

Partners

Part 25

The ops status room was familiar and not, patched walls combining with the well remembered long table shifting Jess's perceptions as she circled the latter and paused at the head of it, resting her hand on the big chair there before tugging it out and settling into it.

She motioned Dev to the monitoring console up a step on a platform at the back of the room, and the bio alt had just seated herself and started tapping the tablets when the door opened and the rest of the agents and techs filed in.

She was in a fresh jumpsuit, with her insignia on the collar, and given what had happened, she knew that in fact, as well as in theory she was in charge here. There simply was no one else, and even if there had been she'd have taken it.

"Okay." Jess started talking once everyone had sat down. "So we have a marginally functioning base here."

"Marginally." Brent nodded in agreement. "One thing we do got now is power. Batts are all topped up and we charged all the carriers while we were at it."

"Good." Jess said. "We've got a storm front coming over in three hours. Anyone want to give me odds we'll get a wave of boom with it?"

"No odds." Elaine still had the look of recent sleep about her. She'd woken up and insisted on attending the meeting. "Fuckers'll be back – unless they already have what they came for."

"The weapons rig?" Tucker asked. "Good luck to em with it. Hope it fries them like it did the last poor asshole who put it on."

"Maybe they'll figure out how to use it. You almost did." Elaine looked over at Jess. "I heard them talking after you tried it."

"Not almost, I did." Jess shrugged "Wasn't particularly hard. You just want to kill everything in your path and it helps you do it. They were more scared of me in that thing than I was of it."

The other agents studied her thoughtfully. "So." Elaine mused. "Did they want it and you separately, did they want to prevent you from using it, or did they figure to make you an offer you couldn't refuse?"

Instead of immediately scoffing at the idea, Jess considered it. "Good question. What do you think. Dev?"

Dev looked up from the console. "What do I think?" She repeated the question. "I don't have enough information to have an opinion."

"That never stops us, kid." Elaine addressed her directly. "Here, opinions are like assholes and breasts. Everyone has at least one."

Dev blinked at her.

Jess chuckled dryly. "If I had to bet, I would bet they just wanted to fry me for Gibraltar, and they took the rig because they found it accidentally. They sure as hell haven't made me an offer - they've been way too busy trying to shoot me for that."

Elaine exhaled. "Maybe it would have been better if they had. Maybe you could have brought us with you. This looks pretty dead end to me here, Jess. That would have at the least, got us inside there."

"If they didn't kill us." Jess remarked. "No way they'd trust me no matter what the offer was."

Mike and April remained quiet, their eyes shifting from one to the other. Their techs were sitting quietly also, in chairs on the far side of the room near where Dev was busy again at her console.

"Hmph." Elaine shrugged. "Still a dead end here."

"Might be dead end." Jess confirmed. "Based on this stuff." She indicated the plas damage reports with a thumb. "We can probably get the outer guns up, and some of the shields, but if they come full at us, that won't last long." She pondered the plas. "We'll get some of them though. I'll make sure they have some regrets before they tank us."

"Storm'll skew that too." Brent was sitting at the table with them, not with the rest of the techs. He had that faint air of slight discomfort of someone not sure of their place. "Scanner's can't tell the diff between plasma fire and incoming lightning. We could end up firing at clouds."

"That's not correct."

Everyone turned to look at Dev in surprise. The bio alt had swung around again and was looking back at them.

"The spectrum is different, according to this comp." Dev pointed at the console. "It's point four three five out of phase." Her

voice was quiet, but confident. "That is tunable."

The room went silent for a minute.

"Lemme see." Brent got up and mounted the step up to the console, pausing behind Dev and peering at the screen.

"Dev rigged her comp to find fish schools at depth." Jess commented. "So she's probably right."

Brent glanced over his shoulder. "Didn't say she wasn't."

"Anyway." Jess returned her attention to the rest of the group. "We'll operate under the assumption we'll be attacked when the storm hits. Let's get whatever defenses we've got up, and shunt power to them so we don't just let the roll over us. Then if they penetrate, and come in again, we'll draw them to a central point."

Elaine nodded. "Logical place would be centops."

"Sure." Jess agreed. "But we would have to leave a trail of broken doors to it through the heart of the citadel. Likely?" She watched her fellow agent lift a hand and let it drop. "We keep them as close to the perimeter as we can. If they hit the carrier bay focus them into maintenance level six, and if they get into the shuttle bay use security main."

"That makes sense." April spoke up. "So the deal is we leave breached entries to both spots?" She said. "And boobytrap em?"

Jess nodded. "You and Mike take care of that." She said. "The rest of us will work on the defensive systems unless Dev's already done that." She eyed her partner.

"Not quite yet." Dev admitted. Brent was now seated next to her pouring over the data on the screens and leaning on his elbows as his eyes flicked over the readouts intently. She went back to working on the screen, as Mike and April and their partners stood and headed out leaving Elaine behind at the table.

"So we make a valiant last stand or hope HQ sends support?" Elaine asked, propping her chin on her fist. "I'm okay with that, by the way. Worse ways to go."

"Jess." Dev interrupted gently. "I am getting biologic readings in what is listed as a storage facility."

Jess got up and came over to see, Elaine circling the table to join them. "What is.. oh." She leaned on the back of the seat Dev was in. "No ident?"

"Scan is not working well in that location." Her partner apologized. "It's just showing bio." She paused. "And it's not some of us."

"Us?" Jess eyed her.

"Biological Alternatives." Her partner clarified. "We have these." She touched her neck, as if reminding Jess. "They do read on scan."

"Don't forget you're more us." Jess indicated herself and Elaine. "Maybe I can talk to your buddy and see what we can do about that necklace."

Dev's eyes went a little rounder, and she tilted her head as she focused intently on Jess. "What?"

"Later." Jess glanced at Elaine. "Let's go find out what that target is." She said. "Dev, you two stay here and get as much working as you can in weapons and defense."

"Yes." Dev said. "But Jess, please take care."

Jess paused and regarded her, a faint smile crossing her face. "I will." She lifted a hand in a wave and headed out the door, Elaine ambling after her, not without giving Dev a long, considering look.

Dev stood up. "I think the systems in the operations room are more functional." She said. "Would you like to move back there to work on this task?"

Brent stood. "Sure. Why not?" He led the way down the step and out of the room. "So you and Jess hook up?" He asked her, as they walked along the corridor.

"Yes." Dev had taken care to look the term up the last time Jess had used it.

"Didn't think that was reg." Brent commented. "Guess it don't matter much now though."

"Yes, it is not correct for bio alts." Dev agreed. "But I was told it was all right because of the job I am assigned to." She touched the pad on the door to the operations room and it opened obediently for her. "However I think you are correct in saying at this time, it does not seem important to worry about."

"Sucks." Brent grunted agreement. "But I'm glad you guys hooked up." He volunteered suddenly, surprising Dev. "Been good for Jess."

Dev sat down slowly at one of the big consoles, and put her hands on the pads, but she didn't start keying anything. "What does that mean?" She finally asked, turning to look at Brent who had settled across from her.

He looked back at her, looking a little startled. "Huh?"

"That thing you said." Dev persisted. "About it being good for Jess?"

"Oh." Brent hunched over the inputs. "Nothin."

Dev waited, but there seemed to be no other response forthcoming, so she shook her head and went back to the screens, calling up all the schematics of the citadel and studying them.

It seemed likely to her that regardless of what they restored there was all kinds of incorrectness heading their way. However, she had a job to do so she started several diagnostics running, and brought up a power schema and leaned on her elbows to look at the multi-levels of tracings, glancing to another screen to look at the power levels now available through the complex.

It was a little like the carrier, really, only on a much bigger scale with a lot more power vectors. In her craft, she had batteries, and the engines, now she was seeing energy being created by the hydro turbines at the base of the cliff, storing power in giant holding cells and then down-stepping the current into distributed stations scattered all over the facility.

Complex, but she had programming for it. Or, at least, she had enough general programming so that she could figure out what to do from there since she didn't really have the true specifics on these systems as she hadn't been expected to manage them.

Well, that could sort of be applied to a lot of things she'd ended up doing here, couldn't it? Dev started to balance the power across the systems. Especially with Jess. She hadn't gotten any programming at all about that.

Had she?

Dev leaned on her elbows and stared at the screen, not really seeing the results of the scan as she pondered how she felt about her partner. What she knew of her. Whether she'd been keyed to recognize her, and programmed to be loyal to her.

She thought about the first moment she'd seen Jess, sitting on the bench, outside the entrance to the citadel, looking so sad, and so defeated, and felt all over again the startled leap of her heart as something in her wanted to go and touch this person, and find out why she looked so lost.

Was it programming?

Dev decided she didn't think so. She didn't want to think that what she felt for Jess had been programmed into her. She wanted that to be real and like a natural born, and not be...

"Hey." Brent said. "She's hot, huh?"

Dev watched her own reflection in the display as her brows contracted over her eyes. She turned her head and peered at Brent in bewilderment. "Excuse me?"

