

Partners

Part 26

Jess paused to dust a bit of debris off her sleeve, before she presented herself to the intelligence room, holding her hand to the plate and feeling the tickle of scan as it read her.

The cavalry had, in fact arrived. A dozen carriers and six big transports, carrying enough troops to handle an invasion force, which is what they'd apparently been expecting. Hard to say, really, who had been the more surprised when the most they had to do was post patrols and find places to park since the carrier bay was half in pieces.

The door opened, and she entered, giving the three men at the end of the table a nod before she settled herself in the end chair facing them.

"Agent Drake." Bensen Alters leaned on his elbows. "Thanks for coming to talk with us. I know it's been a long couple of days for you."

"It has." Jess said, resting her own elbows on the table. Her nerves had finally returned to normal and she'd gotten enough med to function at least until this part was over. She was tired, and wanted her bed, and she suspected that showed.

"You doing all right, Drake? I saw you logged into med earlier."

Jess nodded. "Got caught by three deflected blasters." She said. "Rang my brain out."

She'd been the first they'd called, as she'd figured. She was the senior agent in charge, after all, regardless even of the other position Bain had dangled in front of her. Now, having to face these men, she was glad she hadn't officially accepted it.

Alters cleared his throat. "This is John Bezette, and Jason Elk." He introduced the other two. "Fleet captains."

"Agent." Elk nodded at her. "Your father and I went to the academy together."

Jess nodded back. "Pretty much everyone in the corps has gone to something or other with some part of my family." She admitted wryly. "I have yet to meet a long termer who doesn't have no shit I was there stories about one of us."

Elk smiled briefly, lifting a hand in acknowledgment.

"When we got your message, there were many who found it very hard to believe." Alters said. "In fact, quite a few people thought it was a trick, aimed at luring us in to a trap."

"I can imagine that." Jess agreed. "Especially if that was the first you were hearing of problems out here."

Alters nodded. "Exactly."

Elk looked around. "Based on what we can see here, that message got out just in time."

Jess nodded again. "Not really sure where to start." She said. "But I guess I should begin with advising you that Alexander Bain is dead."

The three men exchanged glances.

"I killed him." Jess continued, after a brief pause. "When he informed us that he intended to turn over this facility into enemy hands, and that he was working on their behalf to overturn not only this organization, but all of Atlantia." She folded her hands. "There were five witnesses to that aside from myself, including Doctor Kurok, from LifeForce."

Elk sighed. "Well, that's news." He glanced at Alters. "Carlsen was right. He's going to be insufferable."

Alters stood up. "What I am about to say is probably going to surprise you, Drake." He said. "But you've done us a great service. Aside from responding to your SOS, my task here was to find Alex." He looked profoundly relieved. "I'm damn glad he's dead. I wouldn't have known where to start asking him questions."

Jess was, in fact, quite surprised to hear that. "You knew about his game?" She asked, cautiously.

Alters glanced at the two captains. "Just before your note came in we finished beating off an attack on the west coast facilities." He said, quietly. "Now I understand what part that had to play in it. They draw us there, by the time we recover, they have a firm beachhead here."

"Except they don't." Jess remarked. "Somehow, we stopped them."

"Somehow." Elk smiled grimly.

"He killed Bricker." She mentioned. "Bain, I mean."

They stared at Jess. "John Bricker's dead?" Elk asked, after a startled pause.

Jess nodded. "First day Bain got here. Said he.." She shrugged. "Who the hell would question the old man? We all just took it for granted that he was trusted. Ops was sending notifies back to base, had no idea comm was looped and locked."

Alters nodded. "Bricker was his nephew." He saw Jess nod. "He told you that?" He watched her nod again. "We knew there was a leak here. He said he knew who it was."

"Apparently he did. Intimately." Jess responded dryly. "Bricker knew something too. He wanted to bring in techs from what he knew was an untainted source."

"The bio alts." Alters nodded. "That must have spooked Alex. According to the shuttle's records, he arrived on the same transport the test case did."

"He certainly did." Jess considered what a personal mixed blessing that had turned out to be. "Surprised the hell out of everyone but then, I was glad to see him."

"Were you? Oh yes." Alters looked at a bit of plas in his hands. "He reinstated you.. promoted you.. several times." He looked up at Jess. "Definitely favored you."

"Until I knifed him." She smiled grimly. "He wasn't too happy with that."

Elk studied her. "If it all went bad, he was going to make you the leak." He stated. "You had top creds here."

"Occurred to me." Jess agreed quietly. "But we didn't much care about consequences at that point. Just dying right."

"Lot of people were lost here." Bezette spoke up for the first time, in a soft, slightly husky tone.

"Too many." Jess said. "Far too damn many."

"But it would have been far more if you hadn't come back, Agent." Alters rebutted gently. "Tell you what. Let us review the centops security monitor feed, and then we can talk about what happens next."

Jess nodded, and stood. "Fine." She said. "I'll be in my quarters if you want me." She headed for the door.

"Drake." Alters called out.

Jess stopped, and paused at the door, her hand on the sill.

"What do you think now, about that whole bio alt thing?" The commander asked. "Seems like a crazy idea to us."

Finally, Jess smiled a real smile back at them. "Best thing that ever happened to me." She stated bluntly. "Bricker was right. You won't ever get something like me from that, but I wouldn't trade my tech for any other on the planet." She hit the door latch and went through it, leaving them three men behind.

"Huh." Elk mused. "Didn't expect that answer." He glanced at Alters. "Want to have a talk with this thing while the comp is spooling?"

"I do." Alters said, in a musing tone. "I really do."

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Dev entered the room with Doctor Dan at her heels, his hand planted firmly on her shoulder. She paused on seeing the three men sitting there, then she went to the table and sat down.

"I think we just intended to see Tech NM-Dev-1." Alters said, mildly.

"I never paid attention to anyone else's intentions before. I'm not aiming to start now." Doctor Dan took a seat next to Dev and folded his hands. "Dev can speak for herself, but if you think you're going throw an interrogation at her, you've got me to deal with."

"Oh we do?" Alters stared at him in fascination. "And you are...?"

"Ah." Doctor Dan leaned back and hiked one knee up, circling it with his hands. "Currently? Daniel J. Kurok, Chief geneticist and senior administrator of LifeForce, Bio station 2."

"Ah." Alters nodded and sat down, as though that explained Kurok's presence. "You made her."

"I did." Kurok agreed. "But more to the point, I'm legally responsible for Dev."

"I'm sure you have all your legalities in place, Doctor, but this is really an Interforce matter." Elk said, politely.

"Ah." Kurok mimicked Alters earlier grunt. "Well in that case, consider me DJ Kurok, senior tech, Field class 32." He smiled at them. "Alex was kind enough to recommission me, to make traveling the halls easier. I didn't think he expected the eventual outcome of that." He pointed at his collar. "So these aren't fake. I earned them the hard way."

The three officers stared at him for a moment in silence. "Well." Alters finally said. "I guess you can stay then, since it's likely we're not going to make you leave."

Doctor Dan smiled his gentle smile at them. “Brilliant answer. Carry on.”

Dev had been sitting quietly, listening to it all. She found herself extremely glad to have her mentor at her side, and it was very interesting to hear him speak about both of his identities. “Thanks, Doctor Dan.”

