up her blaster in a deadly motion only to swing its muzzle up as she got up on her knees and swiveled around.

The enemy were on the ground, bodies contorted. The archways were lit with a familiar blue glow and the overhead lights had all come on along with the air handlers. "Someone got the systems back on." Jess said, finally, rising to her feet. "Status?"

"Okay." April got up from the ground, finally looking stunned and a bit overwhelmed. "Mike?"

"Ow." Mike was sitting with his back against the wall, cradling his right arm with his left. "Broke something."

Jess headed over to where Elaine was crouched over Jason. "April, go get the techs." She circled Jason's sprawled legs and knelt down on the far side of his body. "Take one of the head?"

"Yeah." Elaine exhaled. "If med's down, he's toast." She regarded the long, dark burn that scored half his face, and the charred remains of one ear. "Stupid bastard. I told him to duck."

Jess turned and regarded the rest of the space. She went to the comms panel on the wall and keyed it, hearing a soft crackle in return, but no response. "Tac." She uttered into it. "Any comms, respond."

She waited, then repeated the message.

Another long silence, then rather than from the comms, they heard a response coming from the cross hallway just before the shuttle bay.

"Not much to say." Dan Kurok limped into view, his eyes flicking over them with something like relief. "Took you long enough to get them down here." He sat down on a box, looking completely exhausted. "This is the only area with any grid I could bring up." He blinked mildly. "Once I'd taken everything down that is."

"That was you?" Elaine studied him.

A faint, very wry smile appeared on Doctor Dan's face.

"Though they were leading us on." Jess looked up as the techs came into view following April. "Let's rig a carry, get Jason

to med.” She eyed the hall. “If this sector's got power, that one might too.”

“Marginal.” Kurok said. “This was the last of them, I think. They got comms as I got into the back halls and they took off, left a squadron behind to clean up.” He studied the bodies on the floor. “Hope that's all of them. There's not much in the way of protection left here.” His eyes lifted to Jess's. “And they will be back.”

“What about people?” Elaine asked. “Anyone else from the teams here?”

Kurok just looked at her.

‘Shit.’ She shook her head.

“Maybe Bock was right.” April commented. “He said it was over. We were just prolonging it.”

Jess watched them rigging a sling, then she walked back over to where Dev was seated on the ground, extending a hand down to her. “He was right.” She hoisted her partner to her feet. “But it doesn't matter because we don't stop just because it's a lost cause.” She studied the bio alt. “You okay, Devvie?”

What, really could she say to that? “Yes.” Dev looked around at the dissipating smoke, and the bodies on the ground, and her battered colleagues, and Doctor Dan. “Seeing as I thought they were going to make us dead.”

“Not yet.” Jess sighed. “Maybe soon.”

‘I see.’

“Let's see how hard we can make it for them.”

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It did seem a lost cause. Dev was on her knees, her head inside a wall panel as she studied the readouts on her retrieved scanner. There was so much damage everywhere, it seemed very difficult to know where to start with fixing it.

“Crap.” Brent was in the next panel. “This is bullshit.”

Dev construed that to mean Brent agreed with her assessment, and she made a small noise of assent. “The batteries are being drained at 10 percent per standard hour. Then there will be no power available.”

“We can suck off the carriers for a few hours.” Chester suggested. “But that's it.”

“That's it.” Brent agreed, touching the commset on his head. “Tuck, you there?”

Dev continued her evaluation, trying not to think of the long corridor they were next to that led eventually to her quarters, and rest. There seemed to be no end in sight to the trouble, and she'd reduced her wishing to a simple one for some water and maybe even a packet of those seaweed crackers Jess hated so much.

The power generation systems were offline, that being the crux of the issue. Without them, the citadel had to run on what power was in the batteries, and that was draining rapidly. “How were they operating before? The systems were up when we were downstairs.”

“Someone had the security systems turned off.” Brent said, darkly. “Whatever jacktard let them in, prob. Hope they're carbon char somewhere.”

Dev pulled her head out of the cabinet and looked at him. “You mean, someone here was on their side?”

“Sure.” Brent said. “Knew there was a stinker left here. Let them in the first time, when they bombed the bay.” He tapped his comms again. “Tuck? What's up in med?”

Worried about Jason. Dev could see the tense lines in his face, and she knew a moment of understanding there, that despite the gruff words and attitude, there was caring there for his partner who had looked very damaged to Dev before they'd taken him away.

Doctor Dan had gone back downstairs to bring up the downed sets, and Jess had started inspecting the facility to see what harm had been done to it, apparently having taking no damage herself in the fight.

“Okay thanks.” Brent said into comms, crouching back down and going back to studying the panel. “They got power to med.”

“Damn good news.” Chester said. “They can splint up Mike's arm, too.”

The commset in Dev's ear rustled and she turned her attention from her scanner. “Ack?”

“Hey Dev.” Jess's voice bubbled through. “Your buddy got some help up and going and we cleared out centops. Bring the wrenchers up here – got better access.”

“Ack.” Dev stood up. “Jess said we should go to the operations center.” She told the other techs. “They have made it more optimal.”

“And they've got chairs.” Doug climbed down out of a service hatchway. “No damn connections here anyway, just service trunks.” He said. “Two of the big power transfer banks got fried. This is a mess.”

“Yes.” Dev closed her scanner and secured the panel. “But at least no one is trying to make us dead at the moment, and we have good work to do.”

“You bios' talk funny.” Doug said, as they headed down the hall towards centops. “You know that?”

“We talk funny?” Dev eyed him. “We don't spend most of our time talking about excrement and posterior bodyparts at least.” She protested. “I had to load a custom dictionary into my scanner just to know what you are saying.”

Doug eyed her, trying to hold back a smile. Brent didn't bother, snickering under his breath as they moved through the central hall and past the now active scan gate into ops.

“Hey, what was that with you giving me your box and taking off before?” Brent asked, suddenly. “You looking to get fried on purpose?”

“No.” Dev admitted as they approached central systems. “I was concerned that Jess was in danger.” She glanced up as the emergency lighting overhead flickered a little. “So I wanted to see if I could help in any way.”

They reached the ops door and therefore the conversation stopped, as they entered and found Jess and April inside.

The ops center had taken some considerable damage. Two of the console banks were burned and dark, and there were blaster scores on the walls. But the emergency lighting was on and two more of the banks had some limited screens active and the room was cleared of any bodies.

“Ah, the wrenchers are here.” Jess looked up from a large piece of plas she had spread out on the console top. “What's the status?”

“Batts are crap.” Brent said. “Got maybe three hours left.”

Jess nodded. “That's what the scan said here too.” She indicated one of the two working consoles. “We need to get the exchangers up. We don't get power going we might as well just get in the buses and go fishing.”

“Yah.” Brent sat down at one of the working stations. “Nothing's working down there.”

“Want me to take Doug and see what the status of the intakes are?” April asked. “Might as well move the carrier into the big bay anyhow.”

Jess nodded. “Do a fly around and get a comp scan while you're at it. We need to get at least enough cycles to get scan and met up.”

April nodded and headed for the door, with Doug following her obediently.