Brent blinked. "Jess. She's hot, huh?" He repeated.

Hot. "Um." Dev was now quite distracted. "In my experience I've found her very pleasantly warm, actually." She said, slowly. "Is there a purpose to the question?"

Brent grunted and shook his head, then went back to his console, tapping into the pad with stolid deliberation. "Fuckin' A."

Dev pinched the bridge of her nose and went back to her scan, shaking her own head in silence.

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Jess was aware of Elaine's eyes on her as they stalked the corridors, ignoring the bio alts heading in the opposite direction. "You figure it's some of us hiding?"

"Maybe." The other agent said. "So tell me. What's that thing like in bed?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"You mean Dev?"

"Yes. The jelly bag brain." Elaine responded. "Your little moch mech tech toy."

Jess glanced at her. "You trying to piss me off on purpose?" She asked, in a mild tone.

The next moment she was in side corridor, and Elaine had her blaster pressed against her ribs. "Yes I am." The other agent said. "Because I don't know who this Jess Drake is and I have to wonder if they didn't get to you after all because the Jess I know would have shot me for saying that."

Jess felt a sense of shock and belated awareness of danger. She looked intently at Elaine's face. "You want me to shoot you?" She queried. "You don't think we've got enough trouble here without you and I scrapping it out? Really?"

"They get you, Jess?" Elaine stared right back at her. "Let me end it. You don't want that on you, not with your history."

Jess felt the tension start to build in her. "They didn't get me." She replied. "Maybe I'm just tired."

"Bullshit."

"Maybe being able to trust my partner made a difference."

"Bullshit."

"Maybe I just got a thing for her."

"Really?" Elaine unlocked the blaster. "I don't think so. I think they bought you and now we're just the remnants being turned over to those bastards."

Jess's fingertips twitched. "Don't be stupid."

"I'm not. You've been acting like a space case civ since you got back. Either they got you, or you're on something. Either way, you ain't running me."

The motion surprised both of them but Elaine more, as the weapon smacked against the far wall and then she was on the ground, bent over Jess's knee, fingers gripping her throat like a vise, inches from having her back broken.

She could feel it. Feel the strain, and the strength that held her motionless with respectable ease.

"No body bought me." Jess's voice held a familiar rasp. "And the last thing I took was a bio pack inhaler since I had to breathe water out there saving everyone's ass."

Elaine looked up and saw the ice veneer on those pale eyes and in that moment she relaxed completely, holding her hands up in surrender, palms exposed. "Now that's more like it."

Jess relaxed her fingers. "Just because I'm not a fucking maniac all the time doesn't mean I turned." She said. "That's a bullshit thing to say."

"You're different." Elaine stated. "Look what it took to get you to do this."

Was she? "I am tired." Jess straightened up and pulled Elaine up to her feet. "And Dev's made a difference but not what you think." From an objective view, she didn't even resent Elaine's attack. She might have done it herself if they swapped positions.

She had been acting a little weird. A little soft, maybe, distracted by the focus on these new and strange emotions she'd been experiencing. Still, no call to shove a gun up her nose.

Elaine went over and retrieved her blaster, safeing it and shoving it into her side mount holster. "So you're not screwing with her? I don't believe it. You can't tell me those vibes are fake."

"C'mon." Jess led the way back through the cross-corridor and into the main, walking with long, impatient strides. "Our sleeping arrangements are really none of your fucking business."

Elaine kept up with her. "What's the big deal? I sleep with Jason, and with Tucker, and everyone knows it. We all knew you weren't bunking with Josh, but you've never been shy about that."

"Dev's different."

The shorter agent rolled her eyes. "No shit."

"Not like that." Jess felt suddenly uncomfortable. "She's just a nice kid."

They started down the slanted path to the storage bays, tucked at the base of the cliff where the stone held the chill all the time. "She's technically off limits." Elaine suddenly said. "Not that I figure that would stop you."

"Didn't stop her." Jess felt a faint flush color her cheeks and was glad of the gloom of the corridor. "She's pretty close to being one of us."

"Wishful thinking?"

Jess shook her head. "You saw the comp vid. Dev's got a mind of her own."

They walked in silence for a minute. "She's not a regular bio anyway, that's true." Elaine said, finally. "Got some smarts and I think she's stuck on you."

They reached the end of the hall and Jess cycled the lock, palming the patch at the door and standing back as the stone lined steel ground open. It exposed a man lock, and they entered, waiting for the door behind them to completely close before

they triggered the next one.

The sound of the hatch opening echoed loudly, and as they stepped through, they both went quiet, and still, as the panel slid shut behind them and closed with a grinding snick.

Inside the big cavern were irregularly shaped storage capsules, originally part of the rock structure but sealed off with heavy plas and doors that were firmly shut. Jess drew her blaster and unlocked it, making no effort to muffle the sound. She let the echo of that fade too, and then she moved forward into the space.

Elaine followed, moving a shoulder's width to her left, and shifting her blaster to her right hand. She touched the comms set and lowered her voice. "Ops, ack."

"Ops." Brent's voice answered.

"Target?"

"Stand by."

They moved further into the cavern and approached the first set of storage alcoves. Jess let her head swivel to the left, and then the right, straining her ears for any signs of life. The fact that no one had come to greet them made her now expect intruders and not refugees from the base, and she felt a sense of impatient anger rising.

Her own comms tickled her ear. "Jess?" Dev's warm, slightly burring voice whispered. "Go." Jess grunted.

"Comp sweep." Her partner said. "Comms set to loop."

Jess stopped walking. "Repeat?"

"Comms set to loop." Dev said again. "Admin lock, top sec."

"What?" Elaine drifted over, watching her.

Jess turned and started back to the hatch. "Let's go." She rapped out. "Dev, break it."

"Ack." The bio alt responded readily. "In work."

They got to the door and Jess hit the pad, turning and putting her back to the wall as she swept the area in front of them. "Seems like something got hung up in comms." She told Elaine. "Got the feeling we're being drawn here."

Elaine didn't question it. She ducked into the hatch as it opened and turned in a circle with her blaster drawn, moving in pattern with Jess as they retreated behind the closing door.

The rumbling blast sent them back against the inner door, but the outer held, and as the inner keyed open they tumbled out and started back for ops at a run.

"Day is full of suckage." Elaine remarked. "Tell ya what."

"Getting worse every minute." Jess powered up the ramp towards the main operations corridor, as alarms started to blare and lights rapidly morphed from white to red. "And it's starting to really, really piss me off."

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Dev focused intently on the screen, her fingers tapping lightly on the input surface as she ignored the sounds and vibrations of the room around her.

A piece of debris flew by her and she ducked, pressing her hands flat against the pad and then straightening, surprised to see the screen go blank, then show a process in progress. She looked down at her hands, then quickly looked around the room, hoping whatever it was she'd done wasn't too disruptive.

The door burst open and Jess appeared, outlined in raging red light with Elaine behind her. "What's up?"

"Somethin blew up in the cave." Brent responded. "Plas based, but our sig."

Jess hauled up short. "Ours?"

The tech nodded. "Key frequency defense plus four." He added. "Like maybe they thought you were the bad guys."

"Huh." Jess circled the console Dev was at and safe'd her gun. "El, secure med, and get everyone under cover." She said. "Can we get comms to the cavern? Bitch if they're some of us making a last stand."

"No." Dev sorted through the requests. "Comms is cut to that whole sector, and most of scan." She indicated the boards. "This junction here appears damaged."

The door opened again and Jess's hand went to her blaster, then paused as Dan Kurok's familiar outline appeared. "Ah. You."

"Ah, me." Kurok agreed. He had a toolkit strapped around his body and if no one had known better, he'd have been taken

for any other tech in the corps. "I think we've got incoming." He slid into a seat next to Brent and pulled a pad over. "Ahead of the storm."

"Scan's clear." Brent objected.

Dev pulled over a pad of her own and called up the link to her own carrier, parked on it's pad in the damaged carrier bay. She accessed it's systems and studied the output, keying in and starting a scan from it's position. Then she blinked. "Jess..."

Jess's shoulder bumped hers as the agent leaned closer and her head turned as her eyes tracked to the reading Dev's finger was pointing to.

Dev heard the hitch in her partners' breathing and felt her straighten up as the door opened yet again and April bolted in, blaster in hand. "Someone was bringing the grid down." The young agent's voice was breathless yet crisp. "I blew out a body in a cabinet but didn't stop to pick the pieces up."

"Brent, lock everything down." Jess said. "Go to emergency code two, and seal everything you can."

"Ack." Brent went to work.

"No time to draw them elsewhere." Jess slammed a hand against the console. "Fuck I'm tired of not knowing what the hell is going on."

Dev was speaking into her comms. "Yes, please move clear." She was triggering beam level protections in the carrier bay, watching the power re-balance as Brent sealed the access. She paused, then switched over to a second set of comm syncs. "Kaytee, Kaytee. Ops."

"Here." The soft voice answered.

"There is danger." Dev said. "Incorrect persons are in the facility, doing damage." She looked up, sensing eyes, to find Doctor Dan regarding her from the next console. "Please make yourselves safe."