He patted her hand. “Now, go on. Ask away.” He instructed Alters. “I assume you haven't seen the sec vid yet or we probably would not be bothering with this session.”

“It's spooling.” Elk agreed. “We really just wanted to talk to her about her experience here.”

Dev folded her hands. “I have had an excellent experience here.” She stated. “I've gotten to do a great deal of work, and I think my participation has been a positive one.” She cleared her throat. “Where would you like me to start?”

The three officers exchanged looks again. “Well.” Alters cleared his own throat. “How about at the beginning?”

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“Holy shit.” Elk turned and looked at Alters as the door closed behind their erstwhile interviewees. “Is she for real?”

“Can't wait to see those vids.” Alters had his chin resting on his fist. “She's a lot smarter than I thought she'd be. That's a serious brain in there.”

“No kidding.” Bezette mused. “I saw the original vids from the Gibraltar run. I thought it was a joke, you know? Someone screwed around with the recorder, but then we got the intel from the other side on the blowout. That kid can fly.”

“So Drake pegged it.” Alters chuckled. “Bricker was right. But can they duplicate that? She's a developmental, that doc said. A one off.”

“Guessing he can.” Elk said. “He knows what it takes better than anyone does. Better than any of us, anyway.” He shook his head. “DJ Kurok. Who'd have guessed? Never did know what happened to him after he mustered out.”

“You knew him back then?” Alters asked, curiously.

Elk shook his head. “Not so much. He was Justin Drake's tech. Justy raved about him. Never had another partner like him, from what he said, before he retired. Always thought there was a story there. Justy wasn't emotional about much but he always was about DJ.”

“He came from the other side.” Bezette spoke up. “That was the big deal about him – he got swiped as a juv in a capture in the dev station over there. They brought him over, someone had the big idea to see if he could be turned, put him in psych, they figured he might do for field school.”

“What?” Alters said. “From the other side? Were they nuts?”

“Nope, that's why they paired him with Justin.” Elk nodded. “Family bleeds Interforce colors, you know? Someone in psych told me there was no such thing as un-turnable but Drakes were the closest thing to it. Solid as granite to the point of pigheaded blind devotion to the cause.”

“Drake.” Bezette sighed. “Family full of wildcats and wide eyed insanity. Glad they kill on our side though, tell you what.”

“Tell you what.” Alters agreed. “So did Kurok turn out to be trustworthy?”

“Hm.” Elk drummed his thumbs on the table. “Now that I'm remembering all this... I think they weren't ever sure if he totally bought into the force, but what he did buy into was Justin Drake. So maybe it all worked out that way. He was a damn good tech, from what I heard.”

“Justin left a lot of enemies on that side.” Bezette stated. “He knew he had limited time out. Never cared, though. Too bad they got him – heard his shooter got a medal for it.”

“Based on these..” Alters held up the plas. “His kid paid them back for it in typical double Drake fashion.”

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Jess was lying on her back in her bed, hands folded over her stomach and eyes closed when she heard Dev enter her own quarters next door.

It felt impossibly good to just be relaxing, having someone else be in charge of the chaos for a while. She was mildly curious as to what would end up happening to her, but where once that would have given her a gut ball of anxiety now she felt almost nothing about it.

Would they muster her? Jess doubted it. No matter what the ins and outs of what they'd been through she knew she'd done what she could and the bottom line was, the base was still intact, and still theirs.

So it would be, what it would be. Jess turned her head as the door between their quarters opened, and Dev entered. She came over and sat down on the edge of Jess's bed, and returned her smile. “Hello.”

“Hello, Devvie. You're a sight for sore eyes.”

Dev leaned closer. “Are your eyes sore too?” She asked in a concerned tone. “What does med do for that?”

Jess chuckled. “That's just one of those stupid archaic sayings, Dev. It means I'm glad to see you.” She reached out a hand and touched Dev's leg. “They grill ya?”

Dev eyed her. “You don't really mean cook, right?” She hazarded. “They asked me some questions. But Doctor Dan was there to keep it all straight. He told them they weren't allowed to be mean to me.”

“I like him more and more everyday.” Jess asserted. “They weren't mean to you, were they?”

Dev shook her head. “No. They asked me a lot about things here, and how I did tech, but they were all right.” She studied Jess' face. “I hope they let me stay.”

Anxiety from a completely different direction smacked Jess in the kisser. “Oh...wh. Wait.” She jerked up, propping her weight on her elbows. “What makes you think they won't?”

Dev blinked in some surprise. “Well, they said this was something that the man Bain had approved, and now..” She let the words trail off, seeing the alarm in her partner's face. “I think they thought I did good work, Jess.”

“Fuck.” Jess was now sitting bolt upright in bed. “They asked me how I felt about the project before I walked out of there and I told them it was the best thing that ever happened to me.” She ran her hands through her hair. “I didn't think those guys were that dense... let me go talk to..” She paused and looked at Dev, who had captured her fingers and was holding them. “What?”

“Really the best thing?”

Jess took a breath, then paused, caught by that husky whisper. “Um.” She felt a blush heat her cheeks unexpectedly. “Yeah actually it is.”

Dev exhaled slowly.

“So let me go talk to them.” Jess rolled up out of the bed and headed for the door, pausing when her comms lit. “Damn it.” She swerved the desk and hit the relay. “Drake.”

“Agent Drake? Alters voice filtered through. “We've done reviewing the vid. Can you come to the debrief room, please.”

Jess exhaled. “Sure” She clicked off. “C'mon. You come with me. We might as well find out our fates together.”

Dev scrambled to stand up and came over to join her willingly. “Will they get upset?”

“Don't care.” Jess took her hand and led her out the door, glad, in a sense that soon she'd know the worst, one way or the other. Dev leaving? Screw that. She'd go with her. Jess was pretty sure she could talk Kurok into taking her to station, if she had to.

It was only minutes walk and they were at the debrief, and she scanned them in. Alters was alone in the room, and he looked up as they entered. “Ah.” He said. “Agent Drake, I didn't expect...”

“This is my partner.” Jess stated, taking a seat and motioning Dev to do the same. “Deal with it.”

Alters studied both of them. Dev was wearing her tech's jumpsuit, with her insignia on the collar, and with the suit fastened all the way up, her collar was covered and invisible and as such, she and Jess looked like any other agent and tech pair he'd ever seen. “Okay.” He agreed mildly. “This won't take long anyhow.”

Jess folded her hands and waited.

“The vids conclusively back up what you told us.” Alters said. “In fact, they overtold the story. You left out a few things.” He added. “I have packaged them up, and squirted them back to HQ for their records and review.” He cleared his throat. “They will have to make the overall decisions on what happens to this base, and North base, in terms of personnel. I think you realize we can't let Alex's appointments stand.”

Jess nodded “I expected that.” She stated.

“On the other hand, my rank does allow me to make field appointments and so, with the concurrence of central HQ, I will confirm you in your senior ranking.” Alters said. “Whether they will eventually appoint you further is out of my hands at this time.”

“I don't want any further appointment.”

Alters looked up from the plas in his hands at her. “At this time, I understand that.”

“At any time.” Jess stated clearly. “I don't want to be advanced in rank. I want to remain a field ops agent.”

“You could change your mind in the future, Drake.” Alters said in a mild tone. “Some of us did y'know.”

