

Project Otter (Backstage Crew 2)

Written by TheFanFox, 2020

The hallway stretched onwards ahead, as she padded softly down the slightly-studded studio floor. It was a little dark around her, although she knew that the lights above her were on at full show intensity. There were no sounds around her, no signs of another person anywhere in the vicinity although her senses at that moment were somewhat foggy in her mind. A lonely silence in a place that was usually alive with chatter, laughter and happy screams. Yet despite all of these little elements that could be seen as worrying, the hallmark of a horror movie... Cara strangely felt at ease here at this moment.

As she walked she traced the fingers of her left hand against the wall, made up to resemble a futuristic hangar and let them feel over the archway of a metallic doorway that was merely painted to resemble metal but was actually wooden. Looking out into the central area the strange darkness hid up to halfway across but did not hide the large centre piece of the area. It'd claimed so many volunteers and victims in the past with its double whammy, including herself. She quietly walked over to it, a respectful pace as she stood in awe of the giant space-age shuttle prop that she knew contained two of the show's gunge machines. Looking up at it, she felt her tail twitch slightly at the memory that brushed her consciousness but she batted it away quickly. It twitched more as she weighed up the thought on her mind, biting her lip as the familiar nervousness mingled with the smallest measure of excitement at how naughty that thought was. She dashed to the staircase and flew up it, before she could think better of it but her familiar state of mind finally gave her pause at the top as she stared at the seat ahead of her, positioned so perfectly for...

No one was around. There was no need to hesitate if she wanted to. If. Did she want to again though? Was she that ready to push herself just that little bit further, in the safety that having no one watching made her feel...?

"Maybe I could just... run it a little bit," she heard herself mutter, and she grinned in slight disbelief at her boldness right now.

But as she took a step forward something changed slightly, ever so slightly...

"I knew you watched that stupid show!"

Cara's fur stood up slightly at the other voice, and her tail began to react; twitch, twitch, twitch.

"See? They're right here in this folder on your desktop!"

Cara turned around to face the voice, and the show set seemed to fall away from her as the scene shifted to one from an old memory. The small living area was set with one beat-up sofa and a television set was shoved into the corner. The rest of the room was covered with the standard detritus you'd expect from four students who lived in the same house - old clothes, coats, dirty plates, textbooks, a phone and a lot of old coffee mugs and cups

covered as many surfaces as they were able to. Stood there before Cara were all three of her housemates, two otters and a collie. One of the otters stood in the middle, shapely figure and red hair down to her shoulders, flanked by the other two and it was she who had spoken. As Cara remembered, she was holding the sand cat's laptop in her hands, open and pointing at something on the screen to the other two. The collie looked over at what she was pointing at and gave a bark of laughter.

"Ooh, what a shocker!" he grinned. "Our timid little roomie's got a secret love of messy television shows! Nice find Tazia!"

"I... give that to me!" Cara cried, speaking the words as she remembered saying them that first time, and rushing forward to try and snatch the laptop away.

The otter in the middle, Tazia, ducked away from Cara and laughed at her again, skillfully climbing up and over the sofa while clicking away. Cara continued to chase her, upset at the teasing and eventually she managed to wrestle her laptop away from her housemate. As she clicked closed the video that'd been opened, she was aware that she was blushing slightly but also trembling from sheer rage and a little bit of fear.

Please stop now.

"Well, someone's touchy," Tazia huffed as Cara snatched it away. "Why keep that a secret anyway? What's the big deal, other than it being a bit kiddy?"

"I... don't go through my laptop!" Cara cried, her voice pitching up in anger and frustration.

"Did you actually want to go *on* one of them?"

At that question Cara felt herself completely freeze up, fur raised, muscles tensed, and her tail thrashing. There was more laughter from Tazia and the collie.

"Oh my god, look at her tail!" came the laughing call. "She's totally freaked out at the mere thought of getting gunged!"

Cara could feel herself shivering more as the very *word* set forth a reaction in her, this time with a lot more terror pounding at her heart and she tried to ignore them. Tried to control her tail, her shaking, her heart... tried to breathe.

Please stop.

"Huh, maybe we shouldn't have sent that form off for her earlier..." came the voice of the second otter.

Cara shook herself out of the panic long enough to look over to her, as she bit her lip in a mildly nervous way. She blinked and tried to take calming breaths, but nothing seemed to be helping.

“What?” was all she managed to squeak out.

“Oh yes Cara!” and Tazia came up behind her to smack both hands onto the young sand cat’s shoulders. “We saw a notice earlier. Seems they’re looking for some more volunteers for that new Industrial Zone show you’ve gotten so fond of. And since we’re such good friends, we need to help you...”

The grip tightened on her shoulders and she leaned over Cara’s shoulder.

“Don’t you know that the best way to face a fear is head-on...?” she hissed into Cara’s ear.

Cara very suddenly connected the dots and unable to help herself she bolted, she couldn’t stand it anymore. As she recalled she dashed into her bedroom and slammed closed the door, her back to it as she tried hard to breathe and not cry as panic made the light level around her dance. The ceiling was still covered in studio lighting and she realised that it was all turning around to face her, spotlight her, *watch* her.

“No, no, no, no, no...!” she muttered.

“Oh come on!” came the collie’s voice from the other side. “You can’t be that scared of such a stupid thing as a little gunge!”

“It’s done now Cara!” called Tazia again. “They’ve got your registration form now and you’ll have to go on that show!”

“No, no, no, NO!”

She fumbled for the door lock and sliding it closed she ran across the room and threw herself into bed, curling up under the duvet as the mocking laughter of her two housemates came through the door...

... and then her alarm went off.

Sitting upright quickly Cara was for a second confused as to where her student room had gone. Instead of the white walls covered in posters were some creamy walls... covered in the same posters. But there was a window where there hadn’t been one before, a small desk covered with the plates containing the remains of last night’s takeaway and...

Oh. Right. She wasn’t a student anymore, was she?

As reality came back to her she realised that she’d just been having a dream, a very bad one. An old memory of when her housemates had discovered just what she watched at night and had played that cruel joke on her. Making herself relax and untensing her shoulders,

Cara leant forward to bury her face in her hands and let out a long, quiet but frustrated groan into her palms.

"I've got issues," she muttered to herself.

Entering the studio's car park on foot, she paused as she always did at this point to give herself a gentle pinch on the arm. It still didn't seem real to her, even if it'd now been some time since her first day. When she looked back on the shy, paranoid little sand cat that had gone to university years back for a media degree, disapproval and disappointed words from her parents and teachers ringing in her ears; the fairly meek and anxious person that made up her own mental perception of, well, herself - she'd never have thought in a thousand years that she would be working where she did. So close to machines that while impressive in both design and how well they accomplished their purpose, still made her fur stand on end a little bit every time they set off whether for real or testing purposes. She'd almost gotten used to the sounds of alarms and klaxons now. Almost. At least she'd now gotten confident enough to work around them and at times help clean up after them, even if she'd made pretty much every crew member promise not to try and give her a surprise just yet first. Fortunately most of them had been present at her welcome party and initiation and they seemed to get that her fears wouldn't just be gone in one large gunging, and she needed time to fully get past it. She was getting there though, in steps. She trusted the rest of the crew to not push her, even if she still kept an eye on her back for now. Mind you, so did most of the crew, it was almost an unwritten part of the job.

Pulling her backpack up onto her shoulders more firmly, she took big determined strides over to the front door and nearly crashed through it in the same forward motion. She tried not to break stride and continue towards the staff door and the life beyond it but something caught the corner of her eye and she stopped. It was the receptionist of the studio waving at her, trying to get her attention. Cara wandered over, curiously.

"Sorry to interrupt your rhythm," the receptionist grinned and Cara smiled back, remembering that she pretty much breezed through the lobby every day she came to work in pretty much the same non-stop fashion. "But I've been told to let every member of your show's crew know, there's been a sudden change to the schedules today."

Cara blinked in surprise, then decided to press further. "You mean that something's happening today, or something not happening?"

"Something that was meant to be happening during tomorrow's recording session has been moved up to today," the receptionist said, clicking on her screen and shuffling some papers to try and find the details. "Ah yes, for some reason it seems that instead of doing the bonus Interval game between the second and third areas the team attends, they've opted to pre-record it today and slide it in between in the edit."

Cara raised an eyebrow at that. Usually they had all their players attending the recording on the same day so that they could get all the footage they'd need in one go for the sake of making organisation easier, not to mention knowing that they'd only need to clean everything on the one day. A pre-recording was very unusual, and she wondered if she ought to seek out Ander and bug him for details. As a research assistant he had access to the applicants' records and might even know the reason behind the sudden change of plans.

"I suppose that it doesn't really affect me too much in my work today though, does it?" Cara asked, trying to recall which machine they'd earmarked for the Interval Game this time round. "Unless they've moved the game closer to where we're working in the Processing Wing part of the set?"

"No, I don't think so," the receptionist said, checking her papers again. "But I don't have the full details here, so it might be best to ask your superior or someone else down there on that floor who'd know for certain."

"Lorna," Cara replied, the image of a female rabbit springing forth into her mind. "I'll go find her now, thanks for the heads-up."

"Just doing my job!" the receptionist smiled. "I hope someone from recording will let me have a little sneak peek at it again. It's kind of thrilling."

"You'll probably have to ask for that yourself, I don't always see those guys during the day," Cara shrugged apologetically, walking away from the desk.

"Can't you even take a note to ask for me?"

"That I might be able to do," Cara allowed, stopping.