"We will take care." The Kaytee responded. "May we make the incorrectness stop if it is possible?"

Dev looked at Doctor Dan. After a very brief moment, he nodded. "Yes." Dev said, into the comms. "Doctor Dan says that is permitted."

"We understand." The Kaytee said, and the comms clicked off. Dev took a breath and released it, then she shifted her attention to her carrier scan. "Jess, there are craft coming towards this facility." She said. "Systems are now stable." She added, as she felt Jess's hand touch her shoulder, fingers warm and powerful as they squeezed gently.

"All right, let's seal everything we can, and make it..." Jess stopped speaking as the inner door to ops opened, the one that led to the technical spaces. She turned to face the door, drawing her weapon as it filled with large, armored bodies.

"Ah ah." A tall, gaunt figure eased past them. "No shooting, Agent Drake. These fellows have no sense of humor." Alexander Bain had his own blaster firmly in his grip, though the muzzle was pointed at the ceiling.

The armored bodies had long blasters cradled in their arms, the security insignia of Interforce silver and bold on their chests. There were six of them, and they spread out to cover the agents in the room.

Jess left her free hand on Dev's shoulder but shifted slightly so her body was between the guns and her partner. "Glad we bothered to clear the shuttle bay for you." She kept Bain in view, the security agents in her peripheral vision.

"Alex." Dan Kurok stood up and faced him. "Whats' going on?"

"Ah, that's the question isn't it?" Bain paused behind the damaged master console at the top of the stepped rise. "As Agent Drake noted, I appreciated the effort to allow my cruiser to land. Fortunately it will also allow me to leave, once my business here is finished. Pity you interrupted that." He glanced at April.

"You were taking the power down?" April asked hesitantly. "But..."

"Yes. This facility has become.. hm.. let's say a pawn in a much larger struggle. A down payment, as it were." Bain studied them. "This will make an excellent forward base."

Jess felt a sense of shock as the words penetrated, matching up with the faint, instinct driven suspicions that had started to bubble up in her. "For them."

"Certainly." Bain agreed, in a mild voice. "You should have listened to Mr Bock, Drake. He was telling you the truth, about it being over. It is." He checked a chrono strapped to his wrist. "In perhaps an hour, the West coast facilities will be finding that out as well."

"You sold out." Kurok walked forward, ignoring the gun muzzles swinging in his direction.

"Oh, come now, DJ." Bain waved his free hand. "You know better than anyone how fluid sides can be." He leaned against the chair behind the console. "I thought perhaps you realized what was in the wind when you volunteered to be captured."

Didn't figure you'd be back so soon." He produced a chilly smile. "Didn't offer enough?"

Kurok's posture shifted, just slightly, just enough to make Jess's nape hairs prickle. "They didn't offer me a dime, Alex." He answered softly. "But then I didn't go for that. "

Bain eyed him. "You went for Tagaron."

Kurok smiled faintly.

"You always were a sentimental idiot." Bain shook his head. "After all this time? I hope you left him intact."

Doctor Dan's smile broadened, but showed no real humor at all. "I didn't mention it at the time." He glanced at Jess. "But that's why they were chasing me. I'm afraid I didn't." He looked back at Bain. "So now what, Alex? They just come in and take over?"

"Yes." Bain said. "A foothold on this coast, then the rest. I'm afraid I wasn't able to get the rest of our leadership onboard with my plan, but no matter. It's just a little more time."

"So that's why you've been blocking comms, and why Bock did." Jess spoke up, calmly. "You didn't want them to know."

"Of course not." Bain agreed. "And indeed, you proved yourself to be the one consistently inconsistent obstacle in this entire affair, Agent Drake. You never did what I expected."

"Not even when you had Josh try to take me out?" Jess said.

"Indeed." Bain tilted his head in her direction. "And you can see, I couldn't allow you to leave the force after that, Drake. You're far too dangerous." He cleared his throat. "Stephen would have shot you, of course. You never would have gotten to the harvesters, not with Drake's Bay coming into your control. Too much resistance there."

"I'm not an easy kill." Jess remarked, in a quiet voice.

"Certainly not." Bain said.

Dev just sat there listening. There was so much going on that was wrong. She could see how angry Doctor Dan was, and she could feel the tension in Jess's body, and the shock of the agents and techs in the room was almost palpable.

This was very very bad.

This was betrayal, like the betrayal Jess had suffered, when her partner had damaged her in that other place. She could see it in Jess's posture, and in Doctor Dan's expression, and in the look of fury in April's eyes.

"So." Bain said. "I will ask you all to go into the recreation facility, where we will seal the doors. Then I'm sure our friends will find something entertaining to do with you. Terribly sorry about it all." He said. "Nothing personal, you understand. I appreciate all of your talents, I just cannot afford them at this time.. ah ah, none of that." He pointed his finger at April. "My dear, this suit I'm wearing will send that blast right back at you and I would hate to damage the equipment here. "

April slowly let her hand fall away from her gun, glaring at Bain with seething intensity.

The security agents pointed their blasters at them. "Put your weapons on the table." The nearest one to Jess barked. "Or I'll blow your arm off."

Jess stared steadily at him, leaving her hand on her blaster, her nostrils flaring slightly as she stood quite still in the silence. "Sure you want to leave me behind?" She met Bain's eyes directly. "I might just kill them all."

Bain's ice gray eyes narrowed a trifle.

"You said yourself I was too dangerous." Jess said. "You feel safer with those six bozos or with me?" She ignored the looks of startled outrage from her erstwhile team. "Maybe I want to go with you."

Dev felt a completely different kind of shock. Was Jess really doing what it appeared?

Would she go with the man Bain?

Would she leave them all behind?

Will she leave me behind?

There was a momentary silence. Then Bain broke it. "Drake you do interest me." He said, with a faint almost rueful smile. "Do you really expect me to believe you'd turn your back on this place, these people, your history, and change sides? Come now. I know better. I knew your father, didn't I?"

Jess remained calm, breathing easily. "So what has this ever offered to me? I was going to be mustered out until you showed up. " She took a step forward, putting a bit of distance between herself and Dev. "This place? These people? My family'd be glad to see the last of me. You know what I am. You want to waste that?"

"I see." Bain looked thoughtful. "Hm. Ah, you might have a point there, Drake. It seems to me you act more for your

interests than anyone else.”

Jess smiled. “I’m not my father.”

“That’s for sure.” Kurok spoke up, briefly, and crisply.

Jess ignored him. Ignored the look she knew she was getting from Dev, who was smart enough to realize what she was saying and know her own betrayal.

It was what it was.

Dev felt a wave of unhappiness flow over her. She looked down at the console, not wanting to meet any of the other eyes in the room.

“I owe you more than I do Interforce.” Jess continued. “No matter how you did it or why.”

Something that might have been a faint charmed smile appeared on Bain’s face. “Hm.” He checked his chrono again. “Put your weapon down, Drake, and I might consider it.”

Jess pulled her blaster out and tossed it to one side without hesitation. She kept her back to the rest of the room, not daring to look at any of them.

Especially not Dev. She could almost sense the horror and confusion from her, and the steaming fury from Kurok standing just to her right.

That, at least, she understood at a deep, gut level, and taking one very short peek at his face, Jess suddenly knew at her very core exactly what or more specifically who his loyalty was anchored to and finally she had a personal understanding of why.

But she was out of choices. Turn her back on those security rifles and she’d be dead.

“Well then.” Bain said, after a long pause. “The rest of you, to the door. I would just shorten your distress but certain machinery in this facility is not worth risking blaster fire.” He waved them forward. “It appears Agent Drake and I have something to talk about.”

Jess was nearest the door. She kept her eyes shifted as the rest of them slowly started moving, walking past her as Bain came down and stood at her side. “I’m not often surprised, Drake.” He said, conversationally. “Quite an interesting sensation.”

“Yes, sir.” Jess murmured softly.

Dev came past her, trying to catch her eye. But Jess refused to meet it, only just keeping from biting the inside of her lip as her peripheral vision caught Kurok’s hand coming to rest on her partner’s shoulder and the faint, soft intake of Dev’s breath.

There was a pain there, she hadn’t expected. Jess drew a breath in and pushed past it, focusing on what she knew she had to do.

Then, April was the last to come past her. Now Jess lifted her head and met her fellow agent’s glance for one very long moment, as April shifted her direction just slightly as she moved around a chair, her face a stolid, stony mask.

“I will have to rearrange some things. Find a place for you.” Bain was saying. “I’m sure your new colleagues will be.. hm.. even more surprised than I was.”

“I’m sure they will.” Jess’s heart started to pound. “But I’ve never really been predictable, they tell me.”

Bain chuckled. “Something that might well prove to my advantage. Hm?”

“Maybe.” She felt the blood rush to her skin as her senses sharpened and she dislocated her thinking brain from her instincts as April came up even with her and she let second thoughts and regrets go. The energy flooded through her and her hand shot out, fingers closing around the knife hilt at April’s hip. “Or not. Like now, for instance.”