“Lift's cycling from downstairs.” Brent commented. “Getting biologic readings.. looks like the Doc got things going down there.” He studied the screen. “We should get scan relayed in here until we can get power up those buckheads could be sweeping down on us and we'd never know it.”

“I have our carrier configured to relay that.” Dev spoke up briefly. “So far there is nothing approaching and the weather seems all right.” She took a seat and started connecting her portable scan to the console. “I will send it in here so everyone can see it.”

“That's my driver.” Jess put a hand on Dev's back and gave it a little friendly scratch with her fingertips. “There were less bodies in here than I thought there would be. Only two.” She changed the subject. “We took them to processing, and after Elaine finishes with Jason and Mike in med, she's going to do a foray to see if there are more – there's a lot of people missing.”

“Maybe they got out?” Brent suggested. “Could be they were trying to evac when they were getting crunched.”

“Well, if we don't find bodies, and there's nothing floating ashore, that's a possibility.” Jess turned as there were footsteps in the hall, and then let her hand drop to her blaster as the doorway was filled. “Ah. You.”

“Ah, me.” Dan Kurok agreed. “I have brought all the bio alt sets up, and instructed them to start repair, or restoral, whatever they are capable of.” He said. “They told me someone should check the carrier bay out, as they thought some might be trapped in there.”

He sat down in one of the watch chairs and leaned back, his pale eyes reflecting the emergency lighting despite their bloodshot nature. “Home sweet home, eh?”

Jess returned a wry grin to him, then keyed comms. “April, ack?”

“Ack.” April's voice came back, with the sound of wind behind it. “We're moving across the external fascia.”

“When you're done recon, inspect the carrier bay. Word is people might be in there.”

“Bodies might be in there too.” April said. “My guess is they dropped some nasty in the top there, big place, all you'd need is gravity.”

“Find out and report.” Jess said. “We'll be working on the tie lines in here.”

“Ack.”

“So, they were on batts the whole time?” Brent looked a touch confused. “I don't get it. When we got here it was like they had no idea we were coming, except that hatch on the north side.”

“They were on batteries.” Kurok confirmed. “This place has big ones. I had quite a bit of trouble getting them shut completely down.” He looked at his hands, and then flexed them. “No way to get the systems they were using to watch for everyone off except for that.”

“So they had scan?”

“They had, I think, very limited internal wireplots.” He said. “I got the sense, when I was sneaking around trying not to get shot that whatever the plan was originally there wasn't much left before we got here.” He looked thoughtful.

“Common problem.” Jess sighed. “All right, I'm going to go down to the intake cavern” She glanced at Dev, who immediately stood up and set her scanner down on the console. “We'll be back.”

They walked out into the dimly lit corridor and Dev felt glad they were now by themselves and it was quiet. A motion flickered in and out of her peripheral vision, and she recognized one of the BeeAyes carrying a box away from the cafeteria. “I'm glad Doctor Dan made them all right.”

Jess nodded, her face quiet and pensive. “Know what I feel like doing?”

The question opened up a lot of possibilities. “I'm afraid I don't.” Dev finally answered.

“Wish I could go to my quarters, take a shower, eat two sets of rations, and sleep for two days.” Jess said. “This is so fucked up I don't see an end to it.”

“Mm.” Dev nodded a little. “I would like all that, and also, to lay in bed with you.”

Jess managed a smile at that. “Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Yeah, that would be nice.” Jess admitted. “Damn I'm tired.” She draped her arm over Dev's shoulders as they walked through the unnaturally silent halls. “Y'know, I just don't get what was going on here. They come here, supposedly to get me, but then they take off, and leave a watch squad who can't even tell when they're being infiltrated by us?”

Dev shook her head. “I don't understand most of this either.”

“I mean, what the hell?” Jess went on. “You know?”

“No, I don't know. What's hell?” Dev noticed they were passing one of the dispensers in the hall. “Can we get a drink?”

“Sure.” Jess detoured over to the alcove and bumped the door open, removing a container and handing it to Dev, then taking one for herself. The residual cooling in the casing had kept the temperature relatively down, and she popped open the drink and took a sip while she stood there thinking.

They were still in the secure area. The halls were barren, and dingy looking in the emergency lighting, and it made her feel grim just looking around. Down one hallway was the long winding corridor down to the intake cavern, and cross angles to it was the short branch that led to her quarters.

Their quarters.

The other direction was to the developmental tech area and... Jess turned, as something out of place caught her eye. She set the container down and drew her blaster. “Stay here.” She told Dev, then started down the side hall towards a half open door that had no business being accessed.

It was an unmarked door and there was silence beyond it. Jess cautiously pushed it open with the muzzle of her blaster and waited, ears cocked, as the rough crunch of the manual opening faded. After a moment she glided around the edge of the door way and into the room, hitting the preamp on the blaster and lighting up the room in pale blue wash.

Then she replaced that with the glare of her hand light and holstered the gun, letting out a long, aggravated sigh. “Dev!” She called out. “C'mere.” She keyed her commset as she heard her pilot's light footsteps approaching and half turned as the bio alt entered. “See if you can get some lighting on in here wouldja?”

“Yes.” Dev turned on her own hand light and explored the room, finding a control console across from where Jess was. “It appears this facility isn't used?” She sat down and keyed in a command. “It's empty.”

“That would be the problem.” Jess tapped her commset again. “Centops, Tac 1, Ack?”

“Centops.” Brent answered. “Gohead.”

“I’m in sector blue thirty.” Jess said. “Looks like they borrowed a few things.”

“Ack.” Brent answered. “Relay?”

“Ack.” Jess responded. “We’ll pick it up later. Proceeding.”

“Ack. Relay and mark.” Brent said, clicking off.

Dev had succeeding in getting the low level illumination on, and now she turned and regarded the empty room. “What is this space?” She asked. “I don’t think you showed it to me before.”

“No.” Jess said. “Let’s get walking and I’ll tell you about it.” She waited for Dev to join her and they headed down the hall again. “That room.. it’s a complex there’s more than one space in there – it’s where all the black ops stuff ends up.”

Dev nodded gravely. “It seemed quite dark.”

Jess turned her head and regarded her partner. “Was that a joke?”

Dev shrugged.

“Anyway, the biggest thing we had in there was a new weapons rig that you kind of plugged into.” Jess explained as they got to the access hallway. “It’s gone. Few other things are too but that one..” She shook her head. “Hard to say if it’s more dangerous to us or them.”

“Like that thing they made.” Dev observed. “That was dangerous to them, wasn’t it?”

Jess thought about that as they walked down the steep passageway into the cavern. “Yeah.” She said, after a bit. “But this was... well, if they figure out how to make it work all those fights you saw us in? Us against them in the hall? It would give them an advantage.”

Dev could feel the cold, wet air against her and she pondered as she followed Jess closely. “They wear more things than you do.” She said, eventually. “Is that to protect them?”

Jess worked the airlock into the final cavern. “Yeah. Our plasmas are more intense than theirs, and they don’t.. they don’t train agents like we do.” She led the way into the rock pathway. “They care about living. It’s what makes us crazy to them.” She paused, regarding the huge space. “We’re harder kills because we don’t care.”

Dev’s brows creased. “So this thing will make them not care?” She hazarded.