The blonde vixen behind the desk smiled, quickly scrambling for a pen and a spare piece of paper with which to compose said note. Cara occupied herself by looking around the room, something she often didn't do as she was so used to just barging into the place full steam ahead. A screen in the corner was showing a promotional trailer for the shows that were show at the studio and as the part of the tape that showed Industrial Zone played she got a brief glimpse of a male grey wolf already partially splattered in yellow gunge and white foam being smacked on the head with a torrent of light and dark green slime while sat in The Cockpit and she felt her tail twitch a little bit again behind her. She forced herself to hold her tail still, but then she felt her leg start twitching instead as her foot gently tapped out her nerves. She forced herself to stand still, but still smiled to herself as she repeated mentally what Lorna had told her. Anxiety was normal, the machines were made up to be somewhat overwhelming and the amount dispensed at every go around meant that the reputation was well deserved. Her reaction was not weird or unusual. At least these nervous jiggles didn't come with the same band of fear tightening around her chest anymore. She knew it wasn't so bad anymore.

“There we go,” she heard the vixen say and she turned back around to face the receptionist. “Tell them that while I’d like to see, I understand if I’m not allowed.”

“Don’t worry Sira, I’ll tell them,” Cara assured her, walking backwards slowly with the note in her hand. “See you later!”

As she got into the lift, Cara looked at the note in her hands, neatly folded over and thought about looking. She squashed that desire and put it into her pocket to resist the temptation as she pushed the button for the floor of the IZ set. The ride down was short and Cara kind of wished that she’d managed to arrive at the same time as another member of the crew, as talking to someone on the way down was a little nicer than riding it down in silence.

She really needed to get hold of a new music player for times like this.

As the lift jolted to a halt and opened, she moved forward, averting her eyes from the big studio door to the changing rooms as the logo of the show still managed to give her jolts to her system. She instead headed for a small door off to the side and quickly punched in the code on the small panel on the side, opening the door with her shoulder and moving on through to a small very typical studio corridor. She could hear other people hard at work already and she headed down towards where she knew the recording people would generally be on the morning of a recording. At least, she hoped they’d be there - the recording had been very suddenly changed and that was still in itself a very unusual happening.

Reaching the right door marked with a sign that told you to knock before entering unless the light was on, Cara paused briefly to check. The light wasn’t on (she hadn’t expected it to be) so she gently gave the door a quick rap. Waiting for an answer that didn’t come, she tried again a little harder. When there was still no answer, she dared to place a hand on the handle and slowly pushed it down, opening the door just a crack so she could put an eye to the crack and see through. The room was empty and she realised that the message of the change of recording dates obviously hadn’t come through the night before, else they’d be here by now. This team was generally very punctual. Mind you, when was this recording scheduled for today? Maybe they wouldn’t be in until later because the actual recording wouldn’t be until later on.

Shrugging she gently pushed against the door and wriggled in through the gap to leave Sira’s note on the desk in front of the bank of screens. She turned to look at the small bank of chairs piled up at the back of the room before she left. Sometimes other people in the crew who didn’t need to be on-hand during the show would lurk in here and watch the recording of the show as it happened. So far she’d always turned down the invitation when it was made to her, but maybe it was time... it was silly for her to be shy about loving the show when she actually worked on it!

“Old habits I guess,” she muttered to herself and walked back to the doorway to get down on the set floor and see if she could go track down Lorna to ask her the extra details on the rescheduled recording.

As expected, Lorna was on the studio floor working on the room for a new game, still in the middle of being set up and tested. The room itself wasn't too wide and starting from the back wall most of it was taken up by a large rectangular area cut off from the front of the room by tall perspex walls, with an extra area set into the wall at the back that went almost as high as the ceiling and took up maybe the central third of the boxed-off area. The floor of this area was in a grid 3x3 Cara knew, but the grid was hidden under a layer of murky brown gunk at this time as it would be during the game. Fortunately it seemed that Cliff had drawn the covering shut over this layer so if anyone needed to reach the other end they could do without having to wade. She'd been down here when Cliff had demonstrated to the few assembled how much the specially thick gunk impeded movement, jumping in himself and wading around the first two rows of the grid up to his knees before inviting a few of the other standing around to join him for a paddle. Since the game was supposed to be about getting some sort of cargo from one end of the area to the other, the hindering sludge did its job very well. The other thing making this game difficult... she allowed her eyes to wander upwards to where many pipes stuck through the ceiling of the boxed-in area, the panel that would hide their connected tubes from view while outside in the room still not installed.

There was a noise from the right side of the room and Cara's eyes went towards it, to see the tall magpie-patterned rabbit woman with the tied back ponytail who had been her immediate superior for the last week tugging at one half of the panel, trying to get it to lie on its side without losing her grip on it. She quickly rushed over and got hold of the side higher up, the rabbit looked over and she gave a thankful grin, twitching her upright ears slightly.

"I was wondering if you'd show up today!" she said, as she flipped her ponytail over her shoulder. "I can't do all this set prep myself you know!"

"Sorry Lorna, I had a note to put in the recording booth upstairs," Cara said, as she walked backwards and helped guide the heavy panel piece down onto its side. "I assume that you had enough time to get the paint ready for this thing while you were wondering where I'd gone though?"

Lorna pointed at a sprayer against the front of the boxed-in area and Cara nodded.

"I've been looking forward to this part all week!" she grinned, dashing over to grab it.

"Sometimes I wonder how you ended up here," Lorna said, taking in the sand cat as she wielded the sprayer gleefully. "And other times, I know you belong here. You're far too comfortable with that sprayer in your hands."

"Well, it's part of the job isn't it?" Cara asked, trying to avoid the subject that the rabbit had been bringing up every day during this work week.

“As is the machine testing, and even if we’ve all mutually agreed not to force you into any of them before you tell us you’re ready, you can’t tell me you’ve not thought about throwing the switch on one of us,” she smirked. “Maybe if it was Ander you would?”

Cara avoided her glance and pretended to check the sprayer to make sure it was connected up and in working order, Lorna closed the distance and pressed a little more, her smile teasing.

“Come on, you do owe him after he got you for your initiation,” she said. “I’d be saying the same for anyone, if they’d caught you. Even myself, if Bruce and I had managed to corner you in the Storage Area at the start!”

Cara couldn’t help but grin a little remembering the chase and the start of it when Lorna and Bruce, a wolf, had tried to corner her where she was hiding inside a crate. Her discovery that the front opened on hinges, secured by catches, saw her basically exploding out of the crate in front of Lorna. After that there’d been a slight chase which Cara had ended by sliding through a small gap and pulling herself just out of reach of Lorna’s paw as she’d tried to grab the sand cat’s ankle. It’d been the first bit of running that happened that night, and like all of her dodges she couldn’t help but feel a little proud of it.

“I got my payback, I pulled him into the Cockpit with me afterwards remember?” she replied.

“Yeah, but it’s not as good as seeing someone turn from clean to trashed through one small button push,” Lorna said, her eyes flashing with mischief. “I can see it in your eyes Cara, you want to be the one to gunge someone, don’t you?”

“Oh, right!” Cara said, having just remembered and glad of an excuse to turn her colleague’s mind away from a subject she was still unsure of. “Speaking of someone getting gunged, I heard there was a change of the recording schedule for today?”

“Oh that,” and Lorna allowed Cara to change the subject. “Yeah, I think they discovered that one of the two taking part couldn’t actually do the main recording day tomorrow so they were allowed to reschedule for today.”

“So last minute?” Cara was surprised and maybe slightly aghast at the short notice all this had happened on.

“I think the one who couldn’t make it is a relative of one of the camera operators-”

“Then shouldn’t they know-?” Cara interrupted but Lorna put a hand up and scowled to indicate that she wasn’t done speaking and Cara fell silent.

“- The head camera operator that is,” and Lorna finished. “So she had a direct line in.”

“That makes a little more sense,” Cara sighed. “Suppose as long as we’re working here though, it doesn’t have much of an effect on us.”

“As long as we’re not super noisy,” Lorna nodded. “Now, enough talk. Let’s spray the hell out of these panels and get them ready to be lifted into place!”

The spraying of the panels was the sort of work that could make time pass by very quickly, especially since Cara got on very well with Lorna. Set design and maintenance may even be what she’d steer her career in the direction of, if everyone was as nice as the rabbit was (though Cara wasn’t silly enough to believe they would be). However, lugging around the sprayers was also tiring work, as while they might get lighter the more paint ended up being sprayer, they started off very heavy! When someone finally poked their head into the room they’d been working in to tell the pair that it was time for lunch, Cara’s shoulders and arms hurt from the work. She rolled the shoulders in their joints a little to try and stretch the muscles and exited through the door, hoping to warm the rice and fish mix she’d packed into a tub in the crew’s breakroom microwave and eat gladly of the food. She’d almost reached the camera run that she tended to use as the shortcut up there when it opened for her. She just about stopped short of it as it flew past her face, nearly scraping her nose. Ahead of her, his hand on the door was Ander. For a second he stood there and then taking in her expression and her close she was to the door’s arc, he put the other hand (still holding his trusty clipboard) to his beak to hide his embarrassed grin.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to almost knock you out!”

“I know,” Cara sighed, but she shook a playful fist in his direction as she moved forward and ducked under the arm holding open the door. “What’s up?”

“I just needed to find you,” Ander replied, following her as they walked down the length of the hidden camera track.

“You needed to find me?” Cara asked, turning to him confused.

Ander nodded seriously, and opened his beak to speak. Before he could though...

“Oh just kiss already you two!”

They jumped as someone shouted at them through the entrance to the spiral stairway above them. Ander jumped back a step and started to flip through the registration forms on his clipboard a little flustered, while Cara looked up to see if she could identify the phantom yell. Failing to make out anyone in the darkness she instead made a mildly rude hand gesture in the direction of the entrance to the staircase and heard a laugh as whoever had shouted saw it.

“Why does everyone assume...?” she muttered, glad that the low light would be hiding her blushes.

She walked fast to the staircase and tore up it, trying her best not to trip and hurt herself. Poking her head up into the run above, she frowned as she saw no one about and the nearby hidden door that joined onto a place near the starting room open.

“Typical, they’ve run off,” she muttered.

She climbed up the rest of the way, striding out into the camera run with her mild frustration at being startled making her move a lot faster than she normally would. She briefly stumbled over the camera track on the floor before making it to the door she needed, she heard Ander scurrying up the staircase behind her as he seemingly realised she’d moved off without him.

