

Partners

Part 10

The storm was overwhelmingly violent. Dev had perched herself on the small ledge behind the drop suit with her back against the dispenser half hidden behind it. Overhead, she could hear the almost continual rumble of thunder, and the lightning strikes were going on around them in an eyeblinking barrage of cracks and blasts.

She and Jess were in their gray undersuits, the environmental systems in the carrier working well enough to keep the icy chill of the wind and weather from impacting them. It was comfortable and relaxed, Dev was reading a few pages of her book while Jess fiddled with one of the big blaster rifles.

She had halfway wanted Jess to tell her to take her clothes off. For a moment, she'd thought her partner was, but the fury of the storm had distracted both of them and Jess had seemed to turn a bit shy, her face twisting up into a wry grin as she folded her city suit and put it away.

That was all right, Dev decided. There was always time later to investigate the idea.

After a few minutes Jess set the rifle back into its clamps and stood up, walking over and taking a seat next to her on the ledge. "Crazy out side, huh?" She braced her hands on the edge of the flat surface, her shoulder just brushing Dev's.

And then again, she'd been told there was no time like the present to do things. Dev peered at the big wraparound windows around her seat, which were solid gray with rain hitting them, only intermittently showing the blasts of lightning. "I've never seen anything like this, so yes, I believe it is." She was glad to have the solid wall of the carrier behind her, instead of the glass.

Jess hitched herself back and leaned against the wall, folding her hands and letting them rest on her thighs. "Thats right, no storms in space."

"Well." Dev put her book down. "We do have storms, just not water ones." She said. "We have sun storms and asteroid storms, and they're both pretty dangerous. I remember one of the asteroid ones when I was little that was so bad it knocked out power and grav."

"Huh."

"It was scary. We were all in class when it happened." Dev went on. "All of a sudden we heard a loud noise, then it went dark, then we were all floating."

Jess tried to imagine that, and really couldn't. "Wow."

"It was really disconcerting." Dev agreed. "Even the proctors were scared. You do go through training for emergencies but you don't expect one like that."

Jess considered that in silence. "Space is kinda creepy."

"It sometimes is." Dev nodded. "Especially when they show you what explosive decompression does. No one makes airlock jokes after that." She pulled her legs up crossed and leaned on them. "That's what they do to people who die upside."

Jess made a face.

"Well, it's either that or put them in the solar furnace and you know, I think I'd prefer the spacing." Dev remarked mildly. "I remember in basics class they told us in the long ago past they used to bury bodies in the ground. That sounded pretty crazy."

"It was." Jess admitted. "I guess we don't do any better, processing bodies and just dispersing them into the sea." She said. "Gotta do something with all the mass, I guess and I always though it was sorta comforting to know you'd at least give a fish a meal."

"I see." Dev thought about that. "This is quite an unpleasant subject." She said, finally. "Can you talk about fish instead? They live in the ocean?"

Jess chuckled wryly. "They do. They're the only thing that survived, after it all went bad. They learned to live on the venting algae, and we learned to live on them. That, and we learned to harvest the sea, to use the waves and the tides and the wind for power, and subsist on a lot less than we used to."

Dev nodded. "I learned that in class too." She said. "Except at the creche we used solar power for everything. They took us when we were kids up to the processing center to see the arrays. They were so pretty, all shining, and moving to follow the sun."

Jess studied her hands. "I'd like to see the sun." She remarked. "Maybe you could show me around up there someday."

Dev made a picture in her head of that. She realized with some internal embarrassment that while she'd love to show Jess the sun, she wasn't really happy about considering going back to the creche. She tried to imagine returning to her life of classes and sleep pods, and felt an intense sense of discomfort over it.

It was a strange feeling.

"Except I'm pretty sure you don't want to go back there." Jess said after a few moments of silence. "Do ya?"

Dev smiled, and glanced at her. "No." She admitted. "I was just thinking about that." She shifted a little, to face Jess. "I don't want to go back there. I like it here much better." She looked at her partner, watching the interesting shadows the overhead lights were casting on her profile.

They made her a little mysterious looking. There were sharp planes to her face that seemed stark in the half lighting.

Jess reached over and gently touched the exposed collar on Dev's neck. "Do they ever take these off?"