"I could." Jess admitted. "But I probably won't"

"Probably not, if you've bred as true as these records indicate." He smiled faintly. "But in any case, I have officially updated your records fleetwide to include your senior rank and so, I guess, congratulations are in order."

"Thanks." Jess nodded, and stopped, waiting. Since he didn't speak again, she turned her head and regarded Dev, then looked back at him, eyebrows lifting in question.

For a moment he paused, a puzzled expression on his face. Then it cleared. "Ah." He shuffled the plas. "Doctor Kurok has agreed to pursue the continuance of the biological alternative technical program." He looked up at Dev. "Though it surprised the hell out of HQ, and no doubt will continue to confound many in the corps I agree with you in that this is a very valuable project that should be continued."

Dev sat up a touch straighter, and her eyes brightened, but she remained silent.

Alters leaned forward "There is a matter of your legal contract." He addressed Dev directly. "We have to sort that out. We can't have you beholden to an outside organization no matter how helpful they are. You understand?"

"Not really." Dev said. "But as long as I get to stay with Jess I don't care."

Alters blinked. "Ah."

"I've got some ideas." Jess said. "I'll talk to Kurok."

"Ah." Alters repeated. "We'll be leaving ten carriers and two destroyers behind." He said. "HQ is sending cargo planes out with resupply and re-provisioning until you can get things sorted here." He glanced at the plas again. "So the final thing I have to discuss, Drake, is a legal matter."

Jess managed to stop internally bouncing with her own happiness long enough to focus on him. "Legal matter? You going to charge me with something?"

"No." Alters bit off a grin of his own. "I wouldn't know where to start with that, given claims from various agencies so we're going to ignore all that as we usually do. Our legal team in HQ will deal with damage quotes and the rest."

Jess nodded. "Fine."

"No, the legal issue is property allotment." He folded his hands and looked at Jess. "You're not supposed to have any."

She shrugged. "I don't."

"You do." Alters said. "It registered at HQ just prior to all this." He circled his finger round the room. "You attained majority stake in Drake's Bay."

Jess blinked. "No I..." She paused. "Oh shit." The exclamation issued from her as she realized. "My father coded his shares to me but that was only in the event I went civ."

Alters nodded. "And for 36 minutes, Drake, you did." He said, "When you processed final exit, until Bain had you rescind. your resignation and were reinstated back in you were civ."

Jess sat back, honestly dumbfounded. "Oh hell." She finally blurted.

"In fact, if Stephen Bock had, as Bain stated, killed you on exit, it would have been an illegal act and we'd have been liable for it." Alters concluded. "Would have been damn messy, if your estate made a claim."

Dev merely watched both of them, looking from Alters to her partner, unsure of what, really was going on.

"So what do I have to do?" Jess asked, after a long moment of silence. "My father did that, apparently, to keep the Bay out of the hands of my family .. or.. really my mother." She said. "She's dead now."

"We heard that." Alters said. "I'm not really sure what you do with this. I assume you didn't know it was going to happen?"

Jess shook her head. "Didn't find out until I was at my mother's out-processing it was even in the cards." She said.

"Explains why my brother freaked out though. He must have gotten a notify..." She paused in sudden realization. "And why he called me at base night after I came back in."

And why she'd gotten that call, to attend her mother's out-processing. "Probably were waiting for me to say something. Make a claim." She shook her head. "I had no fucking clue."

"Huh." He frowned. "I'll have to ask legal. But until then, you are the controlling shareholder of record." He eyed her. "You might want to record a will in that case. Until it's sorted."

Jess shook her head again. "Yeah, okay" She sighed. "What a mess."

Alters' face twitched. "Pardon me if I don't sympathize." He held up the stack of plas. "We're going to be sorting **this** mess out for months." He stood up. "Well, Drake, good luck. Good work." He added. "I'm sure commendations and rewards will

be coming down the pipe after this is all processed.”

Jess dared a glance at her partner. “Got what I wanted.” She said, quietly. “Everything else is gravy.”

Dev grinned. “Me too.”

Alters shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Field ops.” He waved the stack of plas. “Dismissed, people. Go get a beer and a rest. You earned it.”

And finally, Jess felt that sensation of impending disaster ease, as she stood up and thought about just an ordinary night after what seemed like an eternity of standing on the edge of an abyss. “Sounds good. C'mon Dev. Where'd we leave off? Me teaching you to surf, right?”

“Right.” Dev agreed, as they left the debrief chamber and moved back out into the hall. “And you said you could do something with fish.”

“Ah, yes. My cooking skills that I bragged about. Right.”

“And maybe we can take another shower.”

“Sure.”

“And practice that sex thing again.”

Jess laughed, putting her arm around Dev's shoulders as they eased into the slowly growing traffic in the halls, as normal life started coming back around them.

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It was understandably quiet in the lounge. Everyone was busy getting things back together, and time to relax and drink would be found later, after the biggest portion of the tasks had been completed. So that left the big room silent and mostly darkened, save a few tables in the back that were dimly lit and occupied.

“So.” Elk put down his beer and gazed at the quiet, blond man across from him. “You're going to go back?”

“Yes.” Dan Kurok rested his hands on his stomach, letting out a brief, tired sigh. “I think I've done enough for a while here, eh?” His eyes twinkled gently. “Don't you?”

The carrier squad commander lifted his glass and tipped it slightly in Kurok's direction. “As you say.” He stretched his legs out, glancing around at the room. “Take a while to get back to normal around here. They lost a lot of people, not to mention what happened at North.”

“Yes.” Doctor Dan's face grew somber. “But if you look at it another way, it's a chance at a fresh start here.” He steepled his fingers together. “I get the feeling there was contention even before what happened with tech Joshua.”

Elk grunted.

“Drake's good.” Kurok said, after a brief pause.

“You'd say that, of course.” Elk responded, mildly.

“I would.” Doctor Dan smiled gently. “But I would even if her father hadn't been my partner.” He exhaled “And a good friend.”

“Happens I agree.” The carrier commander said. “I knew Justin. His kid's better, if those vids are any indication. More driven, more flexible. To have snookered Bain?” He snorted lightly and shook his head. “She took him like a neo.”

“She did.” Kurok smiled more broadly. “Took me, for that matter. Maybe Alex bought her story because he saw my face. I was..” He shook his head. “She hit every button I had.”

“I saw.” Elk smiled. “And she keyed in that nomad female. Don't ask me how. Didn't say a thing, and that kid just knew. Lot of potential there.”

“Mm.” Doctor Dan sighed. “But the second I saw her start to go, I knew. Same body motion as Justin going for a kill.” He gazed pensively across the room. “Damn I still miss him.”

“I think he missed us.” Elk said. “Damn pity what happened to him. After this, I'm wondering if that wasn't something that didn't just happen. Wasn't just them getting lucky, and getting a bead on him.”

“I sure hope not.” Doctor Dan responded quietly. He picked up his glass and sipped from it. “He was too good for that. There had to be effort behind it.”

Elk studied him. “Wasn't much effort behind the revenge for that, apparently.”

A brief, grim smile appeared on the scientist's face. “They'd forgotten. I hadn't.” He answered. “You should have seen the look on Tagaron's face when he realized. Been a very long time since I broke a neck.” He flexed his hands a little. “Glad I

remembered how.”

Elk drummed his fingers on the table, a look of distracted memory on his own face. “Surprised you got an out.”