“Cara, I need to tell you something!” he cried

Cara had thrown the door fully open though, and the small group of people gathered in the introduction room turned to face her. Alex was there of course, still wearing a t-shirt and some dark jeans that were miles away from his usual show wear. Also standing there was Cliff, a tall male otter wearing a headset that Cara recognised from the times she’d met up with the camera operators but had never really spoken with, and most surprising of all...

“Tazia?”

The name fell from her lips before she could stop it, the otter girl looked almost exactly as she had in the dream memory the night before with her hair being just a touch longer than before. Behind her Ander finally caught up and tried to catch his breath. He noticed the situation and winced.

“Oh, so it was that Tazia,” he muttered quietly to himself, flipping back to a form on his clipboard as he did.

“Cara?!” Tazia’s yelp was one of disbelief and shock, but the otter girls’ expression quickly changed to a smirk and Cara felt the fur on the back of her neck stand on end.

“Oh, you know her Cara?” Cliff asked, curiously.

“Yeah, Cara and I were roomies in university!” Tazia interrupted in a sickly sweet voice before Cara could get a word out. “She was such a shut-in, and so shy!”

Alex and Cliff laughed slightly. “Yeah, that sounds like our Cara,” Alex agreed. “But I think that working here is beginning to bring her out of her shell, she’s doing very well.”

“Yeah, I never thought I’d ever see her working here,” Tazia replied, before smirking again. “With her being so *anxious* about everything,” putting a load of emphasis on the one word.

“I-I’ve gotten better,” Cara finally found her voice and tried to make it sound firm. “It’s fun, getting to learn all the things that go into the making of a television program.” And despite

herself she smiled when she recalled all the interesting things she'd already seen working here.

Ander put a hand on her shoulder and gently attempted to pull Cara away from the situation, but Tazia crossed the room towards the door, closing the distance between herself and Cara but not quite coming close enough to be in reach.

"I wonder if they know you applied for the show before?"

Cara felt herself tense up as the remark hit home, as Cliff looked surprised at this piece of information. Strangely, Alex did not look as surprised, rather like he was waiting to see what Cara's response was going to be.

"I didn't apply, you put my name down as a joke!" Cara shouted, feeling her voice getting high-pitched.

"Oh, well that explains some things," Cara heard Alex mutter, and the red wolf walked up behind Tazia to lay a hand on her shoulder. "We'll have time for you two to catch up later, we've got your little revenge game to record soon remember?"

Tazia didn't reply, keeping her eyes locked with Cara until she smiled and looked away, allowing Alex to lead her away to where the game was going to be played. The older otter went with them, but Cliff was left standing there as Alex called back over his shoulder that he'd be up for food in a few minutes so just go on ahead without him. The grey and brown wolf waited until the others were out of earshot before he looked back over to the younger pair standing in the doorway.

"Does she know?" he asked Cara.

"If you mean does she know how freaked out the idea would have made me, yes!" Cara answered, her voice once again pitching up a little higher.

"And she calls herself your friend?" Cliff's voice was incredulous.

"I've had some very bad friends in the past," Cara sighed.

"I'll say..." was Ander's reply from behind her.

"I'm just glad Alex read that situation and got her away from you," Cliff muttered. "Although I think that last thing she mentioned clears up a little puzzle for us at least."

Upon seeing Cara's confused look he clarified. "When you were chosen to join us, we chose you because we noticed that someone with your name had already applied to be on the show. At least, that's what Blue ended up telling us. Alex made the interviewers not tell the ones we invited back for the last round of interviews because all three of you had applied in

the past and he wanted it to be this big brilliant surprise, that they could work on a show they'd wanted to take part in."

"Only they got me instead," Cara grinned despite it all. "Not quite what you were expecting."

"I only knew that we were looking for someone who'd love working here, but then we met when you accidentally locked yourself into that tank and you were very..." Cliff fished around for the right word.

"'High-strung' is the one you used at the time," Cara reminded him.

"It's why I proposed to Blue and Alex later that we should probably let you run off some of that nervous energy first," Cliff said. "Although we seriously considered just letting you go from the position and calling back one of the other two. I think we all came together to try and figure it out afterwards and realised that the handwriting on your job application was different to the one on your show application, and we realised you'd probably been set up once a while back. This just confirms it."

"I'm glad that we didn't just give up on you though Cara," Ander said from behind her. "But wait a second, to go back in the conversation... did Cliff say you-?"

"Not now!" Cara yelled quickly, moving away from him and heading towards the changing room area to get away from the conversation.

Ander ran after her. "Come on Cara! Why didn't you tell me that you got locked in-?"

"I said not now!" Cara laughed, sprinting ahead of him.

Cliff watched them go, before shaking his head with a smile and following them out to go grab his own lunch too. As he walked through the room he, like the younger pair before him, didn't notice the person hiding just out of sight in the women's changing area, one eye peeking around the corner.

Cara was halfway through her lunch when she remembered that Sira had asked her to tell the recording team that she understood if she was unable to see a rough copy of the interval game. Muttering curses under her breath she knew that while it might not seem a massive deal, she was too responsible to let it slip. Grabbing the tub, now half-full of the warmed rice and fish meal she'd brought with her, she put the lid back on it and tucked it under her arm as she left the room to go back to the recording booth and pass on the last bit of the message. She hoped that by now someone of that team would be there, so she could get back to eating.

Coming up to the door again, she checked to make sure the light still wasn't on. Seeing it still dark, she gently rapped on the door and this time heard someone moving on the other side.

She waited patiently until the door handle began to rattle then turn as someone opened it from the other side. A beaver poked his head out, his eyes instantly falling upon Cara.

“You?” he asked, confused. “You don’t usually come watch.”

“No no, I’m not here for that,” Cara said, as he let her into the booth itself. “You got Sira’s note I left for you right?”

“The note!” and the beaver scrambled back over to the main desk in front of the bank of screens and recovered it from under a magazine. “I’d forgotten about that.”

He opened it and read it, nodding.

“Sounds like a reasonable request,” he said. “I’d have to check with our head but no reasons why she can’t, long as she respects that no one can be told about it ‘til it’s broadcast.”

“Oh good, then I don’t need to pass on the other part of the message,” Cara sighed in relief. “I should get back to my lunch.”

“Why not eat in here?” the beaver asked. “We keep saying you’re welcome to watch recordings you know, and we’re about to shoot today’s reschedule.”

“I don’t know,” Cara started, but then her eyes were drawn to motion from one of the screens.

The room was the one she recognised as containing the machine nicknamed by the crew ‘Niagara’, and she could see from the camera’s live feed that people were moving around in the room. That in itself wasn’t unusual, they were pre-recording the interval game today and Niagara was often used for that game. What had caught Cara’s attention was the appearance of someone in front of the camera. They were too close for her to see their head and shoulders, but the slender brown-furred body was dressed in the IZ bikini and bottoms with a short tail sticking out from the top of the bottoms. The distinguishing feature though was an area just above her tail that’d had the fur shaved quite short in a specific way to show off a tattoo under it.

“No way, you too?” she muttered out loud as she moved closer to the screen.

The beaver looked confused, but then there was another knocking from the door and it squeaked open to reveal both Lorna and Karen, along with another member of the recording team. Cara didn’t seem to have noticed though, focused as she was on the screen as she saw Alex come into view behind the person Cara recognised, pointing at the booth and saying something she couldn’t hear.

“That’s the most interest I’ve ever seen you show!” Karen joked, and Cara jumped before looking round.

“Sorry, I just recognise...” she stopped.

“The butt?” Lorna guessed.

“No! Well, yes. Sort of,” Cara answered. She looked back at the screen to where the door for the gunge tank was now being held open and nodded. “You know what? Maybe I will stay for this recording after all.”

“Finally,” Lorna laughed. “I guess I lost the betting on when you would give in though.”

“Excuse me?” Cara asked, bewildered.

“What?!” Karen yelped, surprised. “You guys were taking bets on that? Why didn’t you tell me?”

The beaver just started laughing at the looks of shock and dismay on both the female felines’ faces as Lorna covered her mouth with a paw, grinning guilty behind it.

Cara had settled into a seat to watch the monitor, as the others sat around her talking about various things. The beaver and his recording colleague had slipped into a conversation about things they’d read online about the show recently.

“... Yeah, and they say that ROB’s little rebellion in the second episode of the third season is undeniable proof that they’re right!”

“It’s a bit far-fetched though isn’t it? Thinking that ROB will one day become Silicon?”

“Who knows what the show’s writers are planning to do though!”

“... I’m not sure they’ve put that much thought into it to be frank.”

Karen nudged one of them and pointed to the monitor, where it looked as if they were getting ready to play. The two recording crew went into action, getting ready to cut between cameras and make sure everything went smoothly. Lorna clapped her hands together softly, a massive grin on her face of pure excitement and Cara leant forward to hear better as Alex was counted in.

“Okay, so while our team hits the showers to get ready for our third round, let’s take a breather of our own and have a little fun,” Alex said, as he skipped across the room, revealing the familiar alcove tank and its current inhabitant.

Sitting there on the blow up sofa was a young otter girl, her blonde hair straight and a little fussed about on top of her head. She wore the IZ bikini set and was fiddling with one strap as she tried not to look straight ahead or at the red wolf currently bounding around on the

other side of the perspex door that shut her inside. Cara frowned slightly at seeing this face. It was exactly who she'd thought it was and inside her she felt a long hidden pang of regret begin to surface.

"This lovely young otter is here today as the result of being nominated by our other friend here," Alex continued as another camera focused in on another female otter, this one also wearing the bikini and bottoms set but looking far more at home in it, sat inside a standard gunge cubicle with a red button on the wall beside her.

"Tazia," Cara muttered under her breath and Lorna turned her head towards the sand cat, although she didn't comment.

As Alex then began to talk to the pair about the reasons why they were both there, Cara let her attention wander a little back to the day when she'd last seen the otter inside the gunge tank now...