She drew and spun and slammed her hand and arm as hard as she could into Bain, feeling the grinding shock as the blade in her hand penetrated his light armored jumpsuit and cut through him, as a blast of energy hit her and filled her world with fire.

She let out a roar and yanked the knife back out, then plunged it back into his body again, the hardened blade cutting through his energy suit and sending a keening scream up into the air.

She heard Kurok shout, and Dev yell her name and a scramble behind her but all that mattered was feeling the hot blood on her hands and feeling the jerking of Bain’s body as he gasped in her grip.

She hit the wall and took Bain’s body with her, feeling something hit him as she yanked the blaster out of his hand and spun again, letting instinct drive her as she fired back towards the guards and dropped to her knees to avoid the returning fire.

She could smell blood, and she was lifting her blaster to fire again when something hit her and blew her back against the wall again, knocking her into darkness as she felt the world fade away, the sound of her own name echoing weirdly at

volume following her.

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Pain woke her. Even breathing hurt. Jess felt something shift under her, relatively soft and yielding as it cradled her body and she forced one eye half open to see what was going on.

A scanner pulled back out of her view and was replaced by Dan Kurok's face, a spattering of blood staining his cheek as he gazed at her. "You were wrong." He said, glancing at the scanner. "You are most precisely and exactly your father." He shook his head. "Pair of idiots, the both of you."

Jess managed a faint smile as she tilted her head up a little, to find Dev looking back at her, since she was the owner and operator of the surface Jess was laying on. Her partner looked totally and completely freaked out, and she could see from the look of her eyes that she'd been crying.

And still was, apparently, as a tear emerged and rolled down her cheek. "Sorry." Jess managed to croak at her. "I land on ya or somethin?"

Dev answered by hugging her, which hurt, and didn't, all at once.

"Sixty minutes to arrival." Brent's voice echoed softly.

"Guns six and eight are up." April replied. "If they come in east we can maybe get one or two of them."

Jess could hear the sounds fading in and out. She tried moving a hand, then stopped immediately when a bolt of pain resulted. She thought she heard the door open, and the sound of a bio alt speaking, but all of it was being overshadowed by the thump of Dev's heartbeat under her ear.

"Bain?" She muttered.

"Extremely dead." Kurok answered her, gently pressing something against Jess's upper arm. "Don't try moving. You blew out your neural net." He continued. "Don't be surprised if you smell blue and pink for a while."

"Ok." Jess was happy to comply. "They still comin?"

"Yes." Doctor Dan replied. "Your crazed dramatics merely delayed our collective splatting by perhaps an hour." He gently lifted Jess's other eyelid and peered at the exposed pupil. "Three of them blasted you right after you hit him."

"Ugh."

"Mm." He grunted. "Thought we lost you early there for a minute." He released the eyelid. "But you are, in fact, a damned hard kill, Jesslyn Drake."

"Fucker." Jess managed to get out. "Died too slow. Wish I'd had time to make small pieces out of 'im."

"Damn you Alex." Kurok sighed. "I should have realized something wasn't right." He admitted. "Idiots upside didn't let me talk to Bricker when he came. He knew something." He rested his hand on his knee. "I never thought he'd..." He paused, and shook his head. "Now asking us makes sense."

Dev released one hand and touched his knuckles, but remained silent.

"Bricker needed someone Bain couldn't touch." Jess whispered in agreement. "Finally saw one of my nightmares out last night. Remembered to the end. Saw him there. Watching Josh try to take us out"

"Alex?"

Jess nodded. "Think he wanted to take over the cit easy." She whispered. "Just have em hand it over. Thought he had everyone's number."

Kurok exhaled. "But he believed you wouldn't turn." He said, in a quiet, serious tone. "And like an idiot I told him Dev wouldn't either, so the two of you had to go."

Jess nodded. "Somethin like that." She burred softly. "Harder he tried to see us croaked better we got at escaping it." She managed a brief smile. "Didn't put it all together in time."

"No." Kurok sighed again. "And our past together blinded me."

"He blocked comms. Dev found it." Jess closed her eyes. "Then I knew for sure."

Kurok glanced past her. "Yes." He said. "Sorry I was only half right about the trusting thing, Dev."

Dev sniffled a little. "I saw his vehicle land. I thought that was a good thing."

Doctor Dan sighed. "That was the half wrong. I told you it was okay to trust him."

"Sorry I made you think you were all wrong." Jess felt the gentle hold on her tighten. "Had to get him close." She felt

exhausted by the small effort of speaking. "Least I'll croak knowing I got that bastard first."

Kurok patted her hip very gently. "Rest." He said. "Take care of her, Dev. Let me go see if there's any havoc I can help with." He stood up and hitched the scanner to his tool kit, moving over to take a seat at one of the battered consoles.

There was a quiet moment, then April got up and came over to them, crouching down next to Jess and resting her fingertips on the steel floor. "That was ace." She told Jess bluntly. "Glad you used my blade for it. Most blood honor it's ever seen."

Jess managed another small grin. "Glad you got my sig."

April shook her head a little. "Tried to make my head believe you were turning and it just wouldn't go." She replied. "Not when you refused to look at any of us."

Jess was quiet for a moment. "Specially her." She moved her head a tiny bit towards Dev.

"Specially her." April agreed. "So now we go down in flames. But that's okay, you know?" She said. "It's right." She touched Jess's hand, then stood up and went back to the console, sitting back down and getting on comms.

So now, at last, Jess shifted enough so she could look up at Dev, who was seated against the wall with both arms wrapped around her. The bio alt looked as though she'd been through a full speed carrier wreck and as she looked back, what she was feeling was open and very evident on her face.

Oh. Jess felt.. well, she wasn't sure what she was feeling, but it was very warm, and very powerful and it was making it hard to breathe. "Hey Devvie." She uttered. "You're not too mad at me are ya?"

"No." Dev said, after a brief pause. "I just though they made you dead, and I was.. " She stopped and took a few breaths. "I didn't want that."

Jess was glad she was lying still. It felt good just to be able to stop, and think, and say what she wanted to say. "In about sixty minutes we're probably both going to be made dead." She said. "But I'm real, real glad I got to know you."

Dev just nodded back.

"My dad once said.. " Jess half smiled. "You'll know what love is because its the only thing that hurts as much as it feels good." She nodded a little. "He was right. But it's good."

"It's good." Dev repeated softly. "I'm glad you didn't really want to go with the bad guys, Jess. I would have missed you so much."

Unexpectedly, Jess felt tears sting her own eyes, as she felt Dev hug her close, and the pressure of her head pressing against the side of her own. It unlocked something inside her that she really couldn't quantify, but whatever it was made her want to get up and move around and be a part of what was going on the room.

She didn't want this to end. "Gimme a hand up." She told Dev. "Let's go see if we can help."

"Doctor Dan said for you to rest." Dev objected, even though she helped Jess sit up anyway. She waited, watching her partner work to catch her breath, before she stood up and carefully held on to her arm as Jess rose with her.

The pain was really overwhelming. Jess just stood there breathing for a moment, holding onto Dev so she wouldn't just fall right back down. Every nerve in her body felt like it was being smacked with a round head hammer and it was all she could do to lock her knees in place to remain upright.

After a minute she looked around. There were a pile of bodies, the guards and Bain, in one corner on the lower level and the walls and one of the working consoles had deep, angry black scores on them from the firefight. Near her the wall surface was covered in dried blood, and she could smell the copper scent now as her senses settled.

Mike Arias was seated next to April, his arm in a plas casing, and Brent next to him had a bandage on his head. Tucker and Elaine were on the second console, he with a black eye, and she with half the hair on her head burned off and a scorch mark covered in a bandage across the side of her face.

Elaine briefly looked up from her screen and gave Jess a wry smile. Then she went back to her inputs. No real need for her to say anything, apparently.

Jess managed the few steps over and took a seat at the end of the desk, resting her elbows on the steel surface as Dev sat down next to her. She looked at the screen output, her eyes focusing on the incoming scan, showing a dozen ships pretty much nearly on top of them.

Doctor Dan came over and sat down on the other side of her, just as the outer door opened and one of the Kaytees entered, looking around at them. "Over here, Kaytee." Kurok lifted a hand. "I'm going to send them back downstairs." He told Jess, as the bio alt headed towards them. "Maybe they'll get lucky."

Jess turned and looked at Dev, who was looking right back at her. "Don't suppose you want to go with them, huh?"

“No.” Dev answered straightforwardly. “I would not.”

Jess nodded, and looked back at the screen. “Then let's just go out doing what we do.”

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Dev studied the oncoming vessels, forcing her mind to focus on the problem at hand and not on the horrible thing she'd just been through.

Everything seemed mixed up and upside down. Jess had been right – she had no real idea now who to trust except for Jess herself, and for a moment even that had been in doubt.

She felt her eyes sting again, remembering that. An awful feeling that haunted her even when she told herself that all Jess had been doing was acting.