Dev could feel that touch, and she swallowed the faint lump in her throat from it. "What do you mean?"

Jess ran her thumb over the metal, and felt the thin, flexible edge. "You said it was for programming. So when they're done with that, do they take them off? When you don't need it anymore?"

Dev remained absolutely still for a moment. "No." She said, resisting the urge to move away from her partner's hand. "Because the other reason we have them is so they can put us down if they need to."

Jess sat up and moved closer. "What?" She said, a sharp note in her voice. "What do you mean, put you down?"

The bio alt shrugged slightly. "Sometimes things happen. I mean, we are humans, after all. Even bio alts can end up doing bad things and like any other human they can get dangerous." She put her hand out and touched Jess's knee. "Its like those gates in the citadel, isn't it? That's to stop people when they do bad things."

Jess exhaled. "Yes." She admitted. "It doesn't happen often, but it has happened, when someone just went nuts or.. " She shrugged. "I mean, we are dangerous." She indicated herself. "I am. Any of the agents are. Hell, you saw what Bain did."

"So, it's the same for us." Dev said. "They put a code into a system, and it tells the programming interface to send a signal up into our brains and makes us.. well, it makes your heart stop." She said. "And your breathing." She watched Jess's face, seeing the emotion and tension cross it. "And trying to take it off would do the same thing." She finished quietly.

Jess shifted her fingers from the collar down to Dev's shoulder. "That's why you don't like anyone touching it."

"Yes." Dev said. "But I don't mind if you do."

"Why?"

"I trust you."

Jess looked at her. "Well, NM-Dev-1, I'm sure glad you told me about that damn thing before I tried to get it off you." She patted Dev's cheek. "I'll keep my paws off it though. I don't want to freak you out."

"You won't."

"I won't?"

"No." Dev reached up to touch Jess's hand. "I like when you touch me. It feels good."

Jess felt a curious sensation steal over her and the sound of the storm outside faded as she focused on those pale, gentle eyes facing her. "I'm glad. Feels good to me too." She murmured, letting her hand lay flat against Dev's cheek and feeling the shift under her fingertips as the bio alt smiled in response.

It did feel good. Seeing that smile felt good, and she felt herself smiling back, her skin feeling warm and sensitized as Dev's thumb gently stroked the back of her hand. "Yeah, I like that." She stroked Dev's cheek. "Glad you do too."

Dev's eyes were twinkling a little. "Oh, I do."

What next? Jess felt a little short of breath. "Um... Want to try that kissing thing again?" She suggested hopefully, seeing the instant interest in the pale eyes watching her.

"Yes." Dev responded positively. "I really would."

It was crazy and insane and there was the storm and... Jess leaned over and tilted her head and their lips brushed. And who cared? She made a more solid contact and it grew into something sweet and familiar and she felt herself losing her balance and the next thing she knew they were tumbling together against the back wall of the carrier. "Oof." She grunted, as her head hit the metal surface. "Ouch."

Dev chuckled softly, and righted herself. "That was interesting." She said, clearing her throat a little. "A bit easier in the water I think." She shifted a little and laid down on her back, folding her hands over her stomach. "I do like it though."

Jess slowly straightened, rolling onto her side and extending her legs out. It put her right next to Dev and she propped her head up on her hand and put her other one on Dev's arm. "Me too. C'mere."

Dev rolled over to face her and they kissed again, this time in a somewhat safer position. She felt the good feeling start up again, and she touched Jess's face, feeling a little heat under her fingertips as Jess's hand came to rest on her hip. When they paused, she was short of breath and so was Jess, and they looked at each other at close distance.

Jess reached up and traced one of her cheekbones. "Ever done this before?"

Dev shook her head.

"They teach you about sex upstairs?"

Dev half shrugged. "They showed us a vid in health class." She said. "It wasn't anything like this." She said, quietly. "And they didn't say anything about what it would feel like." She felt her heartbeat start to settle. "Maybe they should have." She added, almost as an afterthought.

"Maybe." Jess smiled a little. "Does it bother you?"

Dev sat there quietly for a little while, thinking about the question. "I don't think so." She finally said. "I like how it feels. I just didn't expect it."

"Expect... kissing? Or that you and I would .. or..." Jess fished a little. "We do this sometimes." She added. "Ops teams, I mean. With each other."