"Cara?"

Cara felt herself jump at the sudden voice, but she didn't look away from the packing she was doing. Thank god that the summer holidays were here, so close to when they'd pulled that horrible joke...

"Cara please," the otter tried again, almost pleading.

Cara refused to look up, she had hoped to avoid all of them today. She'd done so well for the last four days after all, but those days she'd been able to hide at the library or other buildings and sneak in at night and lock herself in her room. Today she was moving out and had to be here to pack and load her belongings into her mother's car.

As if thinking about her had summoned her, Cara's mother appeared in the doorway. She moved past the otter, giving her a slight smile before turning her attention to the last of the boxes.

"How do you manage to acquire so much rubbish in a year?" she muttered, as she picked up the last box Cara wasn't working on. "We need to sort through this all when we get home, you can't need all of this."

"Mhm..." Cara muttered, as her mother left.

The otter watched the older sand cat go and finally entered the room. She almost got up to Cara before the sand cat turned.

"I..." the otter said.

"Go," Cara said, pointing to the door. "I don't want to hear it."

“But it...”

“I said go!” Cara almost shouted. “What you lot called a joke, I call a nightmare. I know, I’m a fucking baby and afraid of something stupid and small. I’ve heard everything you’re going to say many, MANY times before.”

She turned back around to the box to finish taping it. She heard the footsteps behind her slowly leaving, then pausing at the door.

“I didn’t... Tazia thought it’d be,” and the otter sighed. “What I’m trying to say Cara is... While I don’t get why you’re scared, that doesn’t change anything... I’m sorry. I’m really sorry that I let Tazia convince me to do that to you. You didn’t deserve what happened. But I suppose I deserved what you just said.”

The footsteps then ran from the door and Cara turned around quickly, to see the tip of her tail vanishing. She turned back around to finish the box, trying to tell herself that it was all words, a hollow apology. But she’d been wrong. She’d never heard that said to her before. She punched the top of the box and ran to the door, but as she looked around the living area she saw that a pair of shoes were gone and she realised it was too late. She went to the door, but already she knew that the other girl would be long gone. As her mother passed her to go collect the last box, Cara realised that she was on the edge of tears.

“I... I didn’t...” she squeaked softly, knowing that the otter would never hear her apology now.

“Are you okay?”

Cara blinked and realised that she was being observed closely by Karen and Lorna, who looked concerned. She realised that the memory had made her begin to tear up, and she quickly wiped her eyes on her arm fur.

“I’m fine, just... lost in a memory,” she muttered. “Really.”

Lorna looked confused, but Karen’s frown told Cara that she didn’t believe a word the sand cat had said. As the leopard leaned in closer to the sand cat, they were thankfully interrupted by a cry from the beaver.

“Aw, she could do it!” he whispered excitedly. “She could actually win her freedom and gunge the other one!”

“Gunge the camera operator’s niece?” asked the other recording guy.

“Isn’t she the one you called Tazia a minute ago?” Lorna asked Cara, as Alex asked the question that could determine the game on screen.

Cara nodded, glad for the interruption. "The other otter's name is Deryn, and I sincerely hope she gets that question right."

"Oho, so you know them both?" Lorna asked, a grin on her face.

"University roomies," she muttered. "In a way, if what Cliff told me earlier is correct they're partially responsible for me being here now."

"Oh?" was Karen's response, but any reply Cara was about to make was cut off by Lorna's scream.

"No, that's not the right answer!" she cried, as Deryn was told the same by Alex and put a hand to her face.

"Oh come on Deryn, don't lose it now!" Cara said, suddenly as invested as Lorna.

Karen thought about pressing on with what Cara had been saying, but as Deryn answered another question wrong and the other four in the room reacted she decided that maybe it could wait. Cara wasn't forthcoming with a lot of details to do with topics she didn't want to talk about and right now, they were all too interested in what was going on in the studio. She settled back in to watch, and flinched with the others as the third question in a row was answered wrong.

"It all comes down to this last question," Alex said. "Right or wrong, your answer will determine which of you ladies we'll be getting messy today!"

"Both of them, if the past is any indication!" the beaver replied, prompting a snort from Lorna behind him.

As Alex asked the question they all leaned in, hardly daring to breathe as they watched Deryn chew her lip to consider the answer.

"Come on, this was taught in one of our lectures!" Cara hissed frantically. "I know you know it!"

"I'm not sure she knows that she knows it," Karen commented as Deryn hesitated to answer.

"Oh Alex is hurrying her up!" Lorna cried, "Come on Deryn, answer!"

A buzzer played and Alex winced.

"Ooh, and you're out of time," he said. "Which unfortunately for you tips the balance in Tazia's favour, so I think you'd better prepare yourself Deryn!"

“No!” Cara cried, a little louder than she’d meant and was shushed by the beaver. “Ah, sorry.”

They watched as the machine started up as Tazia gleefully hit the button to gunge Deryn, the other otter glancing around frantically for a second before hunching her shoulders in, hand clasped on her lap and her head a little forward and faced down as she once again chewed at her lip. As the camera focused more on her, the foam sprayers were the first things to start up, directed at the otter and softly piling around her form which didn’t move aside to occasionally shake her head to prevent foam going into her face. The foam was still its usual white colour and whatever they’d been using in the back had somehow gotten this batch to be extra sudsy and while it piled high as it always did, it also seemed a bit more slippery than usual and flew everywhere on poor Deryn’s body as it coated her sides and the inflatable seating she was sat in the middle of.

The sprayers were still on when a klaxon sounded and the nozzle above let loose a wave of thick pink gunge, slapping down just on the back and neck of Deryn as she squealed loudly and continued to squeak at the cold and thick goo piling up and making its way around her shoulders to run down her front and as it tickled its way down her back too. She seemed to jerk slightly back, as if trying to sit upright but thinking better of it at the last moment. She did however unclasp her hands to wipe away a trickle that was threatening to make its way inside her bikini top, bringing her hand up in front of her face to view the slimy trail oozing its way through her fingers with some fascination. Taking a breath in and closing her eyes as she did, she jerked backwards again, this time sticking her head under the downpour for a few seconds before leaning back out again. Even that brief immersion had plastered her blonde hair down on top of her head and the sides now hung limp and heavy with gunge that dripped off it. Her face was only minorly covered though, down to her muzzle and she used her one clean hand to wipe clear her eyes. She blinked open in slight shock as the downpour began to turn into more of a drizzle of thick blobs and the foam sprayers finally shut themselves off.

“Deryn never did think pink was her colour,” Cara commented softly to the other crew around her. “I can see why, it doesn’t really suit her.”

“Well you know it’s not over yet, she won’t be staying that colour for long!” Lorna replied.

Almost as if someone could hear her, the grille to Deryn’s left suddenly spewed forth a wave of sky blue gunk. As it slapped into her side and over her head, Deryn gave a cry and automatically scrambled to get away from it. As she slid over to the right, the foam covering it made her slide much faster than she had intended and her legs flew into the air, sending an arc of pink across the door and left wall as Deryn tried to put her hand down on the other side of the sofa to balance. Unfortunately her hand slid on what was covering that side and she ended up lying on her side as the blue wave quickly receded as if it’d been scared off by the otter girl’s slip. Alex hesitantly took a step forward, preparing to ask if she was okay.

“Ow,” they heard Deryn mutter, although it was clear that the word was more reaction than any proper indication of being hurt.

Seeing her no worse for wear, Alex once again moved back out of the splash range. Deryn planted her feet down into the coating of pink and blue that was on the tank's floor and shuffled herself back upright, sitting now a little off-centre to the right as the blue wave started back up again. As they watched though it once again receded down, but almost immediately a wave of bright yellow replaced it from the back grille, once again catching Deryn by surprise although she only screamed this time and didn't try to move away in case of another slip up. Then after a second the second wave also stopped, but was replaced by another sky blue wave from the right, which thoroughly painted the otter. Then it also stopped and the back wave restarted, which then stopped and the left one came back to life. And so the three grilles played their gungy payloads over Deryn's body in a wave motion, back and forth, coating her pink form in equal parts of blue and yellow.

"Wow, Cliff's getting fancy with it," Lorna muttered as they watched.

"I didn't even know he could do that with those grilles," the beaver commented, sounding impressed.

"Well, he has had a lot of practice," Karen smiled.

Lorna considered the leopard for a few moments. "He tested that pattern on you didn't he?"

"Last week," was Karen's only response.

The wave pattern lasted for a good ten seconds before all three burst fully back into life, emptying themselves over their victim before receding back down for the last time and leaving massive trickling leaks down all three walls. Deryn waited for a few more seconds, and then, seemingly thinking it was over, untensed herself and looked forward again. That was when the two nozzles in the ceiling, aimed right at the centre of the tank shot their green streams at her and caught her unaware. As Deryn moved her arms up to shield her face, another two second burst of pink gunge spewed from the pipe above and hit her square on the head.

"Oh now that was cruel!" Karen said, though she was smiling because Deryn was also.

Eventually both the side nozzles shut off too and left the slimy otter painted in greens down her sides with the mixed blue and yellow visible on the rest of her body, save the pink splatter over her head. She hesitantly lowered her arms this time, in case there was another stage but Alex moved forward to speak to her.

"Well, I think that was a fitting consequence for a loss!" he commented. "Are you alright in there?"

Deryn was busy wiping her face off but smiled softly. "I'm fine, I've seen you do much worse to people in here!"

“Well we can do if you want,” Alex said, as the side nozzles both shot out again for a second, making Deryn yelp. “But I don’t think you’d be pleased.”

“I would,” Tazia said, the smile on her face somewhat malicious.

“Yes, perfect point to turn attention onto her now!” Lorna grinned. “Go on Alex, let her have it! She can’t get out of there clean surely?”