“Me too.” Doctor Dan agreed, with a more relaxed grin. “When I heard all the bells going off I thought to myself, well, hang on then, what’s all this for one overage wingnut without so much as a table knife running round?” He started chuckling, and Elk joined him. “Of course I’m laughing now, but it was definitely a relief to look out from under a pileup and see those kids causing chaos all around me.”

“Good people.”

“The best.” Kurok said. “Even if I do say so myself seeing as I made one of them.”

“Ah well.” Elk sighed. “We estimate they can put a shuttle in here in about a week. Can you stand being stuck here that long? I can take you back to Rainer Island and get on there if you like.”

“No, a week is fine.” The blond haired man said. “Give me a chance to say farewell to Dev, and see if I can do anything more to help here.”

Elk nodded. “Make more like her, and that’s a real opportunity for change, DJ.” He said somberly. “Some real potential there.” He stood up and dusted his hands off. “Then if I can’t offer you a ride, I’m going to get my people ready to head back. There’s a lot of commotion about this at HQ, and I can only imagine how many meetings I’m going to have to attend over it.”

Doctor Dan waved his hand genially at him. “Safe trip.” He said, watching the man leave, before he dropped his hand to his thigh and exhaled.

Around him he could hear the faint rumbling hum of the power generators, and he took in a breath tinged with the scent of salt, and machine oil and electrons, so peculiar to this place. So different than the station. He let his thumb rub over the fabric of the jumpsuit he was wearing, deep green in color, once as familiar to him as his own skin.

After a moment, the door to the lounge opened, and Jess entered. She paused and looked around, spotting him in the back and heading over towards him.

He had to smile. The tall, lanky frame was so like Justin’s, save the differences of sex. Jess had the same way of walking, and the same way of holding her shoulders. He watched her until she came right up next to him then gestured to the seat Elk had recently abandoned. “Hello there.”

“Hi.” Jess sat down. “Scan said you were in here. Thought I’d stop by to see how you were.”

Even the vocal timbre was Justin’s. “Oh, just fine thanks. Can I buy you a beer?” He leaned back, feeling a sense of relaxation at her presence. “Getting things back together?”

“As they can be.” Jess said, looking up and catching the eye of the bio alt server, and nodding at him. “Gonna take a while.”

“Mm.”

Jess held out the package she’d been carrying. “Thought you might like this.” She said “Sea jacket, and some stuff of my dad’s they sent me.”

Startled, he reached out and took it without thinking, putting it down on the table. “Thanks.” He said, after a brief pause. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“No.” Jess agreed, smiling as the bio alt came over and handed her a mug of beer. “Dev likes this, y’know.” She indicated the beverage. “She’s a hoot.”

That brought a smile to Doctor Dan’s face and distracted him from the package. “I would accuse you of trying to corrupt her but I started that process the night we left the station.” He admitted. “I wanted to make sure she was exposed to a little vice before she got here.”

Jess chuckled. “She’s done okay. I took her to Jonton’s in Quebec City and introduced her to hopping shrimp.”

“Ahh.” Kurok’s eyes lit up a bit. “Now that, I miss. Even given all the product we have on station, I remember those shrimp.” He licked his lips in memory. “And Jonton. Quite a character.”

Jess leaned back in her chair and hiked one boot up over onto her knee. “I hear you’re going to make more of her.”

Kurok studied his glass for a moment, then he looked up and met Jess’s eyes. “I’m going to design a production set, for operations technical.” He said. “But there’ll never be another one of her.”

Jess nodded. “Too much of you in there?” She ventured, seeing a sharpening of those pale eyes. “C’mon doc, look in the mirror.”

A moment of delicate balance, then Kurok smiled, and his expression softened. "For a minute I almost forgot who I was talking to." He said. "Yes, I contributed a few spirals to Dev. But she's turned out to be her own construct. She's grown so much just in the short time she's been here I hardly recognize her anymore."

"Uh huh."

"So yes, I will create techs for Interforce." Doctor Dan said. "Who knows? Maybe I'll figure out how to make some of your type too." His eyes twinkled at her. "I have some Drake DNA up there, somewhere I'm sure and now that I know about those gills of yours I want to have a closer look at it."

Jess's expressions sobered, though. "Oh, doc." She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. "You don't want to do that." She exhaled. "After all, what would they do with us then? Give us a shot of trunk and out-process us at age six?" She saw his face go still. "We all know what the battery is."

"Jess."

"We know." She shrugged a little. "We know it finds the misfits. The psychos." Her voice took on a slight huskiness. "The serial killers. The twisted loners. Finds the kids with no conscience and prone to violence." She looked up and met his eyes. "Finds them and separates them out and gives them to Interforce."

Kurok exhaled, looking into those calm, resigned blue eyes.

"Hey it gives us structure and discipline." Jess's tone turned a bit mocking. "Make us feel special, and trusted and noble right up to the point they put a gun to your head at grad and you either go in, or go down" She glanced off into the distance. "When you find out what kind of monster you really are."

Doctor Dan had put his cup down, and leaned forward towards her, resting his elbows on his knees so his hands were very close to Jess's. "Except they're wrong."

Her lips twitched. "You know better than that."

"I do." He spoke gently. "I know better. I'm a geneticist now, Jess. I study humanity for a living." He reached out and touched Jess's fingers. "More to the point, I was able to study someone like you at very close quarters for quite some time. Trust me. Your father was no monster, and neither are you."

Jess reluctantly met his gaze.

"You have too much heart." He smiled gently. "You care too much, Jess, and you love too easily." He saw the blush, and closed his hand around hers. "That's the only reason I agreed to leave Dev here. I trust her with you."

They were both quiet for a bit. "Push comes to shove, they don't want you to have hooks in her." Jess said, in a serious tone.

"Reasonable." Doctor Dan admitted. "But I won't transfer her legal status to Interforce." He stated. "I trust you. Not necessarily them."

"No, you wouldn't.. and shouldn't." Jess's eyes took on a glint. "But you might consider transferring her contract to the controlling stakeholder of a long established settlement."

Kurok studied her warily. "What settlement?" He asked, in a puzzled tone.

"Drake's Bay."

"Dr.." Doctor Dan leaned forward and stared intently at her. "And the other half of this story is??? I know how they feel about bio alts at the Bay, Jesslyn. I was surprised you took her there."

"She's my partner."

Kurok shrugged one shoulder. "Yes, of course." He admitted. "That would matter but I still don't understand."

Jess signaled the server. "That'll take another round." She said. "It's a quirky string of circumstances." She cleared her throat. "And a delicate piece of timing."

Kurok laughed gently. "Now I know I'm talking to a Drake." He shook his head, and set his glass down, folding his arms and waiting. "Quirky is the only kind of circumstance they have."

**

Dev wiggled her toes in contentment, turning a page of her book as she lay comfortably on the couch in her quarters. She had a cup of hot tea by her elbow, and a pad nearby showing the ops consoles, and it felt very very good to just relax for a while.

She had one of her off duty jumpsuits on, and she'd had herself another shower, and she'd actually gotten a chance to order some resupply on top of it, though she didn't expect to happen until they got all the rest of the citadel sorted out.

The agents and officers who had come from HQ were standing watches, and at the moment she thought he man Alters was

the one who was in charge.

Everyone still seemed to be looking to Jess for answers though, and Dev thought that was good, and right, and that Jess was enjoying it. After all, she managed to fend off the whole bunch of bad guys by herself and as April had said, it was a trust thing.