"That's what Doctor Dan said." The bio alt said. "I asked him after we did it the first time and he told me that sometimes it happened, and about how it wasn't okay with us but that it was okay for me because I was doing this job." She studied Jess thoughtfully. "But even if he hadn't said that I would still want to do it." She admitted, with an almost bashful look.

Jess looked at her in some mild fascination. "Even if it was... what do you call it, incorrect?"

"Yes." Dev smiled. "I told you that you were really attractive." She said. "You really are, to me."

Jess felt herself grin. "Likewise." She admitted.

"So I would have broken that rule anyway." Dev said. "Even if I'd known about it before."

"Ahhh... I knew I liked you." Her partner's eyes twinkled gravely. "They call me a rogue, y'know. I don't always play by the rules, and that gets me in trouble sometimes." She traced one of Dev's eyebrows. "I knew about the rule regarding bio alts." She said. "but I had no intention of obeying it with you."

Dev's head tilted a little. "Really?"

"Unless you had a problem with it." Jess concluded. "And I don't think you do." She glanced up as the thunder overhead calmed, and the lightning strikes started to taper off. "We can talk about it when we get back to base. It's more comfortable in bed anyway."

They both sat up and then regarded each other. Then Dev hopped off the ledge and shook herself a little, reaching for her flight suit and taking it down off the hook.

Jess reached around her, and then, unexpectedly, ducked her head and gave Dev another kiss. Then she took her own suit and winked, backing up and shaking the suit out in preparation to donning it. "I'm glad you're okay with this. It's been a while for me... Joshua wasn't into girls."

Dev felt quite flushed. It was an interesting feeling. "I see." She got into her flight suit, and went over to the dispenser for a container of water. Her lips were still tingling, and she could taste Jess on them, a little.

Also very interesting. "Are you into boys?" She asked, glancing over her shoulder.

Jess blushed visibly. "Are you?" She turned the question back.

"I never really thought about it either way." Dev answered straightforwardly. "Class made sex about as interesting as sweeping out the kitchen, so no one really talked about it much." She hopped into her seat and started bringing systems online. "But I know one thing."

"Yeah?" Jess gave herself a shake, and dropped into her chair.

Dev turned around and looked at her. "No one ever made me want to kiss them like that before." She turned back around and started synching the comp, slowly bringing the power online and running checks to make sure the lightning strikes hadn't fried anything.

Jess slowly pulled her restraints around her and buckled them, her eyes fixed on the pilot's chair. "Well, we're even." She finally said, as she clicked the catches in place and hit the toggle to retract them. "Because no one's ever made me want to say screw the mission, lets go find a cave somewhere before."

Dev looked over her shoulder again, her pale eyebrows lifting, and then lowering in some confusion.

“Never mind.” Jess started laughing. “Boot the engines up.”

Dev focused her attention back on her job. The rain had lessened to a degree that she could, with some confidence, activate the landing jets again and ease out from under the ledge. It was hard to concentrate though, and she had to take a few long breaths and release them before she set her hands on the throttles and gently ignited the main engines. She could feel them rumble into life, a bit rough as she trimmed the power leads.

She sort of felt like that too, like there were things surging inside her that needed to be trimmed a little. Dev pulled her headset on and settled the ear cups, flicking through the settings and scanning the comp to make sure they hadn't gotten any messages relayed after the storm.

After a moment, her eyes flicked up to the mirror mounted over her position and she found Jess looking back at her in the reflection. Then she had to look forward, and inched the throttles to bring the carrier around the edge of the escarpment and back around in the other direction.

They would pass to the west of Quebec and then up into the northern archipelago to the North station. Dev had the coordinates locked in, and she let out one final deep breath before she nudged the throttles forward and focused in on her task.

Boy, it was hard. Dev took a drink from her container and put it back in its swinging holder. She studied her consoles a couple of times, until her brain finally lurched out of its bemusement and sharpened as the readings and panel displays triggered her programming in a somewhat belated manner.

She looked out the forward screens, seeing nothing much but gray sky and equally gray land. They were traveling over rock plateaus that were slick and wet with the falling rain, their tops scarred and shaped by the continual impact with the water.