Jess produced a brief, grim smile. “It wires your guns into your head. You fire at the speed of thought.” She put her hands on the rock, her fingertips twitching. “I let them rig me into it once.” She turned her head and looked at Dev. “You never want to stop shooting. I nearly took out the test chamber.”

Her pilot frowned. “I don’t think I understand that.” She said, in an apologetic tone. “Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?”

Jess shook her head and pointed down to the board storage area. “It’s not stable. Next guy who tested it fried himself. They ended up giving him a mercy kill.”

The waves were thundering in from under the rock wall, and the spray coated them as they reached the platform and looked out over the fractious water. Unlike the previous time, when the intake tunnels were in work and the water was swirling in a powerful, predictable way, now the waves were smashing against everything, breaking hard against the rocks and sending explosions of water halfway up to the ceiling of the cavern.

It seemed wild and frenzied. Jess leaned back against the rock wall, and folded her arms over her chest. “What is going on here, Dev? That’s the question.”

“Well.” Dev copied her pose, glad to be still and quiet for a bit. “I was thinking about that when we were on the carrier on the way back here, and one thing that seemed interesting to me was those people on the other side are really focused on you.”

“On me.” Jess repeated, in a doubtful tone. “Why me?”

“That’s what I was wondering.” Her partner admitted. “They got that man Joshua to do bad things and caused you difficulties. Then the man Bricker tried to use me to make it less difficult, and after that, the man Bain got you not to leave. Then they paid the captain to do bad things. Then they were trying to get us on that market island, and they chased us and when we got back, we found out they took those people and Doctor Dan and wanted you in return for them.”

“Hm. Yeah.” Jess agreed. “I thought it was because of the Gibraltar run but you know what? It started before that.” She frowned. “It started with Joshua, but turn an agent, and go through all that just to put me on ice? Why?” She unfolded her arms and paced a little. “I’m a good agent, I’ve got a pretty decent record, done a bunch of missions but nothing more or less than someone like Jason, or Elaine, or hell, even Sandy had done.”

“I see.”

“That’s why they were all pissed when they bumped me to senior, by the way.” Jess produced a self deprecating smile. “I wasn’t about to turn it down, but I really hadn’t earned it. Shoulda been probably Elaine.” She crossed her arms again. “But I guess Bain had his reasons.”

“Doctor Dan told me I could trust you, and the main Bain.” Dev said, unexpectedly. “So maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe there are things we don’t know.” She paused. “That happened a lot with us in the creche. They would do things a lot and you never really knew why because they didn’t tell you everything.”

“Mm.” Jess looked thoughtful. “Doesn’t really matter now I guess.” She studied the cavern. “The raceways down there look clear. If they’re all right on the outside we can try a restart after we check the transfer stations.”

“What will happen then?”

“We get power.” Jess started trudging back up the ramp. “We can bring systems up, and talk to home base, and figure out what the hell we’re doing to do when those bastards come back here...” She paused, and looked back at Dev. “But they’d have done that already, right? Send word to HQ about all this?”

“The man Bock seemed to think that was a bad idea.” Dev joined her. “Remember he said, that they would think bad things about us if we did that?”

“He just didn’t want us to communicate. He tried to get them to kill us, remember?” Jess frowned. “Of course they’d tell the top – they killed two bases. We need help.”

But as she said it, she felt that pang in her gut that meant a warning. She remembered something that Bain had said, so long ago now that it felt like someone else’s lifetime. “But there’s no point in worrying about that right now I guess. Let’s just get things up and running here so at least we can...” She paused, in thought.

“Have a meal.” Dev supplied a conclusion for her. “It has been a while.” She added, mournfully.

Jess chuckled, and shook her head. “How about we stop and get some of those damn awful crackers?” She suggested. “I hate them but at least they’re something and they never spoil.”

“Excellent idea.”

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“Centops, Tac 2.”

Jess got her comms in place. “Centops, Ack.” She took a swallow of kack to clear the seaweed crackers from her throat. “Go ahead April.”

“External intakes look okay, no obstructions seen.” April said. “But we just dropped into the bay and got shot at. Think we need some backup from inside.”

“Ack.” Jess got up. “Will check.”

“Jess.” Dev looked up from her console. “A Kaytee says the doors to the bay are secured from the inside. They just reported.” She selected a cracker and put it in her mouth, munching quietly. “I have asked them to put on comm where they can.”

“And a Kaytee is?” Jess inquired, sitting back down.

“One of the pilots.” Dev supplied, listening to her comms. “A PeeEff also says they have found the cut in the transmission lines and are reviewing it.”

“Where is that?” Brent asked. “I’ll go have a look too.”

Dev turned her head and looked at him. “Level six, west service corridor B.”

Brent got up and headed for the door, which was now properly secured and scan protected, and opened after he passed the gateway. “Let you know.” He tossed back before the hatch shut.

Jess studied the marginal wiremap. “Dev, you got any way to patch comms to the service bay? Let me talk in there?”

“I will try.” Dev hunted through the systems she had access to. “There are a lot of things very suboptimal.” She reported. “I think whatever the disruption was on level six also removed service for scan and comms.” She tapped further. “I can possibly activate any vessel comms and relay.”

“There are carriers left in there intact?” Jess asked, going over to peer over Dev’s shoulder. “Oh, okay. I see. The transports are still in there.”

“Yes.”

“Give it a try.” Jess studied the wiremap intently.

Dev carefully patched the comms on the board through an emergency relay, and then to the service craft left in the bay. “It's done.”

“Attention.” Jess watched the relays trigger, a faint trickle of communication. “Attention, this is centops, reg centops, Drake eleven on comm.” She waited a moment. “Ntac, respond.”

“Centops, Tac 2. Relaying external.” Doug's voice echoed softly in Dev's ear. “Scan shows motion inside, sending vid copy.”

“Ack.” Dev answered, studying the vid. Doug had his carrier up on the lip of the escarpment, just barely at the edge of the opening, but she could see the destruction even from there. “Oh.”

Jess leaned against her. “Oh, crap.” She murmured. “Look the hell at that.”

The entire top hatch was disrupted, the metal edges peeled back and gaping, one whole side lying over draped down the side of the cliff. It was as though some huge force had exploded from within, forcing the hatch up and out of its seating deep in the rock.

A crackle. “Drake!” A voice came through comms. “Ntac, sendit.”

“Wants validation.” Jess said. “Don' blame him. I could be anyone up here saying I'm me.”

“That sounded like Cliff.” Dev said, in a low tone. “Should I talk to him?”

“Hang on.” Jess put her hand on Dev's shoulder. “Meet in my neighbor's bunk to pick up your shells.” She enunciated quietly into the comms. All the code in the world was good, but sometimes, there were personal bits that were worth more. “Ack?”

There was a long silence. Then the sound of breathing. “Ack.” Cliff's voice sounded, even on ratty comms, profoundly relieved. “Topside?”

“Friendly.” Jess said.

“Tell them to come. Lot of cleanup needed here.” Clint's voice now sounded exhausted. “Inside hatch's warped. Can't unseal.”

“Ack.” Jess said. “Standby. Tac 2, copy?”