So funny, really since she'd been brought here specifically to address a trust thing, hadn't she?

Dev read a few pages, then she put the book down, and folded her hands on her stomach, gazing quietly at the ceiling of her relaxation area. So much had happened since then.

Doctor Dan had spoken to her. Dev still felt a warm sensation thinking about it, he'd praised her so much she hadn't even known what to say after a bit. She felt like she'd really just tried to do her best with everything, but he seemed to think she'd overrun even the highest expectations he'd had for her programming.

So awesome.

Dev stretched luxuriously and settled back onto her couch, then glanced up at her door as it opened and Jess entered. "Hello, up here."

"Devvvieeeee!" Jess surprisingly gamboled up the steps and pounced on the couch, nearly bowling both of them off it and onto the floor. "What are you up to?"

Dev goggled wide eyed at her. "Um." She she looked around "Up to my relaxation space?"

Jess rolled off onto the floor and stretched out on the padded surface, extending her long legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "Just visited Jason. He's gonna be all right."

"Oh. I'm really glad to hear that." Dev sat up and regarded her supine partner. "Brent was worried."

"Yeah me too." Jess admitted. "Looks like most of the support staff's checked in and most of the bios too. Things are coming back into normal trim."

"The sets really liked being on comms." Dev ventured. "And also, helping defend this place. They're really excited about what they did."

"They and the mechs saved our asses." Jess agreed. "Maybe we can..." She paused. "I talked to Alters. We'll see what happens."

"Excellent." Dev tucked her legs up under her and rested her elbows on her knees, looking down at Jess. "Maybe you could speak to them? They think you're amazing."

Jess pointed her thumb at her own chest. "Me?"

Dev looked around the space. "Yes." She said. "Did you think there was someone else I was referring to?" She watched her partner twiddle her thumbs. "You seem in good spirits."

"It's been a good day, in the end." Jess's eyes twinkled gently. "I got what I wanted."

"Me too." Dev smiled at her.

The comm crackled over head. "Ops to Drake."

"Ah, work is never done." Jess rolled over and punched the commset on Dev's console, tapping in the keys for ops. "Drake here."

It was April's voice. "Theres an assembly in the mess, requesting your presence."

"Ah huh." Jess pondered that. "All right. Be over shortly."

"Ack."

Comms clicked off. Jess and Dev regarded each other. "Wonder what that's all about?" Jess sat up. "You better come with me. I might need some asses kicked."

"Jess." Dev sounded adorably exasperated. "I would never do that to the people here."

"Hey they all saw you tossing those janks around." Jess said. "Maybe we should see if we can build one of those grav gyms here. Ya think?"

"I think you will not like it at all." Dev said mournfully as they went down the steps and towards the door. "It's difficult."

"Bet they put up with it if they end up being able to seriously kick ass like that."

It was comforting to see the halls full of people, and the lights at normal levels. Dev kept up with Jess's long strides as they angled through the central corridors heading for the mess, and she realized that she not only saw more bio alts than she had

before they now seemed to be going out of their way to make eye contact with her.

She straightened up a little and reached up to make sure her insignia were adjusted correctly, just as they got to the door to the mess and passed inside.

There were a bunch of people inside. April and Mike, Doug and Chester, wearing a plas bandage and an arm sling, Brent and Tucker, Elaine, all the ops personnel who had been with them on the rescue and the return.

“Hi.” Elaine said, as soon as the door closed, and the low hum of conversation died. “So, Jess, I got bushwhacked and asked about burns.” She got straight to the point. “As in, when can we get them.”

“Ah.” Jess understood now what was up. “I see.” She perched on one of the tables, regarding the small crowd. “So what's the question?”

April cleared her throat. “We'd like to get our first.” She indicated Mike and herself. “And our partners wanted them too.”

“I explained techs don't get them.” Elaine stated. “It's not reg.”

“Well.” Jess folded her arms. “It used to be reg.” She said, in a mild tone. “Back in my dad's day, apparently.”

“His ghost come back and tell you that?” Elaine responded, in an equally mild tone.

“No.” Jess chuckled. “We saw the doc with his shirt off. He's got them.” She said. “And.. matter of fact, Dev's got one too.” She regarded her partner, who had quietly taken a seat at one of the tables. “I think if it's going to be a tradition, it should be one for everyone who thinks it means something, not just agents. Techs do scary things and get hurt too.”

Doug positively beamed at her. Chester pointed at his arm in silence.

“That your call?” Elaine asked. “You're senior.”

They all turned to Jess and waited.

Jess kicked the floor a bit with her boot. “You know.” She said, not looking at anyone, really. “We all took a big hit in the trust department here lately. For a little while, I wasn't sure of anyone. That's a really crappy feeling.”

“Was crappy for us too.” Brent spoke up from the corner. “What Josh did. Colored all of us.” He indicated himself and Tucker. “Everyone looking cross at us, wasn't fair.”

“No, it wasn't.” Elaine agreed. “We knew that.”

“Probably got some people killed.” Tucker said, quietly. “Sure got Sandy killed. I did the recon on her comp spool – she took the stick from Nappy. Didn't trust him flying and it bit them.”

Jess nodded. “I think.. some of what was really going on was a.. and attack from within.” She felt her way with a slight hesitation, the ideas forming unexpectedly. “Separating techs and agents. Making the culture different. Stopping that.” She touched her arm. “Making agents compete.”

“Huh.” Elaine murmured. “Fractured.” She added thoughtfully.

Jess nodded.

“I felt isolated.” Elaine said, suddenly. “Especially after what happened with Josh... but you're right, Jess. It started before that.”

“Right. So.” Jess straightened up. “Well, what we just went through... when we were in there, anyone think about trusting?”

April and Mike looked at each other, then at their techs. “We trusted you.” April answered. “And I don't really have an explanation for that, because we barely knew you, and everything was going to crap.”

“Sometimes, I guess, maybe, you just trust the gut check.” Jess acknowledged. “Like I did with Dev. I had no real reason to believe. It was ridiculous. A tech given the knowledge in a week you all get in years in field school.” She looked at her partner. “But something in me said, yeah, okay. This is all right.” She reached over and ruffled Dev's hair. “And Dev went all in.”

Dev cleared her throat, slightly embarrassed by the intense attention.

“So anyway” Jess said. “If you want a mark, get one. For that last one, we should all get the same.” She unfastened her jumpsuit at the neck and peeled it down off one arm, exposing the marks there. “I'll go first.”

Elaine stood up. “I'm in.” She said. “And I know Jase will want one.”

Jess looked at Dev.

“Absolutely.” Dev responded, with a smile. “That was amazing work.”

“I want one.” Brent leaned on the table with both hands. “I always did.” He added, with a slight flush. “And y'know.. maybe

people like Clint might want in too.”

Jess smiled, as the group closed in on her. “Get on comm then, and ask him.” She glanced at Dev. “Give your buddy a buzz. Long as we're all being crazy, he might want in for old time's sake.”

“Better go to med and grab a tub of cream then.” Tucker commented. “Gonna need it.”

**

A week later, and the citadel was returning to normal, as normal as it could be given what happened.

“That really got out of hand.” Jess observed, as she stood on the landing platform in the carrier bay, watching a newly fabricated roof panel get set in place.