Doing her job. Making the man Bain believe she was joining him, to get him to let his guard down.

And yet still it hurt. Dev looked up as a warm touch covered the back of her hand, and found Jess regarding her, bloodshot eyes blinking slowly in evident discomfort. “Would you like a drink?” She asked.

“Yeah, but not the kind they have in here.” Jess admitted, with a faint grin. “Hey you okay? You still look freaked out.”

Dev shifted her gaze briefly, then returned it. “I really thought they made you dead.” She indicated the security guard. “And that really bothered me.” She felt Jess's grip on her tighten. “And I thought you were going to leave me here and it made me feel so lost.” She added. “I think I want to throw up.”

Jess's eyes widened, apparently getting more of an answer than she'd expected. “Ah.” She murmured. “I'd never have left you, Devvie.” She lowered her voice. “Honest.”

Dev managed a smile in return.

“Dying, on the other hand.” Her partner gave her a wry grimace. “I'm pretty good at that.”

Dev exhaled. “Yes.” She answered, briefly. “Jess, the bad guys are almost here. “ She changed the subject.

“I know.” Jess chafed the back of her hand with the edge of her thumb. “It sucks right now.”

“I wish we could just go have a snack on the ledge and watch the water.” Dev whispered. “I don't want to be dead, and I really don't want you to be.”

Jess leaned back in her seat and gazed around the room. The citadel was as ready as it was going to be and most of her colleagues were just quietly resting where they were, eyes focused on the displays. Kurok had his head cradled in his hands and for a moment, for her, the world went still.

That happened, sometimes. Jess was never sure if it was a real thing, or just something her mind conjured up to give her a chance to think for a minute.

Sometimes a good idea came. Sometimes in that quiet moment, there was clarity and facts that had been running around in the back of her head presented themselves in the form of a solution to whatever problem she had.

But no. Jess exhaled, and the world rushed on again. There was no magic solution for this. The armored carriers would come in and attack them, they would do their best to defend the citadel for as long as they could, and then, if they penetrated it would come down to a hand to hand in the corridor.

“Short range scan has them.” Brent commented. “Standing by to bring up the guns.”

“Bring them up.” Jess ordered. “Wish I could help you aim em, but I've got the reflexes of my dead aunt right now.” She stared at the comp screen, ignoring the pain. “Dev, send a broadband out, all alert, any endpoint.”

“Yes.” Dev settled her ear cups and exhaled. “Base 10, Base 10, all call.” She spoke clearly. “Inbound hostile, alert prime. Take cover.” She put it on replay and scanned her screen again. The call beam spread out neatly from the citadel, and she could see faint echos back, passive acks that were scattered across the landscape.

“Thanks.” Jess said. “Now send out a broadcast internally. Tell all the non coms to take cover, and seal themselves out of operational areas.”

The door opened, and Doug entered, carrying spare rifles slung over his shoulders, and a sack full of mines. He set the mines on the console near April and a moment later, Chester came in similarly laden.

Dev spoke quietly into the internal comms, repeating Jess's message, and now the techs set up the long blasters near their agents, as the agents settled into the weapons rigs, fitting their hands into the ceiling mounted triggers relatively the same as the ones in the carriers.

There was a set above the seat Jess was in, but she didn't even attempt to pull them down, watching her fingertips twitching as waves of pain rippled through her body. She doubted she could lift her arms above her head, and the shot Kurok had

given her was only slowly returning her nerves to a normal state.

There would be no fighting for her, not in time today anyway. "Dev?"

"Yes?"

"Listen." Jess leaned carefully over towards her. "If they end up shooting this place to pieces, I ain't going to be able to do much about it."

Dev considered this. "I see."

"Stick over there with Doug and those guys." Jess said. "They might do better."

The bio alt adjusted an ear cup and folded her hands on the console. "I think I would rather stay here, next to you." She responded. "If that's all right."

"If that's all right." Her partner sighed. "You want to get killed? Probably by my skull coming off my neck and breaking yours?"

Dev looked up, her expression suddenly as open as Jess had ever seen it. In an instant, unexpectedly, the woman sitting next to her was no longer a bio alt, no longer even a tech. She was just this person Jess found herself really caring for.

"Yeah." Dev said. "I want to share whatever happens to you. I don't care what that is." She spoke the words carefully, as though considering each one with great care. "No matter what the programming says"

"It says otherwise?"

Dev nodded. "We're supposed to value our lives." She agreed. "Since we do have value. People pay highly for us."

Jess carefully propped her chin up on her fist. "You're nuts."

"Yes. I have come to that conclusion also. I have gone far outside the programming for what I'm doing." The bio alt said, in a mournful tone. "That is, I suppose, nuts, if the definition I looked up about that is correct, and you are not referring to an ancient plant once consumed as a snack."

"Me too." Jess reached over and took her hand, bringing it over and placing a kiss on the back of her knuckles. "Stay here by me, Devvie. Been such a long time since anyone's given a shit if I lived or died I might as well enjoy it."

Her partner looked a bit happier. She smiled a trifle and went back to her screens, providing the voice, as it were, of the citadel. "This is central ops." She murmured into her comm. "Yes, it's Dev."

Usually, that was Elaine's job, or sometimes it had been Sandy's. Jess had almost never been tapped for the duty, and people had told her it was because her voice made everyone nervous.

That had always been okay by her. She hated the sound of her own amplified yap.

"Six minutes, mark." Brent said. "Coming into range. Comm blackout."

"Shunting power to the guns." Doug had settled into his station and had a commset on. "We've got plenty of juice, at least."

"Front side battery is up." Tucker reported. "Generators are tapped to full."

Jess looked up to find a full, comprehensive display in front of her. She glanced at Dev, who was busy with her own screens, and blinked her eyes a few times to get them to focus. "Unless they open up when they're in range, hold off." She said. "Let them get right in our faces."

"They'll see the power grid up." Elaine said.

"Maybe they'll figure Bain left it that way." Jess responded. "They sending out any comms?" She asked Dev, who shook her pale head. "He would have told them to come right in, soon as he landed in the shuttle bay."

"Funny we didn't pick that up on scan." Elaine shifted to look over at her. "Just how many layers does the scum go down here, Jess?"

Jess sighed, understanding the comment. "Dev caught his speeder in the bay, on our carrier's scan. I just didn't have time to investigate it before we were in the weeds." She caught sight of Kurok, settling into a tech station, and keying it on. "Hey doc, how'd his boat slip in behind scan?"

"Keyed reflector." Doctor Dan responded, almost absently. "He's .. well, he was, top sec. The idea was, he might have to come into a facility that had been turned."

"Irony's a little crunchy." Elaine remarked.

"Yes. Well." Kurok rubbed his eyes. "What can I tell you? It's old technology. They had it when I was still active."

The rest of the agents were now listening intently. "You were a tech, huh?" Elaine asked, after a brief pause.

"Yes." Doctor Dan looked up at her, seeing the doubt. "Agent Drake'll vouch for me. I think she probably has a picture of me in diapers or something like that." He said, the tiniest bit of a twinkle entering his pale eyes. "Not that we really have much time for that sort of thing, and anyway if I wanted to blow this place up or shoot someone I would have done so already."

"Three minutes." Brent backed up the statement.

"He's fine." Jess remarked, returning Elaine's inquisitive stare. "Just concentrate on aiming. We're not going to have much space to miss in."

Keyed reflector. Dev turned that term over in her head, feeling it tickle some programming, deep down. She nudged it back and forth, and tried to call up what it evoked, but it remained elusive, just out of her mental grasp. Keyed reflector. That meant, she reasoned, something that would... maybe.. "Doctor Dan."

Kurok looked over. "Yes, Dev?"

"If they could do that for the man Bain's vehicle, making scan ignore it, couldn't the bad guys do the same thing with our guns and their vehicles? Make them reflect the beams?"

"Well." Kurok answered thoughtfully. "They could, if they had the frequencies, Dev. Those change... or at least they did, regularly." He adjusted his screen. "Here they come."

"In range." Brent said, calmly. "Freq's changed last week." He added. "They did it cause that guy said to." He pointed at Bain's body. "Weren't scheduled for another ten days... just remembered that." He added, somewhat defensively. "I'd just come on shift and heard some guys saying it in the mess.. they thought it was a good idea to change em."

Everyone's eyes shifted to the dead body, then they all looked over at Jess, who'd straightened in her seat. "Change them now." She said, without hesitation. "Hurry."

The techs dove at their inputs and started tapping, while Jess and Elaine pulled the scan to their own stations. "Faster." Jess said, seeing the line of destroyers now on visual, close enough for the outboard cams to resolve them.

"The codes are locked, Jess." Dev's head lifted. "We can't change them."

"Fuck." Brent added a half second later as he came to the same conclusion.

Jess got up and almost ended up on the ground as she grabbed for the edge of the console when her body seized up.

"Fucker!" She got over to Dev's chair and looked at her screen, seeing the admin lockout, and the request for creds that had denied her partner access. "Gimme."

Dev slid out of the way and gave her access, as she watched her partner tap painfully on the screen.