Cara didn’t say anything, but inside she was thinking pretty much the same as the rabbit. Sure she hadn’t been inside the big tank, but to have someone on the set, sat inside a tank who wasn’t part of the main game and letting them escape without turning it on? That so rarely happened that it was unfeasible that Tazia was going to stay as clean as she currently was right now. Yet something seemed off to Cara. Not only was Tazia not the sort that the sand cat would have pegged for this sort of thing, being far too proud of her appearance, but that grin made Cara wonder if the otter knew something they didn’t.

“They’re not going to,” she muttered softly under her breath.

The beaver turned curiously, as he registered she had said something but an outraged cry from Lorna made him spin back around frantically to see what the matter was. On screen they could see Alex opening the door to the tank Tazia had been in, and the clean otter girl striding out happily. Everyone in the room let out sounds of disappointment.

“No way,” Cara said, disappointed that she had been right to suspect something.

“Aw, I wanted to see her scream,” Lorna pouted.

“I guess the show’s over for now,” Karen said, as she got to her feet. “We’d better get back to work.”

At this she began to leave, Lorna still leaning back in her chair with a scowl on her face. Cara stayed in place, watching as Alex was told the filming had stopped and he slowly approached the tank to see to Deryn. Another crew member appeared with a towel as Tazia left the view of the cameras and Alex offered his hand to Deryn to help her up.

“You took one fall already, we don’t want you to actually hurt yourself in there!” he said.

Deryn for her part graciously accepted the hand and didn’t even try to splash him or rub slime up his arm, which Cara could tell Alex both appreciated and was maybe a little disappointed at. As the towel was handed to her, Deryn began to clean her hands and the slime dripping off her fringe as the door was opened.

“Lorna, I’ll be back on set a little later, I’ve something I need to do first,” Cara said, before turning to the rabbit. “I mean... if that’s okay?”

Lorna stood and pretended to look stern, but she really didn't have the face for it and poked out her tongue.

"I can tell it's important, so I'll meet you down there," she said. "Just don't take too long! Set building takes half as long with two pairs of hands!"

"I won't," Cara said, as she got to her feet too and moved towards the door. "Thanks Lorna."

Deryn was careful as she walked towards the changing rooms and the showers. As she had been warned, gunge was very slippery stuff. And having taken one tumble today, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to do it again onto a surface that wasn't going to be as forgiving as the inflatable seat had been. The crew member who had provided the tower had also produced a water bucket for her to rinse her feet off in, but she was having to be careful where she stepped to stop herself planting a foot into a thick drip of colour. She was now alone, having been escorted up until a few seconds ago by that same crew member and she was very glad that the people here at least took care of the people they drenched. While the experience of a full-on gunging had certainly been a thrill to her, the slip had marred it slightly and she had no desire to have such a frantic time again. At least not for a long while.

She pushed through the double doors, leaving a slimy print on each door and wandered over towards the female showers and changing area. She'd just crossed over the threshold when she looked up and what she saw made her stop dead. The young sand cat in front of her, waiting, was dressed in the crew's uniform of black with the IZ logo on the shirt. As she moved from the wall she'd been leaning on, Deryn realised that even with her black hair cut short she still recognised who this was.

"Deryn?" Cara asked gently.

"Cara?" and Deryn's cry of surprise was a lot less startled than Tazia's had been earlier, more like she was unable to believe that it really was Cara.

"I'm... the last time we saw... i mean," Cara tried, stumbling over her words and then cutting herself off with a muttered curse.

She held up a hand, and then quickly stripped off her crew shirt, throwing it into the corner quickly, before she walked closer to Deryn and opened her arms for a hug. While she did look slightly reluctant, she fixed the otter with a determined look and Deryn realised that Cara was apologising the best way she could think of now, unable to get her words to work for her correctly.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I know that you..."

"Hug me already," Cara said, cutting her off. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I shouted at you."

There was a moment of silence as they stared at each other, and then Deryn gave a happy squeak. She launched herself into a slimy hug with the sand cat so enthusiastically that Cara had to stumble backwards to keep them from both going over on the floor. Squishing the gunge between them, Cara closed her arms over the slimy shoulders and was pleased to realise that far from any shuddering she'd expected the warmth was... nice.

"I was an idiot," she muttered to her friend. "I shouldn't have let my anger loose on you."

"It's okay," Deryn said, and the two pushed away from each other leaving blue, yellow and green stains to mat Cara's fur down her front and over her arms. "I should never have let Tazia convince me it'd be a funny idea."

"... I was watching you know," Cara admitted, with a grin. "In the recording booth. I was rooting for you so hard."

"Why? Because you felt guilty?" Deryn asked, half curious and half teasing.

"Yes... and seeing Tazia having the tables turned on her would have been funny," Cara admitted. "I'm so disappointed she got away though."

"She just wanted to be on television," Deryn admitted shyly. "She convinced me to come on with her, and act like I'd done some small sin like not wash the dishes or something."

"Wait, you two are roomies?"

Deryn snorted as she walked over to the big sprayer area. "Of course not, she has that little flat paid for by her parents where she and her partner live." As the water turned on she began to slowly rotate under the jets to loosen the clinging gunk from her fur. "She just wanted an excuse to come onto a show, and since her uncle's part of the camera crew here it was the easiest option. Just as long as they promised not to gunge her."

Cara felt her mouth drop open at that, and Deryn quickly stopped and waved a hand at her to stop the sand cat giving a cry of mingled anger and disgust. "Don't spread that one around though. Only a few people were supposed to know."

"I knew something was fishy!" Cara hissed, keeping her voice low. "Goddamn that Tazia, I can understand not wanting to get messy but you don't come onto a show where it's a guarantee and demand not to be hit."

Deryn just shrugged and Cara decided that it was best to drop it. She didn't have any sort of power or right to demand that Tazia get messy, and from how Deryn had reacted, she shouldn't even know what had been agreed. If anything she did understand the reluctance but still...

She'd just headed over towards a shower for herself when suddenly Lorna poked her head in. Cara startled and hid around a corner, to hide that she was currently topless. Lorna ducked back out quickly.

"Aren't you supposed to be on the set?!"

"Sorry! Couldn't help myself... had to see what you were up to," the rabbit's voice came.

"It's fine, you didn't know I'd be taking my shirt off," Cara muttered. "To be honest, neither did I. It was a bit of a spur of the moment."

"I appreciated the gesture," Deryn remarked, as she stepped out from the sprayer area to get into a separate shower cubicle for more fine scrubbing of her messy areas.

"Ooh, be careful!" and Lorna had ducked back in now that she knew Cara was hiding herself. "They've got a separate gunge system hooked up to the showers too you know! One second you're washing your hair and the next..."

Deryn looked up at the showerhead startled, and Lorna giggled.

"Don't worry, they won't be turning it on right now," she said. "We gave you enough punishment in that big machine earlier, and you took a tumble too. Just be quick before they change their minds."

"Would you mind actually giving us some privacy though?!" Cara asked, from around the corner.

"Oh, right!" and the rabbit vanished back around the corner.

"She seems like fun," Deryn commented, as she slipped off the IZ swimwear she'd been wearing the entire time.

"Lorna's good fun to work with," Cara admitted. "I'm lucky that most of the people here are much nicer than I'd expected."

"What, did you seriously expect them to gunge you as soon as you got here?" Deryn teased.

Cara raised her eyebrow and smiled, and the otter hid her laugh behind a hand.

"Oh dear!" was her only comment.

"I got to run around a bit first, and in the end... it wasn't that bad," Cara admitted. "Still not as comfortable with it as most of the others are though."

"I suppose that'll come with time," Deryn said, as she scrubbed loose the gunge that'd collected under the bikini top. "How did you end up here anyway? It seems a bit... well, it doesn't seem like a place you'd easily fit."

"According to what I was told a few hours ago, that application," Cara said. "They wanted to hire someone who'd wanted to be on the show. I wasn't what they expected but it's been made to work. I think it's been good for me."

"I'm glad," and Deryn's response was sincere and warm.

Cara felt a weight begin to slip from her shoulders and gave a relieved sigh as Deryn went back to finishing her shower. She'd made up. She didn't need to feel guilty anymore. Even if she shouldn't have said it in the first place, she was glad that Deryn had forgiven her for the outburst. Maybe after this, they could keep in contact. It'd be nice to go shopping with the otter again, like they had before. She smiled to herself and once again began to make her way over to the shower, only for Lorna's foot to begin to appear from the door again. Cara threw herself back into cover, cursing under her breath as she covered her bra with her slimy arms. Lorna stopped, facing away and Cara could see that she had her eyes shut this time.

"I know, I'm sorry!" she started. "But Jerat just came to me, have either of you seen that Tazia girl lately?"

"Since she left the cameras' line of sight?" Cara asked. "No."

"I'm afraid I was more focused on getting out of the tank without falling on my tail again," Deryn admitted, glad the steam on the cubicle walls was hiding her current nakedness.

"Oh, that's not good," Lorna muttered.

"Keep your eyes closed," Cara said, and dashed across the room to grab her crew shirt. Pulling it on over the gunge-matted fur she winced but decided that it'd do for now until she could wash and change.

She walked over to Lorna and carefully guided her out of the shower room, as the rabbit's eyes were still closed. In the changing room Lorna opened them again and saw that Cara was dressed, but not clean.

"You didn't wash?"

"I didn't know you'd be coming back," Cara replied. "I didn't have time, and this is more important I'd guess."

"Yeah, would you mind running over to the Processing Wing part of the set to start the search?" Lorna said, as she fiddled with the settings on her radio. "I know that you of all people will likely get there quickly. Start from the far end and work your way back towards the centre, I'm going to make sure the others know what's going on."

"I'll call if I see her," Cara nodded, hand on her own radio in her pocket.

She then jogged to the double doors onto set and shoulder barged her way through onto the set, slowing down for a second to consider the on-set entryway as well as pull her crew shirt away from her fur where it was sticking, but then decided to use the crew passages through the back to save ducking and crawling through small passages and the things the teams would ordinarily go through. Once was enough, although it was a fun experience.