“Tac 2 moving.” April said. “Rolling vid.”

Jess settled down in the chair next to Dev as the grainy vid resolved, a soft rumble of thunder in the background adding appropriate soundtrack to the view of destruction below.

**

Dev adjusted the landing jets on her carrier as she carefully lowered it into the carrier bay, tilting it forward and holding in pattern as she lit up the work area underneath her.

The destruction was extensive. She could see three recon craft hard against one wall, blackened and scorched but at least in one piece. They were the ones with active comm she had tied into.

Everything else was.. Dev shook her head. It was hard to recognize the service bay, everything was charred and blackened, the only clear space two landing pads on the far side of the space. April and Doug had landed on one of them, and they were examining the destruction while she stayed in the air giving them light.

At least six carriers were blown apart in blasted bits, all with the typical pattern they'd seen in the North station. Dev was glad she was still in the air, since her scanner was indicating to her lumps and chunks of what was, once, people.

People she might have known.

Her comms buzzed softly. “Centops, BR270006.”

“Ack.” Dev answered.

“Go ahead and land on pad 24, Dev. We're about to start up the intakes.”

“Ack.” Dev shifted the jets sideways and moved over April's carrier, lowering the craft slowly until it landed on its skids with a soft bump. She secured the systems and put everything on standby, then she released her restraints and got up. After a brief hesitation, she pulled on the jacket she'd gotten in Quebec city, and fastened it, then she steeled herself and went to the hatch, triggering it open.

It didn't actually smell as bad as she'd expected it to, and she walked down the ramp to the platform and stood there for a moment, looking around.

The faint sound of light rain coming in from the ruined roof hatch pattered around her, and the soft echoes of April's speech and the dull thunk of Doug trying to get the inside hatch open.

It was incorrect, and unpleasant, and Dev sighed as she climbed down off the platform and headed over to where Clint and April were standing. She'd gotten halfway there when she felt, rather than heard, a vibration through her boots, and saw the other two look up and around. "Man, I missed that sound." Clint looked relieved, managing a brief smile as Dev arrived next to them. "Hey, Dev."

"Hello." Dev responded. "I'm sorry there's so much unpleasantness here." She told him, sincerely. "But I'm glad you didn't get damaged."

Clint blushed visibly. "Glad you didn't get offed either." He said. "I figured if anyone would pull through, it'd be you guys."

"Was that the generators coming back online?" April asked. "That rumbling?"

"Not yet, they have to run the water through for a few minutes before it builds up the turbines." Clint said. "But that vibration means they got the intakes going." He looked past April. "It's not as bad as it looks."

April gave him a skeptical look.

"The bodies are mostly theirs." Clint looked her right in the eye, then turned to Dev. "You were right about those cards. We couldn't do much about it though. They came in a blew out the roof with that new thing.. focused the lighting on it someone said."

"Yes, something like that." April agreed. "So, did they all just leave out of here or what?"

"Got a comms, long range." Clint said. "We knew something was going on, saw all the batts go offline, but we couldn't get through to anyone." He studied April. "We didn't think any of the teams would really come back here." He sat down on the edge of a service console. "Figured they'd just tank the place."

"Thank you for making the sets safe." Dev spoke up, after an awkward pause. "That was excellent of you."

Clint managed another slight smile. "They're all right." He said. "Didn't want them to get snuffed."

Abruptly, the overhead lights flickered on, what was left of them, and all around them the clicks and pops of returning power was causing boards to flash and signal lamps to come on. That was followed by a sodden crack, and they all turned to see the inner hatch slowly, peeling open.

"Good job, Doug." April started over to where he was just stepping back. "So what do we do to secure this place? We got anything we can do about that hole in the roof?"

Doug dusted his hands off and stood aside as they joined him, and the open hatch started to admit slightly grubby, jumpsuited figures in, all with faintly illuminated collars. "C'mon in, people."

A Kaytee slipped in and spotted Clint. "Chief." He looked as relieved as he was able to. "May we help?"

"Sure." Clint waved them in. "Let's start cleaning up I guess."

The Kaytee turned to Dev. "Is it optimal?" He asked. "May we do this?"

Dev had her hands in her jacket pockets, and she straightened a bit as they all turned to look at her. She was surprised and a little disconcerted at the question, understanding almost belatedly that the bio alt was waiting for her permission to proceed. "I think that would be excellent, Kaytee." She responded after a brief pause. "We have a lot of work to get things correct."

The Kaytee looked relieved. "Yes." He said, touching the commset in his ear, with something like pride. "A lot of good work to do." He half turned and whispered into the comms, and then started towards the service bay, as more bodies started to slip into past the half open door, pausing to look around at the destruction before moving inside.

"They put them on comms?" Cliff asked, looking at Dev. "And hey, you in charge of them now?"

"Me?" Dev blinked at him. "I don't believe I am in charge of anything." She objected. "Jess had me talk to these sets, I am just familiar to them." She didn't see the point in revealing the internal status consideration of bio alts. There was already enough discomfort around and she didn't want to add to it.

"Only staff left here." April added, briefly. "Made sense to cable them up."

"Right." Cliff pushed himself to his feet. "Hope someone shunts some power to the chow hall. I'm hungry."

"Me too." Doug came over, dusting his hands off "Hey, that's a slick jacket, rocket lady."

"Thank you." Dev decided the thought of something more to eat than crackers, even if it was a cold fish roll, was excellent. "We should go see if that's ready. I'm sure the people in the central operations room could use some food as well."

"Lead on." Doug said. "Not much else we can do here until they're ready for us to lift out debris."

Dev regarded them all with a sense of bemusement. Then she merely shook her head and threaded her way across the rubble on the floor and slid through the hatch, glad to leave the discomfort of the destroyed facility behind her.

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“Okay, that's more like it.” Jess studied the ops board, now pulsing with restored power.

“Yes.” Doctor Dan agreed. “Nice to have eyes and ears again.” He scanned the screen. “Met isn't incredibly awful.”

No, it wasn't. Jess started up the ops routines, and sent the restart sequences to comms and scan. All around her she could hear the faint, but perceptible hum of power and though they were still deep in the crapper, it made her feel a lot better.

“Got the divert to batts in.” Brent commented from the next board. “Recharging.”

“See if you can get some techs up to start pulling those boards.” Jess indicated the two fried subsystems. “I've only got remedial weapons on this one.”

“Ack.” Brent went to comms, then paused, and glanced at Doctor Dan.

“Right.” Kurok slid into a seat next to him and put a commset in his ear. “They'd probably listen to you but they'll listen to me faster.”

“Or Dev.” Brent commented.

Doctor Dan's lips tensed into a faint smile, and he half nodded. “Attention, this is Doctor Dan.” He said in the comms. “I would like a team of PeeKays and TeeBees to come to the operations center, and bring everything needed to rebuild centops stations P15, and P212, quickly.”

The comms crackled immediately, soft, eager voices answering him. “Thank you.” Kurok said, and clicked off comms. Then he leaned on the console and sighed. “Hasn't been the best week of my life, tell you that.”

Jess was about to comment on that when the door opened, and Dev and Doug entered, their arms filled with ration bags. “Ah” She found herself smiling. “Now it's perfect in here.”