"They're spooling up." Tucker said. "We're gonna take it right in the kisser. If they've got our codes it'll cut through the shields like water."

Jess cursed and got the last few letters of her own creds in and entered them. "Let's see if we can't hoist his ugly dead ass on it's own petard." She said. "He upgraded my access."

"Probably was going to lay the blame of everything on you if it went sour." Elaine suggested. "Your login over everything."

"Yeah, rogue agent." Jess muttered. "We'd all be dead. Who'd dispute it."

The damn screen seemed like it took an eon and longer, the pulsing white dot in the center expanding and contracting as though it were breathing and she heard the yell of alarm from Brent just as it finally, finally disappeared and obediently presented schematics to her. "Go!" She awkwardly hopped out of the way as Dev got her hands on the controls and her fingertips raced over the smooth surface.

The lights flickered, and she heard a far off rumble.

"Direct hit." Kurok stated. "They're aiming for the turbine entrance."

"Dev?" Jess uttered.

The bio alt finished her work and lifted her head. "I don't really know what I just did, and I have no idea if it will work but you can try it."

A humming boom sounded, and then several more, as Elaine, Mike and April let loose with the perimeter guns, then a crackling roar vibrated the rock around them and knocked loose a few bits of shale.

"Shields are responding." Brent remarked. "Fucking nice timing, yo."

Jess managed to sit back down without falling, and rested her elbows on the console, waiting for the flashing bolts to fade from her vision. "Just keep shooting."

She could hear the repeated booms, an almost subliminal rumbling that was power being fed to the big outside guns, and released as the other agents aimed and fired. It was strange not to be joining them, but it was far easier to sit as still as she could and just watch the action on the screen.

“Jess.”

“Uh?” Jess rotated her head slightly to look at her partner. “Hey good work.” She added, belatedly. “Thanks for keeping us from being vaporized. You rock.”

“Yes, I'm glad it was effective.” Dev said. “May I continue to work with your identity?”

“Sure. I'll discipline myself later. You can help.” Jess managed a half grin.

Dev returned the grin, then went back to work.

Jess gave up watching the screen and watched her partner instead. She could see the bio alt's pale eyes flickering over the data, and she was inputting steadily, a look of impossibly cute determination on her face.

“Got one.” Mike said. “Didn't expect the beam to take him. Could tell by how he was flying.” He looked over at Jess.

“Good call.”

Jess lifted a hand and pointed her finger at Dev. “Rock star.”

“Very well done, Dev.” Doctor Dan said. “They've figured it out. Splitting apart and heading for the other side of the ridge, unfortunately.”

“Want us to take the busses out and hunt them?” April asked. “We've got nothing for guns in the back.”

“How many're left?” Jess asked.

“Ten.” Brent said. “Two're heading for the carrier bay now.”

“Tell them to take cover.” Jess told Dev. “You'er not going to make it to the bay in time.” She said. “Arm your carriers to implode and wait on my mark.”

Mike's eyes opened wide, but Elaine nodded. “You'er going ot blow the bay?”

“I'm going to blow them if they land in it.” Jess corrected. “Got any better ideas?” She eyed her fellow senior agent, who gave a short, decisive shake of her head. “No? Okay then.”

“No.” Elaine swung her triggers around and let loose with a long blast, tracing an arc of fire across the front of the citadel and catching the very tail end of one of the enemy. “After that rig your buddy there did? I'm all in.”

“That one just clipped the cliff and went down.” Doctor Dan was busy with scan. “Nice shot.”

“Thanks.. uh.. doc.” Elaine swung the screen around and continued hunting. “Rookie watch out there. You got the end guns.”

“Got it.” Mike had the tip of his tongue sticking out from between his teeth and bore down, focusing so hard on his comp he nearly bashed his forehead into it. “Bastard!”

“Clipped him.” April picked up the arc and leaned back as the enemy swerved and went for zenith, tracer fire chasing him up the the ridge. “The rest of them are out of line, Jess.”

“Yeah.” Jess sighed. “Dev, you tell them to get out of the pit?”

“Yes.” Dev nodded. “I spoke with Clint.” She added. “He's in some discomfort, but he agreed to take himself and the others to safety.”

“Carriers are rigged.” Elaine said. “If we blow them, we're stuck here.”

Jess nodded. “We're stuck here anyway. We have comp inside?”

Tucker sent the image he had of the carrier bay to the big screen, showing a grainy view of the inside of the huge space, wisps of offgassing emitting from the four carriers, and machinery in it's half reconstructed position. There were still a few moving figures in view, and Clint's distinctive one, waving an arm at a half dozen bio alt techs who all had bundles and packs of tools in their grip as they bolted for the hatchway.

“They can't seal that hatch.” April said, suddenly. “If they get in there and we don't blow them, theu're inside.”

“That's what these are for.” Elaine pointed at the long guns. “Soon as we're done here, we'll get those all warmed up.”

A flash caught their eye, and the temporary covering to the bay blew out in all directions, sending metal fragments raining down into the bay.

“Clear!” Dev yelled into the comms. “There is danger! Take cover!”

A moment later the bay was lit with landing lights and six destroyers came in fast, all wing and angled body in stark contrast to the stolid carriers hunched on their pads.

"Where's the other two?" Mike asked. "I don't see them on scan."

Dev scrambled to get comp on the back side, and widened her scan, pulling in the signal from her own carrier for as long as she figured she'd get it. "No sign."

Jess felt a jolt of alarm. "The back door." She said. "If they've got Bain's keys that might be one of them."

"It is." Kurok stood up. "One you like to accompany me? I don't much care for surprises."

April stood and joined him. "Doug, stay here and help blow things up." She picked up a long blaster and energized it. "Let's go, Doc. I'm in the mood to kill people."

Doctor Dan paused and looked at Jess, one pale eyebrow lifting in question. Jess waved her hand at him, and was glad to restrict her reaction to that as she slowly put her arm back down.

"The'yre down." Brent said. "Light the trigger?"

Jess looked back at the screen and saw the hatches opening, judging the distances. "Blow the two nearest them." She instructed, shading her eyes just in time as Brent lit off the explosives, setting off the emergency destruct systems on the two carriers designed to keep them from ending up in enemy hands.

The screen whited out. Seconds later, the ripple of the blast transmitted through the rock followed by a scream of sound that cut off abruptly as Brent slammed a control. "Got em." He grunted.

Dev touched her ear bud and listened intently. She could hear booms and thumps, and then, high pitched screaming that was human and not mechanical. The white hot engine systems of the two carriers were scorching the interior of the bay with super thermal heat, and she hoped hard that Clint, and the other sets had gotten out.

Another signal and she tuned it. "Dev! It's April! Send h..!" She turned. "Jess, April is in distress."

"Uh oh." Jess said. "Get those blasters ready, kids." She managed to get to her feet and headed towards the far wall, where the guns were leaning. "Check scan."

"Scan's down." Brent said, suddenly. "We're dark to the wall."

"Shit." Tucker got up and went to an emergency station. "I'll see what I can get on the manuals."

Jess picked up a blaster and cradled it against her arm. "Dev, c'mon over here and take cover behind the console. There rest of you techs too." She took a slow, deep breath, shoving the jangling pain in every nerve ending down and bracing herself against the rock surface.

"No sense blowing the others." Elaine got up and picked up one of the longer guns, coming over and putting the bulk of the main console between herself and the door, bracing the blaster against the top of the stations and un-safing it. "I can hear shots."

Jess could hear them too. "Sounds like a lot of them." She said. "They must have popped that back hatch wide open."

"Probably loaded most of the troops in the ones that hit that, and only skeleton in the bay." Elaine said, regretfully. "We guessed wrong."

"Yeah." Jess looked up as the lights changed, from the standard emergency stations to stark red, and the alerts started to go off on every board she could see.

"Ops compromised." A harsh voice sounded. Bricker's, Jess realized. "Systems deact, standby for lock out."

The systems would lock themselves and then destruct. Jess exhaled, and got the blaster in position, sensing, and then feeling Dev slip in behind her. "Been fun, Devvie."

Dev put a hand on her hip, the touch warm and comforting all out of proportion to the motion. "We all hope we get to do good work and make our contracts happy." She said. "I did both."

Jess smiled wryly. "You sure did."

"And I got to be in love." Dev continued. "I think every single set in the creche would wish they were me."

Jess turned her head and regarded Dev. "You glad you're you?"

Dev stretched up and gave her a kiss on the lips. "Yes."

And so. Jess felt the discomfort fade, and her disappointment with their failure ease off and her mind steadied and eased as she stopped trying to force the future and let her decisions fall where they might. The time for questions was over, and now, it just was what it was.

“We fought the good fight.” Elaine commented, peering down her blaster's spine. “Time to pay, Jesslyn.”

“Time to pay, El.” Jess drew in a breath and got her hands on the triggers, as she heard the thump of boots in the hall, and the crackle of power slamming the outside of the hatch. “Just keep shooting.”