Emerging out of a door hidden behind a metal support strut in the hangar-like area, Cara paused for a second to listen. Maybe her ears weren't as large as Lorna's but she still might hear something if Tazia had made it down here. She was about to move on when she heard soft footsteps walking across a grated floor and she looked up to the walkway that circled the room seven feet up. Across the hangar she saw a figure walking across and trying the doors up there. Cara quietly moved around the edge of the room, wishing that the set lighting was fully on so she could better make out who it was. Although it was very likely to be the missing otter girl, it could just as easily be a crew member who had forgotten their multi-use key. The moment that she got close enough to see that not only were they barefoot, but also wearing the IZ bikini set though, she knew.

"Tazia!" she shouted, moving away from the wall to glare up at the otter.

Tazia jumped and turned around to see who had shouted. Then she ran for the staircase that descended down and further into the rooms of the Processing Wing, located at the other end of the hangar and Cara started to run parallel to her on the hangar floor. As Tazia vanished down the stairs and out of sight, Cara skidded into a door and frantically searched her pockets for her own multi-use key.

"Damn Tazia, what does she think she's doing?" she muttered angrily under her breath as she found the key and scrambled to get it into the lock.

Beyond this door she knew there was a short corridor that connected to three other rooms, two fairly small and the one at the end being the much larger one that she and Lorna had spent the last week making look appropriate for the show. The stairway that the otter had vanished down also came out onto it. She wondered just what Tazia was actually doing, trying to break into rooms on the set. Sadly the ones beyond this door were all open to the corridor so she could theoretically enter any of them while Cara struggled to get through. If she didn't spot Tazia, the otter could easily slip past her and escape into the main area of the Processing Wing and from there who knows where? No, Cara needed to corner her now.

As the door finally opened, she reached for her radio. She needed to at least let them know where to come. She held the door closed and switched on the radio.

"This is Cara Sandcat, anyone receiving?"

“Receiving you Sandcat,” came a voice that Cara could tell was Blue’s. “Lorna’s passed on Jerat’s message about his missing niece, said she’d sent you ahead.”

“She’s here, in the Processing Wing’s new corridor,” Cara reported. “She was on the walkway trying to access rooms and ran down the stairway into the corridor when I tried to call her. I might need someone else here. I’m not sure what she’s doing.”

“Hear you loud and clear Cara,” and this voice was Karen’s. “I’ll make a move down there with a few others. Lorna, Cliff, Jerat?”

“On my way!” Lorna’s response came.

There was a grunt of confirmation which Cara guessed to be Jerat’s, and at that moment Cara heard something from the other side of the door.

“Hey lovely viewers, it’s Tazia, doing another vlog from inside a special location!”

“What is she-?” Cara muttered, stashing the radio and slowly pushing the door open.

She slipped as quietly into the corridor as she could, closing the door behind her. Sure it wasn’t locked anymore, but in the case of Tazia deciding to bolt again it’d buy a few seconds to catch up. Pausing to listen again, Cara realised that far from hiding Tazia was strutting about in the room directly ahead of her. The same room that Lorna and she had been working on. In her hand was a shiny smartphone which Tazia was speaking to, clearly recording a video and completely unaware that she was being watched by the sand cat.

“Yes that’s right viewers, welcome inside of the set of the Industrial Zone!”

She was making a vlog?! She’d gone through all of this, roping in Deryn, the game, everything... just to sneak off into the set and make a vlog from inside a place she wasn’t supposed to be?! Oh for...

“And this here is one of the famous machines they use in the games!”

At this Tazia spun the phone to face the enclosed area, and started walking towards its open door (wait, wasn’t that closed earlier?). At this Cara ran forward, panicked as she realised that maybe having this guest to the set wandering off into an as-of-yet untested gunge machine might not look so good publicly if the otter got herself hurt in some way.

“Tazia, no!” she cried.

Tazia flinched, finally realising that Cara was there and she turned the smartphone onto Cara as the sand cat closed in.

“Ugh, I’m filming something here!” she cried.

Cara stopped a short way from the otter and held up a hand.

“You’re not supposed to be here!” Cara said, panting a little bit from the quick dash. “If you’d wanted a tour, surely you could have asked your uncle?”

“Oh him, he doesn’t know what I do for my streaming viewers,” Tazia replied, smiling. “I love to go places and show my lovely viewers a backstage view of everything. People love videos showing them what they don’t get to see ordinarily and I’d never had gotten to see what I really wanted to!”

“Well it stops now,” Cara said, trying to sound firm. “We show people around under supervision for a reason you know, you could get hurt. Come on, we’re leaving. Your uncle’s worried sick.”

Tazia just laughed. “You think you’re the first one to catch me? I’m not going anywhere with you, I want to show my viewers this first.” And she started to walk back towards the enclosed area. Cara hissed.

“Don’t, that thing’s not been tested yet!” she cried.

“Ooh, so it’s new! I can get an exclusive first look!” Tazia said, as she swung the phone around to film the two doors, one either side of the opening into the cut-off area.

Cara sprinted forward to try and stop the otter, but Tazia dashed inside and started filming the ceiling, nozzles pointed down. Cara hesitated at the door as her nerves momentarily got the better of her and that was when they both heard the sound of an air hiss. As Tazia turned around and Cara looked to the side, the two doors slid closed and trapped Tazia inside of the enclosed area. Cara took a step back in surprise and realised that lights around the sides of the area were also blinking, and watched as the covering over the thick gungey wallow cracked down the middle and began sliding apart too. Tazia screamed as she stumbled and one leg sank into the brown goo, somehow managing to flail her arms enough to not go over fully and sinking her other leg straight in to keep her balance. To Cara’s amazement she’d somehow managed to hold onto her smartphone, although the footage would be terrible to watch from all that flailing.

“What are you doing?!” she screamed at Cara, aiming the phone at the sand cat.

Cara was stuck for words for a moment, then snarled. “ME?! I told you not to go inside it!”

“You just told me it was untested!”

“I thought you’d be smart enough to... oh never mind!” Cara groaned. “Hold on, I’ll try to get this door open...”

“Allow me.”

Cara jumped, as a voice came from the corridor behind her. Emerging from the semi-lit hall came Cliff's lupine self, looking awkwardly at the trapped otter ahead of him but seemingly not all that out of breath. Seeing Cara looking behind him, Cliff looked around too, then realised she was looking for Karen, Lorna, and Jerat to be following him.

"I was already on set close by working on something else when you radioed everyone," he said, by way of an explanation. "The others will still be on their way, but I think I might be the crew member you need most of all right now." And he addressed that last part to the otter girl who was still looking around at what she was standing in with disgust.

"Any ideas why it closed?" Cara asked, as he moved past her to examine the door more closely.

"None, other than the entire thing's not fully operational yet," he replied. "I was having a few issues two days ago with the doors triggering on their own, but I thought I'd solved it."

"Just fix it!" Tazia demanded.

"Whoa there," Cara said, holding up a hand. "This man here is responsible for most of the machines you've seen on screen you realise, he's your best bet to getting out of there quickly so show some respect."

"But I'd like some quiet to figure it out," Cliff continued, not looking up from where he was now gently using a screwdriver to lever off the covering around the door's access panel. "After all, who knows what might happen if I'm distracted?"

Tazia frowned, not quite understanding what he meant but Cara looked over at him with a little alarm. He didn't really mean he'd...? Surely they'd get into trouble if he did? Was he one of the ones who knew just what Tazia's little condition had been? Cliff was focused on the wires behind the panel now and Cara could see nothing in his manner that was anything other than serious. So maybe he really had been trying to just warn her. Yes, it had to be that. No need to let her paranoia run off with her.

She decided to go back down the hallway to see if she could see the others, and to direct them once they did appear. The door she'd had to come through to access the corridor was still closed, and she passed through it and stuck her head out to look around the main area of the Processing Wing curiously. The half-dimmed lights made seeing anyone a bit more of a challenge as shadows were being thrown all over the room that wouldn't be there if full studio lighting was on... which direction did Karen say they were going to come from? Maybe she should radio them again and find out. She was just reaching down to her pocket for it when the sound of something from behind her made her tense up for a second as she reacted to a jolt of fear in her brain. She relaxed again as her common sense reasserted itself but then another jolt of fear shot through her as she realised what that sound actually meant.

“Oh, that’s not supposed to be happening...”

Cliff’s worried voice from behind her confirmed that, yes - the rest of the machine Tazia was stuck inside had just turned itself on. She pulled her head back through the door and pelted down the semi-corridor to where the wolf was looking around at the wires behind the door panel with some of the same worry Cara was feeling.

“I probably shouldn’t have placed the activation wires so close to the door panel’s ones,” he was muttering to himself. “I’ll need to go around the back, access the bigger mass connected to the pumps. She can’t move.” He addressed Cara, before standing up, and quickly walking around to the side and pushing a door hidden in the wall’s panelling.

Cara looked at the cover for the door panel, sitting on the floor, the panel itself dangling from its wires loosely and back up at Tazia, who while she didn’t know what was going on had caught the tension from the two crew members.

“Where’s he going?” she asked.

“Tazia, listen to me,” Cara said, trying to keep her voice calmer. “Stay as still as you can, the nozzles above you have just turned themselves on. Cliff’s going to access the pump at the back to make sure you don’t get... well...”

Tazia looked shocked for a second then slowly, her face turned into one of fury again. “You think I believe that?”

“Tazia, please...”

“No, you’re just trying to scare me,” the otter said angrily. “Do you still hold a grudge from that stupid prank years ago?”

“Don’t...”

“You were such a baby, it was just a joke!” Tazia scoffed. “And now you think you’ve got the means to turn the tables, but I know what you’re doing! My uncle’s going to hear about this, you can’t just use your job’s resources for petty revenge!”

“Tazia, this isn’t about that form! Don’t move until we say it’s okay, we’ll get you out!”

“Right, like gunge’ll really fall from the sky if I do thi-” the rest of her sentence was cut off by her scream as Tazia moved her phoneless hand through an area to her left and a cascade of white goo poured from the nozzle over that area.