Dev came over to where she was seated and put down her burden. “We thought it would be a good idea to have a meal.” She explained. “The machines are not yet restarted, but we found these in the preparation storage area.”

“Dont have to ask me twice.” Brent came over and claimed a ration, then retreated back to his seat.

Dev handed over a ration to Doctor Dan, then sat down next to Jess with her own. “Clint thinks it is possible they have a mesh screen that can be attached to the bay roof to help cover it.”

Jess had opened her ration and was scarfing a fish roll. She chewed, then paused, and swallowed. “Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.” Jess lifted the roll.

“Welcome.” Dev glanced at her, then grinned a little turning her fish roll around to find a place to bite into it. Now that the air handlers were back on, it was less damp and chilly, and she was starting to feel more comfortable, almost like she was ready to unfasten her jacket, in fact.

“That looks sexy on you.” Jess commented.

Dev paused in mid chew and looked at her in surprise.

“The jacket.” Jess clarified. “I thought it did when you got it, but now I really think so.” She was keeping her voice low, but not whispering.

“Um.” Dev swallowed hastily. “Thanks, I like it.” She added. “It's comfortable.. I was cold when I got off the carrier but it's getting warmer now.”

“Yeah, environ's coming back up.” Jess scooted her chair closer, setting aside her worries for a short time out. “Kind of cool to just talk about stuff for a few minutes, huh?” She rested her elbow on the console and her head on her hand.

Dev put her rations down and pulled a bit of cloth from one of her pockets, standing up unexpectedly and using the cloth to clean off Jess's dusty, bruised face. “You appear to need rest.”

Jess had her eyes closed, and there was a faint smile on her face. “Do you know how long it's been since someone wiped my face off for me?”

“No, I don't.” Her partner answered promptly. “Was it a long time?”

“Very.”

“Do we know what tasks we want to accomplish now?” Dev asked. “Or do we have time to take a rest?”

“Good question.”

Jess felt the gentle brush of Dev's fingers against her skin and thought about how good it would feel to just do something as normal as go back to her quarters, get washed up, and take a nap in her bed. It felt like it had been months since she'd done that, though she knew it hadn't actually been all that long.

It was ridiculous, but she just wanted to do one mundane shift. Wake up and go to ops, get a met report, scan the overnight squirts.. Jess opened her eyes and looked around at the half destroyed room, at fried consoles now being worked over by bio alts, and at the scorched places on the floor she'd scraped up what she assumed were colleagues remains from.

“No sign of anyone on the long range.” Brent spoke up. “Nice to have that back. Storm's moving past too, looks like we'll have some clear for a while.”

Jess reached out with her free hand and circled Dev's leg with it, just savoring the simplicity of the contact and acknowledging how good it felt when Dev rested her forearm on her shoulder and they just spent a few quiet minutes being together.

Dev moved, circling around Jess and standing behind her, putting her hands on her shoulders and starting to knead them. “I looked this up in comp.” She said. “Let me know if I do it wrong.”

It was nearing second watch, outside, Jess knew, the skies would be darkening into dusk. “Brent, we get the sit report off to HQ?”

“Yup.” Brent grunted, his mouth full of mushroom cake. “Got a squirt ack back, but nothin else yet.”

Jess leaned back and let her head rest against Dev's body. “Put out a low band signal out, see if anyone's in hiding.” She said. “Not enough wreckage here for everyone.”

“Will do.”

The door opened again and Elaine entered, coming around the console to take a seat next to Jess. “Med's fully synched. I got Jase in the tank, he's holding his own.” She exhaled. “Nice to get systems back. How's met?”

“Quiet.” Brent said. “Glad Jase's all right.”

“Yeah, me too.” Elaine nodded. “Arias's got a formcast on his arm, he went off to work down in the pit.” She glanced at Dev, who was still standing behind Jess, her hands working the agent's neck. “Oh that's nice. Didn't know they programmed them for that.”

“They don't.” Dev answered, before Jess could straighten up. “I looked it up in comp.” She could feel the tension suddenly wind into Jess's body, though she didn't move, all the muscles in her arms and shoulders coiled under her fingers and she stopped trying to squeeze them since there didn't seem to be any point to it. “It is nice.”

Doctor Dan had been quietly watching. Now he stood up. “I'm going to go get a wash and a hot cup of something. Based on the last scan metrics, we're clear for a couple hours all around.” He said. “Might as well take advantage of it.” He gave them all a meaningful look. “Right?”

“Agreed.” Elaine nodded. “Not sure how the hell we managed to get this all done, but here we are. You tell the west coasters?”

Jess nodded. “Brent sent a squirt. Maybe they'll send someone up from Picchu before the next front rolls in. Without met, I don't think they'll come at us.”

“I'll take watch then.” Elaine said. “Go on and chill Jess. You've had a longer run than we did.”

Thus held out, Jess was unable to keep herself from accepting the offer. “Okay.” She stood up and clapped Dev on the back. “Let's go get that shower you wanted, Devvie. Buzz me if anything shakes, E.”

“You know it.” Elaine took over the console, pulling over an unopened ration and settling in.

“I'll stick.” Brent said. “Got scans running.”

Jess lifted a hand and they left ops, walking the short distance to the entrance to Jess's quarters while Doctor Dan went in the other direction. “Have a good rest.” She tossed back over her shoulder at him.

“You too.” He gave them both one of his gentle smiles. “Dev, we should talk later, after we all get some sleep.”

Dev just nodded, before they parted and went to the entryway to their space.

Jess touched the lock pad and the door opened, the lights inside perking up as they walked inside. “Ahh. Home sweet home.” She remarked, walking in a few steps and stopping, letting her senses scan the inside of the room.

The air handlers had been on long enough to clear the damp chill from the room, and a slow inspection allowed Jess to relax as she noted the telltales that confirmed no one had entered in her absence.

Not sure why they would – even with the enemy rampaging around the citadel her personal quarters could not have come up on the list of interesting places, given that there was nothing in them that she treasured or even probably much cared about.

Her eyes fell on the trunks that had come from her father, and she paused, reviewing that supposition.

“I’m going to go get in the wet thing.” Dev ambled on towards the door separating their quarters.

“Mind if I join you?” Jess asked, after a pause.

Dev paused at the door and looked back at her. “Why would I mind that?” She asked, in a puzzled tone. “The space is somewhat small for both of us but it should be sufficient.”

“Just asking.” Jess sighed. “My brain's exhausted like the rest of me.” She undid the catches on her jumpsuit top as she followed Dev into her space, not entirely sure why the thought of just using her own facility was making her uncomfortable. Brain crick maybe?

Maybe.

Dev's space was emptier than hers. There wasn't any clutter around, and the only thing sitting on her workdesk was the square, somewhat worn shape of the book she'd left behind. “Gotta get you some knick nacks, Devvie.”

Dev paused and turned to look at her. Then she sighed and trudged towards the comp screen only to be pulled gently to a halt as Jess intercepted her. “I don't know what a knick is, much less a nack.”

“Just things you keep, reminds you of stuff.” Jess turned her and prodded her towards the shower.