“We will.” Tucker had a blaster. So did Brent, and Doug, and they joined the agents shoulder to shoulder as the hatch buckled and slammed inward to the floor.

The room lit white and blue with fire.

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“Keep down!” Jess yelled back over her shoulder, as she aimed and took a shot at the edge of an armored shoulder she spotted outside the door.

The room was full of smoke, and the red lights made it dark and hard to see anything. The first wave had come flying it shooting, and now a half dozen armored forms were piled in the front part of the room, their legs blocking the hatch open and giving their comrades a shot into the ops center.

No way out. Jess could see shadows flickering on the far wall, and then a second later a mine flew in. “Shit!”

Tucker leaped over the console and booted the mine back out the way it came, getting just behind cover before it exploded and filled the entry with golden fire that rippled out and flowed towards them.

Jess turned and dove for the ground, taking Dev with her as the force flowed up over the console and over their heads.

“Watch for them behind it!”

“On it!” Mike said. “Bastards!”

Jess looked up to make sure the plasma had dissipated, then she got back up and leveled her blaster, letting off a long burst as one of the enemy came right at them, clearly expecting them to be stunned. She trained her sights on his face plate and watched it heat to white hot, as he hauled up and tried to turn back out of the way.

Too late. His head exploded inside his armor and he dropped, reeling backwards as two more came in, skidding to a halt when they saw the body heading towards them and turning to retreat as two beams hit them from Mike and Elaine's guns.

Another mine. Another ducking, but this time the energy ripped through the bottom of the consoles and Tucker went down in jerking agony, his blaster flying from his hands and nearly hitting Dev in the head.

Brent heaved one of their own mines out the door and they ducked as the booming roar filled the space.

“We should just charge them. They'll just pick us off.” Elaine got over by Jess. “If we're going to die, might as well do it fast, Jess. We can't hold out forever.”

“Hang on a little longer.” Jess half stood and got off a shot, hoping her knees would hold her. She felt Dev grab and steady her and got wedged into place against the console, forcing her body to behave. “Any idea how long we've been fighting? How long till that storm was due over?”

“It will be soon.” Dev replied “We've been doing this for almost forty five minutes.”

“Why?” Elaine asked “What the hell does a storm do for us? They're the ones who have the damn magic mushrooms Jess – we don't, and even if we did, it does nothing for us here in the kill zone. “

Fifteen minutes. Jess exhaled. “Okay.” She let the gun rest on the console and blinked the sweat from her eyes. “Elaine, take these guys out the back, down Bain's hallways. I'll cover you.”

Elaine looked at her. “Cover us?”

Mike threw another mine out, and ducked. “Ware!”

“Look.” Jess got her head down as plasma rippled through the room. “I can barely stand up. I'm not going to be able to keep up with you all.” She uttered. “Get the hell out, and just go.”

Dev crouched quietly behind her partner, listening. The consoles were all dead, locked out by the security systems and there was nothing else she could do except keep Jess company.

She could see Elaine's face as she looked at Jess, surprising emotion tensing the muscles there.

“Jess, we can't leave you here.” Elaine finally said. “Screw it.”

“You can.” Jess lifted her head. “Everyone listen up.” She raised her voice. “On ten, head out the back with Elaine on point. I'll cover.”

There was a moment of silence, then Mike cleared his throat. “If it's all the same to you, senior, I'd rather stay.”

“Ack” Brent went back to the bag of mines, arming another one and handing it over to him.”

“Ack.” Doug echoed, looking up and over from where he was kneeling next to Tucker. “I’ll answer ack for him too.”

Jess's eyes flicked around the room, and then paused on Elaine's face, before she turned and regarded Dev. “Can I at least get you to listen to me?”

Dev gazed steadily back at her. “Please don't ask me to leave you.” She replied, simply. “I really don't want to.”

Jess sighed. “You're all insane.” She turned and put her hands back on the blaster. “All right. Just take as many of them with us as we can I guess.”

Her voice sounded indifferent, but Dev, who was just in the right spot, could see her eyes blink, and the faint flash of tears as they escaped and landed on the metal surface of the useless station.

She wasn't sure she understood what that meant. But she knew it was a strong feeling.

Elaine got in next to her and propped her blaster up on the edge of the console, sighting down it. “Y'know, I always figured I'd go like this.” She let off a blast, as a dark figure flickered past the entrance. “Never thought I'd make it to retire, or you either.”

“Yeah.” Jess muttered.

Elaine leaned forward so she could see Dev. “And you...” She grinned briefly. “You're all right, NM-Dev-1.”

Dev smiled back.

“Specially if you hooked this one good.” Elaine nudged Jess's arm, then returned her attention to the doorway, and six bodies inbound. “Here we go... for the corps!” The last words were a bellow and in an rush of energy the yell was picked up and carried forward, as the six enemy soldiers came right at them, dodging the blaster fire and returning it with their own.

Jess just kept firing, the blaster rifle thumping against her chest as she let off quick bursts, going from one target to another to another as the air itself started to burn, white fire and dark shadows taking the color out of everything as the red lights themselves died and the shots became a continuous thunder.

One of the enemy dodged past Doug's rolling body and leaped over the console right at Jess. She released the blaster rifle and drew her sidearm, continuing to fire as he came flying through the air and slammed into her, a hit she had no way of avoiding.

The pain ramped with unexpected ferocity and she felt her back hit the wall as he landed on her, hand already raised with the butt of his gun slamming down at her.

She couldn't budge her torso, but she got the blaster in between them and squeezed the trigger, the muzzle shoved hard against his belly as she felt him cough.

His hand swerved as he went for her hands instead of her head and then he was hit from the side by a small, fair haired figure that got a shoulder under him and heaved him off against the wall as Jess rolled clear.

The man bounced off the wall and reached out to grab Jess, but he was yanked away and slammed against the floor and then his arm was pulled behind him as that same, slight, fair figure landed on his back and removed his shoulder from its socket, surprising a startled yell of pain from him.

Jess started to get up, then something impacted her hard and sent her flying to slam against the wall herself, and she drew and breath and got her hands up in time for her vision to clear and see the big armored figure in front of her raise its gun and the pre-aim splashed on her face.

Then it was gone because a body was blocking it, half kneeling, half sprawled across her with its arms raised in a protective spread merely meant to assure the coming blast would tank the both of them.

A moments hesitation on his part, some ancient animal brain instinct that held his finger for just a breath.

Just long enough for Jess to get one arm around her protector and one hand on her fallen blaster and to reach around and aim herself and force her hand to contract on the trigger and her wrist to withstand the backblast as the gun bucked in her grip as the blast took the gun right out of the enemy's hands.

Her boot hooked his, and her other one slammed out and caught him in the groin and then he was being blown backwards as two other blaster beams hit his body.

And then, for a long moment, it was quiet.

White emergency lights were blinking on and off, and the room was full of smoke and the smell of burned flesh and blood. There was no sound from the outside hallway, where they could see blinking lights as well.

Then a roar of sound shuddered through the wall and they could hear the crackle of comm, and the sound of battle language

that wasn't theirs, and the sweet, sweet note of panic that meant maybe, somehow something had swung their way.

Motion now, and running boots, and the next thing they saw was a crowd of bodies in pursuit yelling loudly and carrying shadowy pieces of gear, their necks flashing with faintly colored tracing around their necks.

Jess blinked. "Bios!" She let her body thump back against the wall and felt Dev do the same, as her partner started shaking. "What the hell???"

A roar then came from the other side of the hall, and the next moment there was a huge pile up, blasters going everywhere, and the eerie cascade of power arcs energizing as the fight passed them by, leaving the corridor outside clear.

Somehow, Jess got to her feet, carrying Dev with her and they surged forward, past the consoles, stepping on the enemy bodies and joining the other agents and techs at the doorway as they bolted outside.

And then they stopped. The huge central corridor meetpoint was filled with rapidly falling enemy, with hand blaster fire coming from the hallway leading down to the caverns and power arcs being fired from the technical gear carried by the bio alts on the other.

"Holy shit." Elaine grunted, holding a bleeding gash on her side.

Then one jump-suited figure dodged to the front, and yelled out in that same, unfamiliar battle language, a powerful and commanding tone that cut through all the noise as the figure swept their arm up and the arcs died down.

There were only two of the enemy left, and they dropped their guns, and lifted their hands, staggering back against the wall and slamming their backs against the rock surface.

And then it was briefly quiet again.

Jess forced herself forward, nudging her way through the crowd of bio alts who turned their heads, then parted quickly when they saw who it was. She emerged at the front of them, and stopped next to Dan Kurok, who was battered and covered in grime.

April limped forward from across the lines, leaving a crowd of support staff in varicolored jump suits behind her.

"Next time." Dan Kurok finally said, spitting out a little blood. "I'm going to pretend I didn't see the memo."

"Fuck yah." April agreed, lifting a shaking hand to touch a blast on the side of her head. "They definitely didn't go over this in battle school."

Jess put a hand on both of their shoulders. "Nice timing. Thanks for saving our asses."