The otter girl pulled her arm back sharply and the pour shut off after two seconds, but splashed more of the thick wallow up Tazia’s left leg and left a few drops of white goo down the left side of her body. She stumbled slightly to her right with the force she’d pulled her hand back, but blessedly did not go far enough to trigger the right hand side and the one

above her didn't seem active at the time. Tazia stared in shock at the white patch on the brown goo, before slowly turning to look towards Cara with the same look, and now the sand cat could see the fear and belief in the otter's eyes. She pointed at Tazia firmly.

"Do. Not. MOVE!" she barked out again, emphasising each word and this time Tazia listened to her.

As Tazia stood still in the middle of the goo, Cara put a paw over her face and moved away slightly. How had it come to this, with that silly girl trapped in the middle of a machine? It was nearly surreal, something you'd read in some badly written story... but then sometimes reality was stranger or just as strange as fiction. She paced back down the small corridor and back again, trying to walk off some of the nervous energy that was flowing through her body right now. All the while she could feel Tazia watching her, but tried to ignore the stare which right now she couldn't tell if it was more frightened or angry. She hoped it was the former, because even if the Tazia she knew was the one she'd seen in evidence today, it'd been a few years. Maybe, just maybe, the otter girl had done some maturing and was sensible enough to let this teach her a lesson in why she shouldn't be sneaking off to film these vlogs. Maybe that lesson would stick if Cliff couldn't fix it and they would be forced to vent the nozzles onto-

"Can't you do anything?"

Cara turned to Tazia as she asked the question. It'd been pleading, even if it was still underneath the otter girl's usual snotty attitude. Looking into her eyes, where she was trying to hide nerves, Cara felt a little guilty at her last incomplete thought. She knew what it felt like to be that afraid of being trapped in a machine, something unpleasant poised to be dropped onto her head... Pushing away the memories of her much younger self, Cara shook her head.

"I'm still pretty new here, I don't know the inner workings of these things," she said, folding her arms. "Cliff really is your best bet, and once the others get here..."

"You need to get me out before they do."

Cara blinked as the otter cut her off, her tone seemed... desperate? She was looking intently at Cara - no, past Cara to the door into the corridor. Cara tilted her head.

"More of us means we can have a much higher chance of getting you free clean you realise," she said. "I mean, Cliff might ask me to do something in a minute but more people gives us more options."

"No, I can't... you can't let my..." Tazia stopped there and Cara suddenly got it.

"Your 'uncle doesn't know what you do for your viewers' huh?" she said, recalling what Tazia had told her earlier. "He truly DOESN'T know does he? The places you trespass for filming."

Tazia was quiet but Cara could see that she was right, and despite her desire to be the better person, take the high road she couldn't resist. Surely she was owed this little bit of revenge if she got no others.

"Well, he knows now. He knows that you wander off," she said. "Even if he doesn't quite know what you do, he's never going to trust you again is he?"

"Shut up," Tazia hissed.

"I'm just telling you the truth," Cara muttered. "If you keep pushing and ignoring the things that don't suit you, you eventually get bitten. I hope you realise that you'll get off easy here no matter what happens with Cliff behind the walls there, because it could have been worse. You might have gotten yourself injured somewhere else, killed maybe."

Tazia actually snorted, her old attitude taking her over. "As if you'd ever consider injury or death a worse option than humiliation, not if the way you reacted that evening is any indication!"

Cara felt her tail twitch but looked Tazia in the eye. "At one point i may have. But I've since learned there are much worse things in this world to fear. I've grown up some, shame you don't seem to have."

Tazia scowled and if it wasn't for the threat still looming actively above her, Cara knew that the otter girl wouldn't have let the insult stand. She turned away from the enclosed area and once again paced back towards the door, balling her fist up slightly. She shouldn't have sniped at the otter, that was a mistake. Not one she'd likely pay for, but she still probably shouldn't have done it. She let out a sigh, then looked up as the door began to move. It opened and she saw Karen poke her head through first, followed by Tazia's uncle, Jerat, and finally Lorna who looked about as serious as Cara had ever seen her look. Lorna met her eyes and nodded, but the other two moved past the sand cat to survey the situation. Cara turned and ran after them.

"Hold on, Cliff's around the back," she told the two. "Front doors have locked her in and the nozzles have activated, he's trying to turn it off."

Jerat looked shocked and moved quickly towards the area, and Cara could see Tazia's body language change to one of something terrified of being caught out. Karen had paused and was looking at the entire scene thoughtfully, as if she was trying to figure something out. Lorna moved up behind Cara and put a paw on the sand cat's shoulder as she shook her head.

"Oh dear dear," she muttered, then looked at Cara. "Are you sure you didn't have anything to do with her getting stuck in there?"

Karen looked around in surprise. "Lorna!"

“Not me,” Cara said, trying hard to hide a smile at Lorna’s joke then making her voice low so as not to be heard by the otters. “Even if I was hoping she’d get it in the studio earlier, I’m responsible enough not to cause trouble for us by even trying it.”

“Should hope not!” Karen said, before she moved forward too.

Lorna waited a few seconds until she was out of earshot before asking, “But seriously, did you?”

“No!” Cara said again, and she moved forward to join the other group.

As she got closer she could see that Jerat was frowning angrily at the trapped otter girl in the middle of the gunge pool. Tazia looked afraid, but this time Cara could tell that the fear was coming from having been caught by her uncle.

“I should have listened to my wife... what were you thinking??” he demanded of her. “The police said if you were caught trespassing again...” He muttered angrily. “I thought I could rely on you not to be like this. If my brother hadn’t been so useless in raising you...”

“Hey, my dad loves me!” Tazia spat back at him. “At least he let me have a life growing up, unlike my cousins...”

“He let you get away with far too much, and now...” Jerat waved a paw to indicate the situation Tazia found herself in. “If Cliff can’t fix it maybe the resulting downpour would be enough to teach you a lesson.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Don’t worry, I think I’ve got them,” came a voice from the hidden door and Cliff emerged, wiping his brow. “Oh, hello everyone. Just in time to see the situation this trespasser’s gotten herself into. The Zone doesn’t like intruders and so it’s decided to hold onto her, and I’ve been trying to ‘persuade’ it to let go.”

“Cliff, did you fix the issues or not?” Karen asked, seriously and Cliff dropped the jovial look off his face.

“I think I’ve gotten the nozzles to behave and switch off, but the door’s still jammed,” he admitted, awkwardly rubbing his hand behind his neck. “I think I’m going to have to completely re-do it after we’ve got this incident past us.”

“Wait, you can’t get me out?” Tazia cried from inside, finally moving from the relatively stiff posture she’d been holding the last few minutes. “You can’t leave me, you have to get me out!”

“Calm down,” Jerat scolded her and Tazia shut up, scowling back at him for daring to tell her off. “We’ve always got more than one way out of a machine, and I don’t think you’d have made it any different with this one, right?”

Cliff nodded. “Yup, there’ll be a panel hidden in the back wall.” And he pointed to the other side of the sealed-off area where the part set back into the wall was. “I’m going to see if I can force it to open from this panel again though, as I hadn’t quite finished troubleshooting when I accidentally triggered it to turn on.”

“Do you want one of us to go round there then and open it, just so we can get her out?” Lorna asked.

“Yeah, Cara would you mind?” Cliff asked the sand cat. “I know you know where it is, you and Lorna just finished decorating that end two days ago right?”

“Three,” Cara agreed. “I suppose you’re asking me because it’s also a tight squeeze?”

“You’ll get in there easiest,” he replied. “Now, go.”

Cara nodded again, taking one last look around at the assembled crew members. Lorna was still a little way off, hovering and watching the events from afar. Jerat was right up against the door with his attention focused squarely on his niece, who was trying to ignore her uncle as best as she could while slowly moving through the thick wall of gunge. Cliff has gone to the panel and the dangling wires again, with Karen standing just next to him letting him work but making small suggestions and holding wires out of the way as Cliff asked her to. Cara walked over to the hidden door, left ajar by the wolf and looked back one last time, this time at Tazia. The otter had now turned to face the back wall but was carefully and slowly trying to move through the goo, and from her body language and the fact she was holding her arms up high and out to the sides Cara could tell she wasn’t enjoying the feeling around her feet. Biting down on the lip to stop the giggle, she ducked inside the run and made her way swiftly down it. She stepped over a box of tools that had been left off to one side and came to the end, where the run turned 90 degrees right to run behind the big boxed-off area and house the mass of cables for the nozzles and the front door of the large enclosed area as well as the secret panel in the back wall through which the crew would eventually be able to stock that area with ‘crates’ for the game that Industrial Zone would be running using this new machine. Hell Cara thought as she reached the door, they might very well ask her to be the one stocking it if she was the smallest crew member around. Cliff had said that he wanted to have her shadow him on one show at least so she could know how it was done, and learn some of the more complicated machine safety procedures that all crew members ought to know.

“Okay, coming through now!” she called through to the other side, unsure if her voice was going to carry but working on the latches that held the door closed.

Even though they were new, the sliding latches still took a little effort for her to move and Cara wondered if anyone had lubricated them any yet. Having gotten two open the third one

was refusing to budge all the way or even just enough for her to get it open and she stopped to take a break, rubbing on her palm where the edge had been digging in. Thinking, she recalled seeing something that had looked like a can of lubricant spray in the toolbox, and she began to backtrack towards it to see if it had been and bring it back if it could be of any use getting the last latch to open. Turning back around the corner she saw the can and pounced on it, lifting it up closer to her face to read the label in the semi-darkness. Seeing that she'd been correct about what it was she let out a quiet "Yes!" before heading back towards the panel door and the stuck latch. On the way she passed the mass of wires and slowed down a little to see if she could identify any of them from that one time Cliff had taught her how he marked his cables for each machine...

"I tend to mark ceiling nozzles with red tape, side ones with yellow, floor's will be green, foam jets tend to be blue... yes, that's because of the soap element in there; doors I use this special hazard tape, it just seems appropriate, and other things tend to get rings of black tape depending on how many extra features each machine's running."