“Oh. Like that little oil thing you got me at the market.” Dev nodded. “Yes, I have that in my space up there.” She pointed to the relaxation area.

They entered the wet space and Dev was very glad to turn on the water, feeling the mist hit her face as it splattered against the rock wall. It felt very good to step under it, and feel the warmth hit her skin, a relief from the persistent damp cold.

Jess eased in behind her and Dev heard her let out an almost silent sigh. She turned to face her partner, seeing her leaning back against the rock with her eyes closed, droplets from the shower dotting her skin. “Jess?”

“Mm?” Dark lashes fluttered and lifted, as Jess opened her eyes to peer back at her.

Dev studied her gravely. “You seem.. um..”

“Damaged? Incorrect?” Jess ventured.

“Upset.” Dev concluded. “Are you mad about something?”

Her partner regarded her for a moment. “I’m here naked with you in a shower. How mad could I possibly be about that?” She asked, then smiled. “I’m not mad, or upset. I’m just freaked out about what we just went through and I don’t really know where to go from here.”

“Do we need to go anywhere?” Dev asked. “I think I like it here.” She was enjoying the beat of the water against her back and she offered Jess some soap. “We did good work here, correct?”

“Well.” Jess took the soap but instead of using it on herself, she started scrubbing Dev with it. “If you mean, is it good we’re back in control of the citadel, and the bad guys have run off, sure.” She observed. “If you mean, is it good that they saved all the bios, and not all the carriers blew up, and we got power running again, sure.”

Dev shyly took a hand ful of the soap and started washing her partner's skin. There were a lot of bruises under the surface of it, and one long scratch down the inside of her arm. “I see.”

“I just don't know what to expect next.” Jess clarified. “Are they going to come back again with the met weapon? They going to try to do something with the stuff they stole from here? We can prepare at some level but then – how did they get in the first time? Even with the power off, the batts would have kept them out. I just don't get it. I don't understand now what they're after.”

“Besides you.”

“Dev, I don't think it's me.” Jess shook her head. “I don't buy it. I'm not that important. I think they're using me as an excuse.”

Dev didn't really understand that. “An excuse for what?”

But her partner shook her head again. “That's what I don't know. I don't know how far this goes.” She moved closer and lowered her voice. “I don't know what I can trust.” She cradled Dev's face in her hands. “Except this. Except you.”

It felt quite overwhelming. Dev understood she had no programming for this. The feeling went past any instruction or class, and touched a deeper and more primitive part of who she was. She took a breath. “That makes me so happy.”

“Happy?” Jess's forehead touched hers.

“Yes.” Dev whispered. “I want to be a part of you.”

Jess's eyes opened wider, in a moment of unguarded wonder. “Really?”

“Absolutely really.”

Jess circled her with both arms and pulled her close. She closed her eyes as she felt the pressure return, and as she stepped under the force of the shower it felt like it was washing her clean.

All the vague sense of failure dissipated. She was able to shift all the accomplishments they'd achieved in the recent past into perspective, having this one touchstone cement into place. It was odd – she'd never needed anything personal at all and now she felt like this change had become important as..

“Jess.” Dev spoke up. “I think it's possible I might fall asleep right here. I cannot breathe in the water like you can, so I think we should finish before that happens.”

Jess started chuckling. “Yeah. Thanks for reminding me .I need to get a anti dose into me before that little stunt gets me into med.” She pulled back and tilted her head, giving Dev a kiss on the lips. “I want to be a part of you too.”

It was good. Dev enjoyed the kiss and felt a jolt of happiness inside. It was very good.

And on top of it, she sensed there was sex practice in her very near future.

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There was, in fact, a lot of good things in her very near future, but not quite sex practice yet. Dev was dry, clean, in fresh sleep clothing and she had a cup of hot seaweed tea sweetened with some of the honey they'd brought back from their last mission, watching curiously as Jess applied an inhaler to her nose and mouth, taking deep breaths from it.

She, too, was in the brief sleep clothes and as Dev watched she flexed her toes a little as she sucked in another lungful.

Somehow, she stopped thinking about what was going on elsewhere in the citadel. The world had shrunk in a way, down to the room they were in, and the two of them, alone.

“Is that a medicine?” Dev asked, after a while of silence.

Jess nodded. She pulled the mask off her face and cleared her throat. “It's an antibiotic vapor.” She stated. “Kills anything I might have picked up sucking in all that salt water.” She paused, and regarded Dev soberly. “What do you think about that?”

“I think it's amazing.” Dev said promptly. “If you mean how you breathe water. That's the most amazing thing I have seen yet downside.”

“Hm.” Jess took another few breaths, then lowered the breather again. “Part of my sordid family history.” She glanced at Dev. “My mother, in one of her crazier moods, decided she'd toss the genetic dice and paid off some crackpot she found to tweak her eggs.”

Dev's brows contracted. “Excuse me?”

“Kind of like what they do for you, up there.” Jess examined the inhaler, finding it empty. She set it aside. “He switched a few things around and when I was born, the result was this.” She indicated her chest. “They thought I had a birth defect at first. Were going to terminate me.”

Dev blinked hard. “Excuse me?” She said again, a little louder.

“We've got no resources for people who can't contribute, Dev.” Jess said, in a mild tone. “They don't keep defective babies.” She took a sip of her own tea. “Where was I.. oh yes, my internal arrangements. Anyway, what I ended up with was a kind of feathery cups around all the air tubes in my lungs and when I put water in them, they filter out the oxygen and deliver it.”

This time Dev merely shook her head slightly.

“Huge breakthrough. Mom had all sorts of plans for me.” Jess said. “Then of course I tested in.” She indicated the citadel walls around her, and produced an ironic smile. “She never got over that. My father just laughed his ass off because she'd done it without asking him.”

Dev sipped her tea in silence for a while. “I've taken some of the biologic programming.” She said eventually. “That was very dangerous to attempt.”

“Sure.” Jess agreed. “She was nuts. I could have come out with two heads and ripped her apart in the process.”

Dev's face scrunched.

“Anyway, it's borderline useful, as you saw. I don't do it often.” Jess sighed. “Hurts like hell, and there's this to contend with after.” She lifted the inhaler. “But I gotta tell ya, it was worth it seeing your face.” She chuckled. “Your eyes nearly came

out of your head.”

“I was very surprised.” Dev agreed. “So was Doctor Dan.”

“Hard to say if I'd pass it or not.” Jess examined her hand idly. “We've been adapting for a while out there.” She held the hand up and spread her fingers. “Got a little bit of webbing already, and my skin repels the cold water. Common over at the Bay.”

Dev put her cup down and moved closer, taking Jess's hand and examining it. There were scars along the back, and there, between each finger, a rounded bit of skin where on her own hands there was none. “Wow.” She looked up at Jess. “They're so careful about making changes up in the creche, and here it's just happening.”

“The ability to adapt is what kept humanity alive.” Jess said. “So many species couldn't and died.”

The bio alt curled her fingers around Jess's and looked at her. “You're amazing.”

Jess grinned unexpectedly. “Nice for you to say that, instead of saying I'm a freak. In school they thought I was.”

Dev looked thoughtful. “Yes, I know what that feels like.” She said. “I felt like that in the creche, because I was the only instance of my set.” She reflected. “It's sort of like the same thing.”