“What did?” April asked. The young agent was standing next to her, observing the product of seven days worth of all hands on deck labor in the busy, now cleaned and partially reconstructed service bay. All of the wreckage had been removed and fused together, set on the cliff side as a marker of sorts.

Twelve pads were active, the ten HQ had sent, and the two remaining undestroyed ones, including Dev's, parked on the far pad near the big service console.

Jess gestured towards a group of working mechs, all in jumpsuits that were missing one sleeve, baring shoulders that all bore a reddened burned design in them. “I mean, c'mon.”

April smiled, refraining from rubbing her own arm. “Y'know something?” she said.

“Figure I'm about to.”

“We do that.” April said. “Not a burn, but this.” She unfastened the neck of her suit and pulled it down enough to expose her collarbone. Just below it, there was an intricate colored pattern pressed into her skin. “From my people.”

Jess studied it. “Why?”

“Makes us all a part of something.” April responded readily. “No matter how we squabble, you know? We do, yeah??” she said. “So I think we won that round with everyone who was here, and we all have that in common. So this.” She pointed at her arm. “People want to say, I was there. I took part. I put it on the line.”

Jess nodded. “Yeah. I get that.”

April eyed her briefly in silence. “So let me ask. You ever think about going with Bain?” She asked. “Even for a second?”

A faint smile appeared on the taller agent's face. “Nah. I'm a Drake.” She stated easily. “One trait that's common to all of us is pigheaded stubborn pride the likes of which would blow your eyeballs out.” She turned to look at April. “I was the one that trusted Bain. It was my mess to clean up.”

It was April's turn to nod. “Yeah, I get that.”

Jess chuckled. “C'mon.” She turned and retreated back towards the service hatch. “Doc's about to leave. Let's go say goodbye.”

“Too bad he's leaving. Good people.”

“The best. But I bet he'll be back.”

**

It was cold, and raining outside. Dan Kurok stood quietly watching through the blast proof glass portal as the shuttle very slowly settled itself into position on the pad ramp. The rockets fluttered closed, and the locks fastened, off-gassing filling the space around the shuttle as a team of bio alt mechs started forward with ground umbilicals.

He sighed. It was hard to quantify really how he felt. In one sense, it was good to know that things had stabilized and he felt satisfied to go back to station and get one with things.

In another sense, though, he had grown, again, unexpected roots in this place and there was a part of him that really didn't want to go.

Dev was part of that, of course. But the truth was, he now admitted privately, that as long as he'd spent on station, and how rewarding that career was, it had never developed any sense of family in him anywhere near what the feeling was he'd experienced in the last few weeks here.

Maybe you never could really get the corps out of you. Doctor Dan exhaled, and put his fingertips against the glass, leaning forward slightly. He was going to miss the sets here, and the techs and agents who had accepted him, and the easy familiarity he'd encountered in the past seven days.

He would miss that, and the camaraderie of those who understood what sacrifice was and who had seen the things he'd seen

and done things he remembered doing that he shared with no one at all on station.

They couldn't even fathom it, up there. He couldn't talk to anyone up there like he'd talked to Elk, even attempting it would cause nervous breakdowns and screaming in the halls. He sighed again, watching his breath fog the glass, a little.

Ah well.

A sound behind him made him turn, seeing the inner security hatch open and a crowd of bodies appear. Jess was in the lead, her arm draped over Dev's shoulders, but around and behind her were all the techs and all the agents, and behind them, the sets and mechs he'd led in his small part in the battle.

His heart ached, in truth, seeing them. He'd rather been hoping they'd be too occupied to notice his leaving. "Ah."

Dev slipped free of Jess's grip and ran to him, throwing her arms around him and giving him a ferocious hug. "Oh Doctor Dan! I wish you weren't leaving. I'll miss you."

He returned the hug, his eyes meeting Jess's over Dev's shoulder. "I'll miss you too, Dev." He released her, but kept an arm around her as she turned and the rest arrived. "And I'll miss the rest of you too. It's been quite an experience we shared."

"It has been for sure." Clint responded. "Too bad you're going to miss the party tonight."

"Mm." Doctor Dan's eyes twinkled. "I am sorry about that, but my head probably isn't if I remember those parties as well as I think I do."

"Hehehe." Elaine let out a low laugh. "You do."

Jess had her hands in her pockets, her black duty suit outlining her tall frame. "You should come visit again soon." She said, a smile shaping her lips. "Or maybe we'll come visit you."

Doctor Dan pictured in his head the hysterical reaction to that invasion and smiled his gentle smile back. "I think that would be an excellent idea." He responded mildly. "Especially when we start developing the advanced programming for Dev's successors." He glanced fondly at her. "Though we're going to have to really work at matching you."

Dev smiled in obvious delight. "Please say hello to everyone at the creche for me." She said. "Especially Gigi."

"I will." He promised.

The outer hatch unsealed and opened, and a blast of cold, wet, salty air tinged with rocket fuel gusted against them. A man in the bright blue oversuit of the interspace crew entered, looking around. "Kurok, Daniel J?"

"That's me." Doctor Dan waved at him.

"Please board." The man said. "We are off schedule."

"Ah. I see the customer service is as spectacular as always." Doctor Dan released Dev and started forward, only to be intercepted by the gang of Interforce personnel, each of whom offered a hand shake, or a pat on the arm, or from the anxiously waiting sets, a timid embrace.

It was almost overwhelming, and it ended with a swirl of motion and then Jess was closing her arms around him in a rush of energy new, and strange, and yet echoing with remembered familiarity. "Both of you take care." He uttered softly. "You hear me, Jesslyn?"

"You too." Jess answered, as she released him and stepped back. "C'mon. We'll walk you onboard."

The interspace loader scrambled out of the way as the gang of them filed through the hatch, out into the icy rain falling around the shuttle, escorting his passenger until they reached the ramp, and he went up alone, pausing the top to turn and wave goodbye before he disappeared inside.

Dev sighed, her eyelashes blinking to shed the raindrops. "Bye, Doctor Dan."

Jess gave her a one armed hug, then turned and motioned the crowd to go back inside. "We'll see him again." She predicted confidently. "Maybe sooner than you think."

The hatch closed behind them, and the rest of the crowd dispersed, but Dev and Jess went to the window and stood there, watching until the shuttle's engines fired, and it rumbled back off the ground into the sky.

**

It was still raining, though the darkness kept it to just a sound on the edges of the dome overhead as the assembly space filled with bodies.

The ramp doors were open, and everyone was wandering in, a mixture of ranks and specialties in a swarm of colored uniforms.

The mess had been restored to the point where it could offer crocks and basins of the basics, and just to one side of the food

line was a cluster of black and dark green clad bodies, sprawled on the multi level stone platforms that led up eventually to the dais.

The newcomers sent from HQ mixed with what was left of Base 10's ops teams, personalities already emerging and polite conversation devolving into mild trash talk that even so, barely had a sting.

So Jess and Dev, along with April and Doug and Mike and Chester, Elaine and Tucker, and a carefully wrapped up and still pale Jason and Brent were in a crowd of newcomers, Jeff and his partner Able, and Donna and her tech Caroline, both veterans along with eight other pairs who were waiting to hear if the assignment was going to be permanent.

"S'better here than back west." Jeff was saying. "Room to make a mark, y'know?"

"True." Donna agreed. "It's like starting new. Just need to find out if we'll stay here, or be part of the North team."