Suddenly there was a distant electrical sound from beyond the wall and the sound of a lupine yelp. Cara looked up in alarm, before hearing Cliff's voice muffled from coming through the wall.

"Sorry guys, that touched something it shouldn't have! Nothing to worry about!"

Cara heard a murmur that sounded like Karen, probably telling him off for making them all jump. She grinned at that image, but it had reminded her that she did actually have a reason for being back here and she should probably get back to doing it quickly. She went back along the corridor at a light pace, stopping by the panel door and using a small amount of the lubricant spray around the end of the bolt before taking hold and yanking again. It still resisted but she could feel it slowly, surely sliding until it all leapt open with a loud sound and a small stab of pain as she managed to trap part of her fur behind the end she'd been pulling on. Suppressing a curse word, as she yanked her hand back she slid claws into the crack of the panel and began to pull it open on the small hinges to open it up. Pulling herself back around the door and crouching down slightly to stick her head through the opening, she saw Tazia still slowly wading over, her head hidden above the low open doorway. As she came slowly closer, still holding her arms up and clutching that phone in her hand Cara reflected that she really had chosen well of the bikini sets available. This one fitted the otter's shape very well, but she did wonder if after this incident she might not be allowed to keep it. Only once had a participant had their 'winnings' confiscated, but it'd been before Cara'd joined the backstage crew and she hadn't really felt like asking for the details yet. She'd only really overheard about it happening one time, and it didn't sound like a thing anyone wanted to think about again. They loved the people who came to take part in this quirky little show, and the sand cat could only think that whoever had been barred from taking the set home had done something very silly. There was always going to be one, even in the nicest bunch of people...

It was only because she had her head sticking out that she saw what happened next. Tazia's passage over from the central spot she'd been stuck to the square just before the alcove had been mostly uneventful, and the sand cat's eyes had started looking around the area as she knew this was a golden opportunity to do so without any risk involved. It just so happened she was looking at the ceiling when she saw that something was amiss. Unfortunately she didn't have any time to voice this because a little light flicked on. Next to one of the pipes and its nozzle. The one that just so happened to be above where Tazia was stood. There was a second before a small click sounded, and this was all the warning Tazia got before a light blue runny slime pour hit her square on the head. She shrieked in surprise, stumbling backwards and Cara lost sight of her behind the downpour. She did however see the phone, which had remained clean up until now, slip from Tazia's grasp and disappear under the thick brown wallow with a thick plop. There were other various cries from way over on the other side of the area, where the rest of the crew in attendance stood but Cara barely heard it over the thunderous noise of the gunge. After five seconds it stopped, and Cara looked up to see the small light that indicated the nozzle's activeness switch off. And then she looked up to see Tazia, and the second she noticed the fiery rage in the otter's eyes she felt panic well up inside. Tazia must think this had been part of a plot to get her! At that Cara's old flight instincts took hold of her and she pulled her head back and bolted down the run.

"Get back here!" she heard Tazia scream, as the sound of someone moving through thick gunge came from behind the sand cat.

As Cara turned the corner she heard Tazia slip in the wallow and kept going, only to run into Lorna at the door before she could bypass it.

"Hey, calm down!" she said, grabbing Cara's shoulders lightly and directing her out of the door. "Not your fault."

Cara moved across the room with her to the others, looking over to the enclosed area to see that it was finally empty again, a blue patch on the surface of the wallow marking where the nozzle above it had gone off and the entire thing still lightly moving as evidence of someone having just moved through it and left. There was a splash of the brown gunk covering the floor of the alcove, and the trail of goo led into the panel door that Cara had opened. Wet footsteps announced the arrival of Tazia, who glared towards Cara angrily but was intercepted by her uncle in a much rougher fashion to how Lorna had just grabbed hold of her. Tazia's red hair was now flattened down by blue gunge, that ran down her face and either side of her muzzle. Her shoulders and chest had caught a good covering too, and trails ran down her front and sides down to her hips and legs, the legs themselves still caked in the thick brown gunge she'd been stood in. Cara moved back behind the others as the otter pointed towards the group.

"You set me up! All of you!" she cried. "Cara probably told you all some sob story earlier and you decided to do this to me, I'll make sure my dad hears about this. We'll go to the media, you won't get away with it!"

“Shut up Tazia,” Jerat hissed, giving her a shake. “You’re being hysterical. They had nothing to do with your misfortune, you chose to come down here!”

“And how could we set up anything for you if we didn’t know you would disobey the rules we set in place?” Karen asked, reasonably. “You made the choice to sneak onto set when we weren’t looking.”

“Exactly, and even if we had known you’d sneak off, we couldn’t have known where you’d go,” Lorna added, once again putting on her stern face.

“She directed me down here!” Tazia pointed at Cara now. “Tempted me into it by saying it was new... And whatever she told you about me, she’s lying.”

“I told most of them very little about you Tazia!” Cara protested. “Only that you and I once knew each other and that you pulled a very cruel joke on me.”

“And we respect the wishes of someone who might be nervous of getting messy,” Cliff added, placing his hand onto the sand cat’s shoulder in support. “How dare you accuse her of any malice in this? She’s probably one of the nicest people in this crew.”

“Only because we’ve not fully corrupted her yet,” Lorna muttered quietly, with a grin.

“So, this mess is your fault and no one else’s,” Jerat finished, before grabbing Tazia’s arm firmly. “Come on, let’s get you back upstairs and tell Blue that we’ve found you. Maybe we’ll even let you clean up, once you apologise to her and everyone else.”

He then dragged Tazia towards the door and the otter girl struggled slightly at first, before giving in and following after him meekly. The rest of the group watched them go, only breathing a sigh of relief once the sound of both footsteps faded.

“Well, that was fun,” Lorna muttered.

“It was,” Cliff said, before turning back to the machine and shaking his head. “I guess this won’t be ready for show time quite as soon as I’d hoped if the door’s not going to work.”

Cara watched him exaggerate his despair and then grinned. “Should I plug in the main power cable in the back so you can open it again?”

Cliff looked at her in surprise, but quickly recovered and laughed.

“You noticed?”

“Big cable marked with yellow and black tape lying on the ground clearly not plugged in?” Cara asked, raising an eyebrow. “Yeah, I noticed when I was back there.”

Lorna started laughing, and despite trying to look stern Karen also couldn't help but smirk. Cliff avoided giving a response to Cara by going back to the hanging panel and he started to reattach it back to where he'd detached it from the machine's front, when he'd been pretending to work on trying to open the door.

"I should be mad Cliff, I really should," Karen said. "But... I did keep quiet earlier when I saw you switch that one nozzle back on even if you did it very loudly."

"Electric crackle nearly gave me away," Cliff grinned, as he began to reattach the screws. "Also noticed you never questioned me as to how I, the one who built it in the first place, was having such trouble getting an Industrial Zone gunge machine to behave."

Karen just rolled her eyes at him.

"Not that that idiot didn't deserve it but... why did you do it?" Lorna asked.

"Well, Tazia was right about one thing. Cara did tell me a story," Cliff confessed. "And when I heard the otter had gone missing, I came through the hidden passages and found our little sand cat confronting her. When Tazia went into the machine, well I couldn't let that chance pass me by. A little bit of karma for a horrible housemate and a nasty trick."

Cara felt herself blushing, and averted her eyes awkwardly.

"You didn't have to do that but... thanks," she said. "Just as long as this doesn't get any of us into trouble."

"Well, as long as the finer details don't get out we should be okay," Lorna said, awkwardly.

"For once, I agree," Karen replied. "If just for the sake of us all, let's not speak of this again."

"Agreed."

"And let's try never to DO something like this again, or else." Karen added, with a glare at Cliff who threw his hands up to defend himself with a grin.

"Don't worry, I've got it out of my system now," he assured her. "Cross my heart, will never happen again."

"Good," Karen sighed. "Now, I'd better get back upstairs to see how this is going to be dealt with."

She left and for a few seconds the other three stood there, silent.

"This is totally going to happen again," Lorna said out loud, and Cara heard Cliff give a snort of agreement.

“Just as long as it’s not frequent I think we’ll be fine,” he said.

“Oh yeah,” Cara said, before turning back to the machine. “Wait, why were the tanks for the nozzles full anyway? Don’t you usually keep them empty?”

Cliff paused in his repairs. “Oh, was planning to do some testing with them later. Find me a few volunteers.” He grinned at her, impishly. “Want to Cara?”

Cara backed off slowly and laughed nervously. “Pass, for now.”

“Oh come on, this will be fun!” Lorna grinned back and grabbed Cara around the middle, lifting her up slightly.

Cara laughed and wriggled in the rabbit’s grasp, as Lorna marched her closer to the area, moving slowly with the weight of the sand cat in her arms. Eventually Lorna dropped her back to the ground and stuck her tongue out at Cara.

“Nah, I’m not that evil,” she said. “But if you change your mind we could go together. It’s always better when you’ve got a buddy.”

Cara thought. “That could be fun.”

“Ah, you heard it Cliff, she agreed!” Lorna said, pointing.

“To nothing!” Cara snorted, walking away from the rabbit.

They had all come upstairs now and Cara was wrapping up work and preparing to go home. Today had been something alright. Before she left the staff area though she felt her phone buzz with a text message. Curiously, she pulled it out and saw a number she didn’t recognise, so opened the message.

Hi Cara, it’s me - Deryn.

A parakeet member of the crew gave me the number, and I wondered if you wanted to go get drinks this weekend? We’ve got a lot of catching up to do, and I bet you’ve got lots of interesting stories from where you work! You have to tell me some!

Happily, Cara added Deryn’s number to her phone and sent a message back saying that she would love to go for drinks. Stepping outside and taking a breath of fresh, cool evening air she thought about the message.

Interesting stories huh? There was one story that she knew Deryn would take just as much pleasure in hearing as Cara would telling it...