Jess was about to protest, and then the words penetrated and she thought about them instead. “That's exactly what that feels like” She murmured. “I always felt like I was different. Even in school where everyone there was supposed to be different – I never felt like I belonged.”

“Because of this?” Dev touched her hand.

“Because of everything.” Jess answered. “I just always felt..” She glanced off across the room. “I never felt like I fit in. Even when I was tested, and accepted into the corps, and went through the training. There was just something there that never felt all the way right.”

“Like something was missing.”

“Maybe.”

“I thought maybe my weird feeling would go away once I had a contract.” Dev said, mildly. “And it did.”

“It did?”

She nodded. “I felt like this was my place.”

Jess got up and put the inhaler on her workspace, then came back and sat down next to Dev, leaning forward and letting her elbows rest on her knees. “Maybe they programmed you for that.”

“Oh, they did.” Dev immediately nodded. “They gave me programming about this place, and a lot of the tech in it, but it wasn't something in my head that thought that, it was something in here.” She touched her stomach. “It was a bit like...” She let out a relieved sigh. “Ah.. like that.”

Jess thought back to her arrival at the citadel and tried to remember what that had felt like. Had she been glad to be there? Had it been a welcome, or just another set of challenges?

Had it ever been home? Had her home ever been home? Jess shook her head and lifted her hands, wiggling her fingers. “Want to go to bed?”

“Yes.” Dev set her cup down. “I would like that very much.”

Jess turned and studied the latest readouts from ops. They were still very quiet, just standard entries from Elaine, and a few tech notes from Brent. Weather was stable.

With a slight grunt she stood and waited for Dev to join her, then they walked over the bed in her quarters and settled onto it, the lights in the room dimming obediently as they sensed the pressure on the soft surface. “Damn that feels good.” Jess stretched out and felt her body relax. “Comfortable as that chair is, it ain't like sleeping.”

“No.” Dev curled up next to her and reached out to touch Jess's arm, fitting her fingers around it in a gentle clasp. “This is nice.”

Jess rolled onto her side and smiled. “Want to do something nicer?”

“Yes I do.” Dev took Jess's hand and kissed it, feeling the skin warm under her lips. “But if we're supposed to rest, shouldn't we?”

“No.” Jess leaned over and kissed her on the lips. “We should do what we want to do cause you never know what's gonna happen next.”

Dev was more than glad to defer to her partner's wisdom in that regard. Her body was already appreciating the touch,

sensation growing and making her both want to touch Jess back, and for that all to continue.

The lights dimmed further, and only the slight glow from the screens on Jess's workspace and the trim around the walls was visible, casting them both into shadows. Dev felt the fabric of her light shirt being pulled up and then Jess's touch was exploring her skin and the pleasant sensation increased.

She touched Jess back, and heard a soft sound come from her. That was interesting. She repeated the motion, suspecting she was pleasing her partner and also making her feel good as well.

She wanted that, even more than she wanted to feel good herself. Jess had seemed sad to her, despite her demurrals, and she wanted to see if she could make her feel happy.

So she called up all the things she'd learned about sex, and set to work applying them, touching and tasting and listening for those little noises, feeling Jess's breathing get faster as she moved closer and their bodies pressed together.

Lying down, the fact that Jess was so much taller than she was didn't matter, Dev was glad to discover. She felt Jess's arms curl around her as she continued her exploration, moving down her partner's body with a sense of pleasant curiosity.

She slid her hand down and found Jess's shorts already gone, and realized her own were too. She wondered for a moment when that had happened, then forgot about it as a touch caressed her inner thigh and her breathing caught from it, a surge of desire flooding through her and making her press her head against Jess's stomach.

Her body felt warm, for the first time in days. She even felt a little sweat breaking out, as she returned the touch and then went further, trying to remember what it was that Jess liked her to do as she felt her partner's body shift and tense under her, a low growl rumbling from her throat.

Ah yes, she remembered the motion and the touch, and the position that was just like....

Jess's body started to convulse, the grip on on Dev tightening as she kept up the rhythm until she could hear gasping, then she relaxed the pressure, gentling and slowing the motion as Jess slowly relaxed, rocking them both lightly in an embrace.

Dev was pleased. She thought she'd done the right things. "Was that okay?"

Jess laughed silently, her body jerking with it. "Never got programming for that, really?"

"No." Dev fitted her body against Jess's with a feeling of contentment. "Not at all."

"Fuck." Jess slid her hands along Dev's slightly sweat dampened sides. "You could get paid to do that."

Dev enjoyed the touch, especially when Jess started gently teasing motions of her own. "I can't get paid for anything, actually." She remarked. "But I'd rather not do it with anyone but you."

"Ah, is that so?" Jess's attentions got a little more intense.

"Yes." Dev whispered, her body starting to hum with pleasure. She welcomed the heat as Jess pressed against her and wondered how she could have even thought getting rest would be better than this.

Really!

Jess lay quietly, on the very edge of sleep. Her body was sensitized yet sated, knowing a sense of inner peace so rare as to almost not to be trusted.

Almost.

Dev was curled up next to her, pale head burrowed into one of Jess's shoulders, and one arm flung over her, the steady warmth of her breath tickling the bare skin.

It felt so good. So good, and so very unusual for her. There never had been the feeling she had right now, not ever before when she'd shared a bed with someone.

She'd never felt this relaxed, this at peace with herself.

Even knowing it wouldn't last, that a minute from now, or an hour, or even if she was lucky a handful of hours she'd be back in the maelstrom and facing death, or worse couldn't stop her from savoring this feeling of peace, and contentment, and yes, of happiness.

Didn't matter. Jess wiggled her toes and let her thoughts slip, savoring now the feeling of sleep taking her over, tucked under the covers in her own bed, with her own...

What, really, was Dev? Her partner? Yes. Her lover? Jess smiled briefly. Well yes, apparently so. Her friend? She thought about that word, tasting it cautiously on the back of her tongue. Yes, maybe Dev was that too. If they both survived, it would be interesting to discover what they ended up being.

Dev belonged to Interforce though. Jess frowned. They'd paid for it, and like all the rest of the bios in the citadel, her pilot was property of the corps and had no say in her future.

Maybe they could last long enough for Jess to retire, and then.. She remembered, abruptly, what her brother had revealed at Drake's Bay. Jesses eyes opened and she looked up into the darkness of her quarters. If she retired, and went civ... could she pay off Dev's contract and bring her the Bay?'

She'd have all the resources of the Bay behind her now, wouldn't she?

Dev stirred in her sleep and nestled closer, the dim reflection from her collar catching Jess's eye. If she did buy her contract, could they take that off? Would Dev want to have it off, if it meant no more programming for her?

Hm. Jess shook her head and firmly closed her eyes. Time enough to think of that once they got out of the mess they were in now. No sense in counting your shrimps before you brought the basket up, right?

Right.

At last, she let sleep take her, resolved to get as much rest as fate would let her.

**

Hands grabbed her and she twisted, pulling against straps that kept her flat on her back, wrenching her arms to pull them free to fight.