"Thank you, for drawing the attention of every god damned one of them to ops and leaving the halls clear for us." Doctor Dan said. "Wheres. ah."

Dev had followed Jess through the crowd of her fellow sets, and now was standing quietly next to her, just behind the three of them, with Elaine, and Brent, and Doug after her.

Clint emerged from the group of armed workers, and walked over to join them. "Crappy day." He was holding one arm close to his body. "Now what?"

They were all silent briefly then everyone looked at Jess.

Jess looked around at the smoke filled, body filled, stale air filled space. Then she sighed and looked at Kurok. "Think you can get the systems started back up?"

Doctor Dan shrugged. "Suppose we'll find out." He looked up as a loud rumble sounded, shuddering through the halls. "Let's just hope the rest of their fleet isn't in that storm."

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The one undamaged place was the mess hall. Jess was more than glad to be sprawled in one of the chairs in the back, as bio alts and citadel techs mingled and worked on temporary rigs set up on tables and counters everywhere.

"Got the batts on line at least." Clint had taken a seat next to her, looking exhausted. "Air handlers are cycling."

"I hear." Jess responded quietly. "If anyone can get the mains back, it'll be the doc."

"Who is he, Jess?" Clint asked, keeping his voice low. "I heard him talk their talk in the hall."

It was hard to even muster up the energy to respond. Kurok had given her another shot of something, and that had started the pain fading but Jess knew she was almost at her limits. "He was my father's first partner." She answered. "He was a tech. One of us."

"Oh." Clint looked surprised. "Really?"

Jess nodded. "My dad could talk their battle talk too." She added, not really sure if that was true, but not really caring.

“Right yeah.” The mech senior nodded. “And hey, he made Dev, right?”

“He made Dev.” Jess agreed. “And he sure did a bang up job there.” She looked up as her partner came over, putting down a cup of water next to her hand and taking the seat next to her with one of her own. “How ya doing, Devvie?”

“I’m really tired.” Dev responded in a soft, husky voice.

“Well, seeing as you were beating up guys five times your size and throwing me around like a rag doll I’m not surprised.” Jess rested her chin on her hand. “Can we talk sometime about how techs aren’t supposed to step in front of a blaster pointed at their agent?”

Dev took a sip from her cup and swallowed it.

“You did that, Dev?” Clint asked. “Wow.”

“She did that.”

The outer door slid open and April and Mike entered, steering their way through the busy crowd back to where Jess was seated.

“I’ll go finish trying to work on the security systems.” Dev got up and eased past them as they came over. “Excuse me.”

The two agents sat down. “We got all the trash taken out.” Mike said. “Had the bios bring up those donkey carts they use and hauled the bodies out and dumped em.”

“Got the prisoners locked up in the storage facilities.” April reported. “So Kurok says now he might be able to get the comp out of unlock since we have only friendly chips inside.”

“How’s the weather outside?”

“Sucks.” Mike said. “Raining like crazy. Flooding in the carrier bay, what’s left of it.” His jumpsuit was wet. “I got into my carrier though, and ran scan. Nothing in range.”

“Good.”

“Your rig’s in one piece too.” Mike added. “I think if they get comp back up, Dev had it tied in.”

“She did.” Jess agreed. “But without comp we don’t know how much scan and comm got sent back to the otherside and I..” She paused, as the lights flickered overhead, morphing from white, to red, then back to a blue tinged daylight that meant normal, whatever that really meant anymore. “Ah.”

Clint got up. “Mains are back.” He looked relieved. “Let me start getting things ramped.”

“Thanks Clint.” Jess commented, blinking a little in the new illumination. Behind her, she heard the mech in the mess systems start a low buzzing, and the working teams looked around, visibly brightening at the returning power.

“Sure, Jess.” Clint blushed a little, then hurried off.

April inspected the bandage on her arm. “Seems like ten years since we showed up here.” She commented. “Glad to see the doc got systems back. He’s pretty wicked good. I was watching him on that comp.”

“Well, I guess that’s where Dev gets it from.” Jess said, after a moment. “Figure he used his genotype.”

“That’s kinda weird.” Mike said, after a bit of an awkward pause.

Jess shrugged. “Is what it is.” She looked past them to the door, which had opened, and admitted Elaine. “Whats up?”

“Comp came up, ten seconds after that comms did and there’s a full sec broadcast coming in to your sig.” Elaine said.

“Urgent repeat.”

With a sigh, Jess pushed herself to her feet, glad, at least, that standing no longer felt like she was having knives poked into her from all angles. “Could be good, could be bad.” She said. “Let’s go find out.”

They walked back to central ops, and as she entered, Jess spotted Dev working at one of the consoles. Her partner looked up as she came in, and as their eyes met Jess almost forgot completely what she’d come for. She angled her steps to the side and went to Dev’s workbench instead of the main comms board. “Hey.”

“They have a message for you.” Dev offered up at once.

“I have a message for you.” Jess ignored the rest of the room, and put her hand up against Dev’s cheek. “That is, you look really stressed. What’s up?”

“Jess” Elaine called over.

“Hang on.” Jess lifted a hand in her direction with out turning around. “Devvie?”

Dev’s expression altered, and she smiled faintly. “I’m okay.” She told Jess. “Just a bit overwhelmed by all the stuff that

happened, I guess.”

“Hang in there, Dev.” Jess stroked her cheek with the edge of her thumb. “Just hang in there, and maybe we'll get to sit down and talk about it soon. Okay?”

“Yes.” Dev's smile broadened a little. “Now you should take your call, Jess. I think it's important.”

“Not as important to me as you are” Jess knew the whole room was listening, and found herself not caring at all. “Try and chill.” Now, finally she turned and walked over to the big comms station and sat down next to Elaine, tucking a set of ear buds in her ears and extending her hand to the scan pad.

“That's fucked up.” Elaine commented. “But you know, at this point I don't care.”

Jess smiled briefly and put her hand flat on the pad, feeling the tickle as it validated her, and the embedded chips beneath her skin. She looked up as the screen lit and tried not to blink, as the scan beam hit her eyes for a brief instant.

Then the screen cleared, and she heard the static and phasing of the looped message.

“HQ HQ HQ.” The metallic, male voice echoed softly in her ears. “Drake J, standby.”

“Ack” Jess answered quietly. “Drake, J on comm.”

Then the line switched, and she heard the rumble of carrier engines and the screen lit to reveal a male face looking back at her, older and scarred, with thick, wavy gray hair. “Drake.”

“Yes.” Jess responded. “Jesslyn Drake, senior agent, Base 10.”

He nodded. “We got a high density squirt detailing an attack by force. Validate.” He ordered. “Benson Alters on comm.”

Jess remembered him, from school. “Yes sir, I remember you from in flight tactics class.” She commented. “The squirt was valid. Details in person.”

The man relaxed just a trifle. “Ack.” He said, to both her spoken and unspoken words. “Due local approx two. Clear entrance?”

Jess shook her head visibly so he could see it.

“Ack.” He responded. “Please keep this channel open. Report as needed.”

“Ack.” Jess, at last, felt a sense of relief. “Will do.”

The visible image disappeared, but the waveform remained, and she keyed it to overhead comms sending the soft sound of the open carrier into the room. “Open sig.” She announced. “We've got fleet inbound.”

The sounds of utter relief around her matched her internal feelings exactly. “Apparently a message from here got through.” She said. “So whoever made that happen, I love you.”

After a brief pause, everyone looked at Dev, who looked up in surprise, a visible blush appearing on her face. “Um.” She cleared her throat. “I don't think I did that.”

“Did I say you did?” Jess's brows arched slightly.

Dev blushed more deeply.

“Now, if I was a betting woman...” Elaine drawled. “And I checked the logs, I bet we'd find someone's creds on that message in here.”

Doctor Dan looked up from a console he had his head completely inserted into. “Please don't make Dev pass out.” He said. “She's had a tough day.” He got up from the floor and sat down. “And I think that was the best news we could have hoped for.”

“Got that right.” Jess sighed. “Maybe this is closer to over.”

“Let me make sure everyone's on PTT.” Elaine was busy with her board. “Full power's back, and the non coms are getting the rest of daily operations up.”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan said. “My advice now is, we all get some rest before the cavalry gets here, and starts asking questions. They'll be on scan and keep off any other funny business here.” He glanced at Jess. “You might want to take a trip down to med.”

Questions. Yes. Jess recalled all the things they'd been through, and how that was all going to look to HQ. “Let's hope they believe us.” She stood up. “Let's go, Dev.”

Obediently Dev left her work and joined Jess at the door, dusting her hands off as they left ops, and walked together down the hall. “Are we going to med?”

“Yeah.” Jess said. “I need another shot, and you've got a bump on your head.”

“I do. It hurts.” The bio alt agreed. “Is it over now, Jess? Did we win?”

Jess walked along in silence for a few moments, then she nodded. “For now, I think it is.” She allowed. “And I think we survived more than we won. But I'll take it.”

Dev reached out and took her hand, closing her fingers around Jess's. “Me too.”

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[Concluded in Part 26](#)