"Other side makes a move, we'll be the front lines." Elaine reminded them. "It's not a picnic."

"Can we have another picnic?" Dev softly asked Jess, whose head was resting on her leg.

"Sure." Jess opened one eye and regarded the crowd of ops teams. "No it's no picnic but where in the corps is?"

"Exactly." Jeff nodded. "Least we'll see action here."

A stir got their attention, and across the room Bensen Alters was walking up to the podium as the lights brightened a little to focus the attention on it.

Jess sat up and swung her legs off the platform, bracing her hands on the edge of it as Dev scooted over a little. "So now let's see what we're in for."

Alters had been acting commander for the week, and proved himself to be a calm and laid back presence who focused on returning the citadel to functionality and handle the logistics of the repair teams and materials that had been flown in.

Jess had found herself hoping they made his a permanent assignment. She didn't know who the other candidates might be though. HQ and Alters had left her pretty much alone the whole week as though hoping it would all fade into the past and let normality take over again.

It was almost a bit of a let down kind of feeling. She'd at least expected to get a request to submit a report, or something.

But no, nothing.

Maybe they'd reviewed everything again, and decided she was a cock up after all. That she should have seen through Bain earlier. Or something.

Alters cleared his throat and the sound in the room died down as everyone turned to listen to him. "Good evening people." He said. "I'll make this brief since this is a time to relax and celebrate for a few hours."

That didn't sound so bad. Jess picked up her mug and took a drink from it. Maybe they hadn't decided yet about anything.

"I've just got a few announcements." Alters said. "First off, a final assignment of command has not yet been made here. So you will be stuck with me for a while longer."

"Heh." Jess chuckled. "Bet they want to see how he does."

"Sounds right." Elaine had settled next to her. "He's all right."

"Secondly, it has been decided that North base will not be revitalized at this time." He went on. "At least until we have more personnel available. The recent past has left us a little shy of that."

"That's not good news." Elaine muttered.

"To address this, we have opened up a staffing review." Alters said. "New announcements will be made as warranted on that. We are also reviewing the possibility of renewing our base at the Pole."

"Oh shit. Please don't let us go there." Jeff moaned. "I saw that report."

"So until any of that changes, this facility will be the eastern vanguard and as such, the decision has been made to do a refresh of the battlements, and add some new weapons systems now under development."

"Ah. Good." Jess nodded. "I like that."

Alters cleared his throat again. "HQ has informed me commendations and citations are in transmit. Likely those of you affected will have something in queue by tomorrow morning."

"So far, so good." April commented.

"However, I would like to announce just one of them now."

The ops group all turned and looked at Jess. "If this isn't for you, I'm limping out." Jason said. "Dripping blood all the way

back to my quarters. I swear it.”

Jess shrugged. “I don't need any useless commendations.”

“That's not the point. Take the respect.” Elaine retorted. “Don't be an ass.”

Jess didn't particularly think she was being an ass. There had just been so many people who pitched in, she didn't feel her own role had been that important. But she waited in silence as an officer brought a box up to Alters, and put it on the podium in front of him.

“Oh ho, bet I know what that is.” Jason joked weakly. “Definitely for you Jessie.”

“Crap.” Jess sighed, as she realized what he was talking about. “Shoot me now.”

“In the long tradition of Interforce.” Alters said. “We only have a few.. a really very few physical citations. We mostly like to give you all comforts and bonuses, as you all well know.”

Now everyone was looking back at Jess, as she covered her eyes with one hand, a faint hum of chuckles rising in the room.

“Two of our physical citations are posthumous.” Now Alters was looking across the platforms with the start of a smile. “The third is the oldest, and can only be given to an active member, and it's purpose is to acknowledge not number of enemies destroyed, or successful missions but instead to celebrate the ideals of gallantry, of nobility and the old fashioned notion of heroism.”

“Please tell me this isn't happening.” Jess muttered under her breath. “Someone call an alert.”

“Is.. “ Dev looked profoundly confused. “Something wrong?”

“Oh Jessie. You poor thing.” Jason was leaning against the wall, holding his arm to his side, but grinning at her.

Alters cleared his throat again. “This citation is remembered best for it's first recipient, and though it hasn't been given in at least four generations as it happens today we'll award it to that recipient's direct blood descendant. Jesslyn Drake, please c'mon up here and get this thing.”

Jess wasn't really sure how to react. She could hear the thunderous applause, and feel the hands patting her back and pushing her forward. She got control of her body and shook off the hands, but kept her own grip on Dev. “C'mon. You're coming up there with me if I have to go get it.”

Dev had absolutely no idea what was going on, but she obediently stayed at Jess's side as they climbed up to the top platform amidst the cheering crowd until they were at Alter's side, and he was opening up the box and taking something out of it.

“I know you probably want to kill me.” Alters muttered.

“No one wants to have to live up to this.” Jess muttered back. “It's a millstone.”

“Maybe.” Alters carefully sorted out the bright metal chain and stepped forward. “But I didn't argue with them when they said to give it to ya.”

With a silent sigh, Jess ducked her head and felt the links settle over her neck, as Alters gently laid the medal on her chest. She could see the delicate lattice of the background, and the stolid five pointed star, and the ring of letters around the edges of it.

She felt Dev shift and looked over at her, finding her inspecting her new decoration.

“It's pretty.” The bio alt said after a moment. “Why do you think it's incorrect?”

“Tell ya later.” Jess muttered.

“Try to bear up under the horror of it all, Drake.” Alters whispered. “Say thanks, and go and get drunk.” He patted her on the shoulder, then faced the crowd. “People – I give you our history's sixth recipient, and the fourth of the same name, of the Star of Valor.”

With a long exhale, Jess turned and faced the room, accepting the applause and the whistles, and trying not to think about how red her face had to be. She clasped her hands behind her back and waited for the noise to die down, then cleared her throat self-consciously.

All those eyes looking back at her. “So I guess the first rounds on me, huh?” Jess said, before she could really think of what she wanted to say. She let the resulting laughter relax her though, and then felt a touch on her arm that was Dev and that made her relax even more. “I don't think I did anything for this that everyone else here didn't do.” She said. “I just was the unlucky one whose name was on the reports. So thanks.” She considered. “Let's go party.”

Another roar of applause, and then she was free to leave and she did, tugging Dev along with her as she escaped back to the platform and a big mug being held out to her, hands slapping her back, and a big crowd gathering to admire her star.

She would spend the night in self deprecation and hopefully get drunk enough to forget about it. Jess accepted the clink of mugs against hers. Maybe later, though, there'd be a moment for her to look at herself in the mirror with the damn thing on and not feel like such a dork about it.

Maybe.

**

The shuttle docked to station with the usual graceful twisting drift, locking on and grappling with a jostling clang as the ship came into rotation and returned gravity to the people inside the vessel.

“Docking secure. Releasing restraints.” The cold voice echoed softly on comm.

Dan Kurok shouldered his bag, pausing with a grimace to swing the bag to his other shoulder and shake his head as he went to the hatch and waited for the green access light to go on. “Contagious insanity. Must have been. I wasn't consciously that idiotic, was I?”

Why yes, yes he had been.

The light went on, and a chime sounded, and he depressurized the hatch and opened it, getting a puff of clean and engineered air into his lungs as he walked down the passage and into station, into a world of light, and sand colors and space that had once been totally familiar to him but now seemed a little strange.