It was dark. It was loud. She could hear screams and explosions. Nearby there was laughter, and then she felt the hot agony as a knife plunged into her and her back arched as she tried to move away from it.

An ankle came free, and she twisted more violently, lifting her knee up and kicking out against the hands holding her down. A body slammed down over her and she let out a deep growl, her eyes flickering shut and then open as the rage built, bringing clean energy to her.

A yell of alarm, and she convulsed, throwing the body off her and breaking a strap holding her wrist, and now she was half free. She slammed her fist into a moving head and grabbed a hold with her fingers, feeling one sink into an eyesocket as she used the body as as shield to intercept the energy beams she sensed coming at her.

The body fell over and she used the momentum to pull her up and against the straps, feeling the strain and then the heavy snap as the leather parted and she was on her feet.

"She's loose!"

Yes. Jess let the rage take her. The pain in her back faded, and she slammed against the nearest body, knocking them back and revealing, for a split second the handle of a blaster that she got her fingers on and yanked from it's holster.

"Look out!"

She was caught up in the dream this time, it's vivid starkness playing out but the waves of horror she'd felt before in it wasn't there. This time she could feel her heart pounding, and her skin flushing, and instead of feeling terror, she understood she was the genesis of it.

It was an exhilarating sense of freedom, startling and new and in the foggy way of dreams she knew a moment of wonder as she went with the newness of it, fading back into the action and surging forward.

Hands grabbed her and she spun them off, letting her mind slide down into that space where everything went black and white and she went from captive to hunter, turning and spinning as she pulled the blaster into her body and then unlocked it, recognizing the keys as one of her own.

Josh's blaster. She brought it up and ducked a thrown arm, swiveling in the other direction as she let out a long blast of energy, cutting through bodies and consoles as people dove in all directions away from her.

Then she saw the doorway open, and fill with armored bodies and she kept on going with the blaster, getting the guards in the face in a swath before she got all the way around and saw Josh.

Just long enough to see his eyes widen before she blew his head apart in a splatter of bone and blood.

No thought, just instinct, her legs propelling her body up into the air as return fire lit the space she'd been in and she twisted and kept firing, the blaster growing hot in her hands.

Stark and clear and raw, as she threw herself into the battle and lost all regard for her own safety, aware of a rush of energy that sent her back up into the air and into a twisting turn that had blaster fire shooting to every side of her but somehow missing a hit, and the delicious sensation of tumbling in mid air as she returned the shots with pinpoint accuracy.

Then there were dead bodies all around, not the least of which Josh's, and she was getting her balance enough to start for the door.

And then her peripheral vision caught a motion and she turned and aimed as a black sheet of glass slid closed giving her just one brief glimpse of a profile before it was gone, and the wall sealed with a blue tinted edge as she stared at it, frozen in a

moment of time.

A voice whispered in her ear. Jess felt the dream slowly fade, with her in frozen stasis, the shock of realization moderating to a knowledge of her true surroundings as she opened her eyes to find Dev gazing at her in total, absorbed concern.

“Dev.”

Dev looked around, then back at her. “Yes? Are you all right? You were moving around and I thought you were dreaming.”

Jess took a few breaths, as her body came down from the battle high. “I was.” She murmured. “I was having that same bad dream but..”

“You weren't yelling this time.” Dev settled back down next to her. “It didn't seem dangerous to interrupt you.”

“No, I..” Jess paused to think. “It wasn't the same. Ended weird.” She admitted. “Or maybe.. I dont know if I.. maybe it was me that was different this time. I wasn't..” She paused briefly. “I wasn't scared. Something changed.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Dev queried.

“I think its a good thing.” Her partner said. “I think I remembered something. Maybe.”

She checked the chrono and then relaxed again, putting an arm around Dev and letting her eyes drift closed. “We can worry about it in the morning.”

“Okay.”

“Along with everything else.”

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The soft chime of first watch sounding woke her up. Jess glanced at the chrono in some startlement, then blinked the sleep out of her eyes as she propped herself up in bed.

No dreams this time. Just a long space of delicious oblivion, almost as normal as it once had been to wake up here.

A slight sound nearly made her bound out of it, then she belatedly recognized Dev's form as the bio alt entered from her own quarters and came over to the bed, a steaming cup in her hands. “Hello.” She offered Jess the cup. “Would you like some tea?”

“Sure.” Jess pulled her legs up crossed under her and took the cup. “Been up long?”

“About a half hour.” Dev said. “I checked with operations, and things are still nominal, so I thought it would be all right to let you rest a while longer.”

Jess sipped her seaweed tea and observed her tech over the rim of her cup. “You feel better today?”

Dev smiled. “I do.” She admitted. “Do you?”

Jess considered that. “Yeah.” She said. “My back's a little sore still. But okay aside from that.” She stretched her body out a little and realized it was true. “Let me go check in.” She got up and went to the workspace, carrying the tea with her. She sat down and ran her hands through her hair, then started to key up the screens.

“Jess?”

“Huh?” She glanced up to find Dev approaching, a bit of her discarded clothing in one hand. “What's that for?”

“If you're going to go on vid comms, you might consider putting a shirt on.” Dev suggested. “I know if I was on the other end of the transmission it would be very distracting.”

Jess glanced down, then grinned. “Ah, they're used to my ugly old carcass.” She took the shirt Dev was offering her anyway, and put it on, then triggered comms. “Ops?”

Dev went over to the other screen and tapped something into it, reviewing the results intently.

The vid cleared after a moment and Jess was looking at April “Morning.” She greeted the rookie agent. “How's life?”

April was in a fresh jumpsuit, and looked alert and rested. “Good morning.” She returned the greeting. “Elaine and Brent are offshift. Jason is stable in med, and Mike is getting the bay recomissioned.”

“Thanks.” Jess nodded. “How's met?”

“Line of storms is building, expected overhead plus four.” April responded crisply. “Mike said they got a screen up over the bay, should stand up to the rain.”

“Right.” Jess felt a sense of the inevitable brush over her. “Plus one, in the recon chamber. Let's put the plan down. Let everyone know.”

“Ack.” April responded immediately. “Plus one.”

Jess closed comms and leaned her elbows on the desk, regarding Dev with a bemused expression. "I guess it's time to go be in charge, Devvie." She pushed herself to her feet. "Let's get ourseves in order and get some grub, and go do what we do."

"Jess?"

"Hm?"

Dev came over and touched her side. "You do not have an ugly old carcass." She stated. "Not if the comp dictionary gave me back the correct reference."

Jess smiled at her. "Ah, you're a sweet talker, you are." She affectionately cupped Dev's face in her hands. "C'mon, Devvie. I'm a wreck."

Dev shook her head, her eyes watching Jess's intently. "You're the most beautiful person I've ever known."

Jess felt the blush, and she blinked a little, finding herself surprisingly tongue tied. "Um." She cleared her throat gently. "I don't think anyone ever said anything like that to me before."

"Really?" Dev straightened up as Jess tilted her head down and they kissed. "I dont know why not." She gave her partner a hug. "But I'm glad I got to say it."

Jess smiled, staring across her quarters as she returned the hug, rocking them both back and forth. "Me too." She finally said. "Meeee too."

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[Continued in Part 25](#)