A little off, his eyes missing the tint of granite, and the smell of salt on the back of his tongue.

“Daniel!” Randall Doss hurried forward, from the small group that was waiting for him just inside the lock. “Thank goodness you're back! I can't begin to tell you all the things awry here! Projects out of scope! Delays!”

“Yes, I'm sure there are.” Doctor Dan felt the variable gravity make his steps a trifle unsteady. “Couldn't be helped though. There were some complications.”

“Oh, I hope not.” Doss looked concerned. “We were so concerned when you told us of the attack there.. and you almost injured! Why, what would we do, Daniel? What would we do without you? I can't begin to imagine the magnitude...wait.. where are you going?”

“Randall.” Kurok faced him. “Please shut up.”

“Aid..” He stopped. “Daniel! There's no cause to be rude.”

“There's more cause to be rude than you could possibly imagine.” Doctor Dan said. “Feel free to call any amount of meetings tomorrow to catch things up, but right now I'm just going to go to bed. It's been a long, long, day.”

“Oh.” Doss backed off. “I see.. okay, well, of course. You've just finished a long trip. Absolutely we can catch up tomorrow. But..” He eyed the pale haired man in trepidation. “Was it a success, Daniel? I see you didn't bring the unit back with you.”

Pausing in the act of walking away, Dan Kurok turned again and studied him, then smiled briefly. “Yes.”

Doss sighed in relief. “Oh, that's good to hear.” He said, then paused. “That's an interesting jacket, Daniel. Quite attractive.”

Kurok looked down at the Drake's Bay colors decorating his chest and smiled again. “Small reminder of an old friendship.” He turned and started towards the lift tubes, then stopped again and turned. “We'll need to rearrange the budgets,”

“We will?”

“And the production schedules. I'll need to pull programming teams.” Kurok turned a final time and this time kept walking, leaving Doss's sputtering behind him. “Good night, Randall.” He lifted his hand in a wave. “Night all.”

He walked on alone, crossing the rounded corridors, the soft pops and clicks of the station sounding a bit strange. At the end of the passage way he paused, going to the clear wall of a dome and peering out, seeing the sun start to emerge from the far edge of the cloud covered planet beneath him and wishing for a sudden, intense moment, he was under the atmosphere rather than over it.

Then he shook his head, and continued on, reaching the lift tube and stepping into it. He pushed off and up and allowed himself to feel as tired as he was, acknowledging the portion of that which a weariness of the heart, rather than of the body.

Ah well. It would pass.

“Doctor Dan!”

He turned in the tube as he drifted upward, and slowed to let the female bio alt coming up from below catch him up. “Hello, Gigi.” He smiled at the young woman. “How are you?”

“Doctor Dan.. you're back.” Gigi smiled. “We really missed you.”

"Thanks, Gigi. I appreciate that." He smiled back. "In fact, I have a message from Dev for you. She said to say hello."

Gigi's eyes brightened "Really? It's good to hear that. How's Dev's assignment?" She asked. "Is she doing well?"

Doctor Dan chuckled. "Gigi, she's doing spectacular. Her assignment absolutely loves her."

"That's excellent!" Gigi responded. "We hoped that would be so. It was such an exciting opportunity, the Director said." She responded. "In fact, he wanted some reports that were due in, so I am on shift late tonight."

"Yes it is exciting." He guided her off the tube into the admin section and turned off the corridor to his housing unit.

"Goodnight, Gigi."

"Good night!" Gigi trotted off towards her assigned station.

He reached his door and scanned it open, walking inside as the enviro systems detected his presence and brought up lights and wall screens, tuned habitually to the outside view.

"Home sweet home." He spoke quietly, hearing an unaccustomed rasp in his voice. "Maybe I should have stayed for that damn party after all."

He paused and put his bag down on the workdesk with a sigh. Then he eased the jacket off and set it beside the bag, standing there in his tech jumpsuit with his arms folded for a few minutes. He nodded to himself and sat down, pulling the keypad over and tapping it, signing in with his credentials and pulling up his template. "Time for a change of scenery I think."

A moment later the walls faded out, the moving starfield replaced with rough rock walls and the light moderated to a dim blue tint, the gentle whisper of airflow covered with a very light rumble of thunder.

"Mmhm. That's better." He stood up and caught sight of his reflection. "Wonder how much they'd freak out if I wore these in the lab." He mused thoughtfully. "Well I suspect we'll be finding out."

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It was very late. Dev leaned on her folded arms as she looked out over the sea, feeling the wind ruffle her hair. It had stopped raining, at least for the moment, and the seas were calm and only lightly white capped.

She drew in a deep breath of the salt air and enjoyed the faint spray as it hit her face, leaving a coating of salt on her lips that she tasted. "It's so pretty."

Jess came over and handed her a glass, already full of the rich, golden honey mead. "So are you."

"It's very nice of you to say that." Dev held up her glass, and Jess touched it with her own. She'd learned about this curious habit and felt it was a little strange, though harmless. "And it's true I find you a lot more attractive than the water."

They both took a sip of the liquor.

"So here we are." Jess leaned on the rock shelf next to her. "Here's to hoping your second month in service is less insane than your first was."

"I think the best part of it was meeting you." Dev said. "Flying the carrier was good too." She paused again. "And those shrimps we had."

Jess started laughing. "Glad you've got your priorities straight."

"And it was awesome rescuing Doctor Dan." Dev said. "But you were still the best thing."

"I feel the same about you." Jess leaned against the wall, facing her. "Ready for some fish?" She indicated the portable griller behind her. "I know it's late, but it smells good, doesn't it?"

They settled together on the bench with a small tray between them and Dev had to agree that the thing Jess had made smelled very good indeed.

Jess held up a forkful of it and she took it into her mouth, chewing it thoughtfully. It had a slightly spicy and slightly sweet taste, and she licked her lips after she swallowed it. "That's very good."

Jess smiled and took a mouthful for herself. "That makes me a lot happier to hear than getting that damn medal."

"Why don't you like it?" Dev asked, after a moment of silence. "Everyone seemed to think it was an excellent thing to get."

Jess offered her more fish. "It sets an expectation." She said. "Then you always have to live up to it. You always have to be a noble selfless nitwad throwing yourself into a pit on everyone else's behalf all the time." She swirled her mead in its glass and took a swallow. "It reduces your options."

Dev chewed thoughtfully and swallowed. "But Jess." She said. "You do that anyway. Put yourself in danger for everyone."

Jess stared at the fish. "Yeah, I know." She finally said, in a soft voice. "It's just .. uh.. uncomfortable thinking it's expected

of me.”

“I see.” The bio alt bit down on the fork she was using. “I think.”

Jess shook her head. “Never mind, Dev. You're right. It doesn't really matter, I guess.”

Dev reached out and touched her hand. “If it makes you feel more comfortable, I will try to remember to jump into the pit first, all right?” She said, seriously.

One dark eyebrow quirked. “That doesn't make me feel any more comfortable.”

“It doesn't?”

“No!”

“I'm not sure letting you jump into a pit would be correct then, Jess. Can't we jump together?”

“No!”

“No?”

“Dev!”

“Yes?”

“How about you finish that fish and we both go jump together into my bed.”

“That would be excellent.”

“Thought you'd think so. C”mon partner. Let's go home.”

**

The End.