After a few minutes traveling, Dev felt her shoulders relax and she was better able to focus. She ran through her checks and had the systems rescan for damages, her mind running over the readouts as she took in a weather report. The heavy clouds they'd huddled under had passed over, but she could see on the outscan there was another storm moving in.

Dutifully, she reported that to Jess, feeling a prickle between her shoulderblades as she heard the soft click and slither of her partner's restraints coming loose. She flexed her hands a trifle as Jess came to stand next to her, anticipating and getting the friendly pressure of a hand on her shoulder. “There.” She pointed at the outscan.

“I see.” Jess mused. “Damn it.” She looked at the powerful lines, the dark reds and oranges telling their own tales of the strong electrical forces buried inside them. “These storms are getting outrageous. We used to have two, three days between them. Now we're lucky if we go twelve or twenty hours.”

“Why is that?” Dev asked.

“No one really knows.” Jess leaned on the back of her chair. “We've lost so much damn science.” She grunted. “Huh. Well, we'll have to either make it a very short stop at North or find a place on the ice to hole up if that line comes in fast as it looks like.”

Dev's brows hiked up a little. “Hole up on the ice?” She inquired. “In the carrier?”

“Sure.” Jess glanced back over her shoulder. “I packed cold kits. Includes lined sleeping bags in case we get caught out.”

“I see.” Dev trimmed the carrier's flight, taking them around a tall peak in a gentle curve, very aware of the hand casually resting on her shoulder as Jess studied the comp.

Ahead of them she could see a long line of craggy bluffs, and the western edges of them had thick gray clouds draped over them. She checked her navigation readouts and let her elbow rest on her chair arm, feeling a bit of warmth through her pilot's suit as she pressed against Jess's thigh. “Thirty minutes.”

“Mm.” Jess gave her shoulder a squeeze, then she retreated back to the back of the carrier, starting to rummage around in the equipment locker. “Once you get within ten, they'll contact you on sideband twelve.” She said. “Then ask you to switch to a mainline channel for traffic control.”

Dev peered at the empty sky. “Is it a busy place?”

“No.” Jess said. “They're just regulation sticklers. Just move to whatever channel they want, and let them call the numbers for you when you go in. They've got a carrier bay like we do, only smaller.”

“All right.” Dev said. “May I ask you something?”

Jess stopped rummaging. “What makes you think you have to ask permission?”

Dev cleared her throat. “I didn't mean to cause you discomfort.” She said. “I was just wondering if the people at the location we're traveling to know I'm a bio alt.”

Jess came back up to the front of the carrier. She leaned on the back of Dev's chair. "Why?"

Dev risked a glance up and almost didn't look back down at the console. "I just wondered. It's interesting to see how different people react."

Jess looked thoughtfully through the rain lashed window. Would they know? Dev had only been at the citadel for a few days, and the stations were by tradition autonomous from each other. The less you knew about the structure of the organization, after all the less you could tell anyone about it.

Only the old man knew it all. "Unless Bain messaged them, they probably don't know." Jess admitted. "But your creds will tell them when you come into the complex. Does it bother you?"

Dev shook her head. "Does it bother you?" She again turned the question on Jess.

"No." Her partner said. "But the Norther's are old fashioned. It might damn well bother them." She smiled, in a not entirely nice way. "And that could be a lot of fun."

"Fun?" Dev glanced up at her again.

"Fun." Jess gently ruffled her hair, then she went back to her seat and dropped into it, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "Almost as fun as an ice cave might be."

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Dev wondered about the ice cave, as she piloted the carrier along its assigned route towards the North station escarpment. She could already see it on the horizon, a lonely pinnacle of rock that was an island in the surrounding storm tossed seas. It was stark and forbidding, on the outside not really different from the citadel they'd come from but smaller, and more remote. A soft chime sounded in her ear cup. "Approaching vehicle, identify." The voice demanded, low, and with an interesting lilt to it.

"BR27006 approaching from the southwest." Dev answered. "Requesting entry and landing."

"Stand by."

Dev kept the carrier on course, but slowed her engines a bit as she flicked off the auto nav and took possession of her throttles. She saw the alert on comp as they were scanned, imagining that she could feel the beam as it passed over them. She acknowledged the alert, and keyed in their ident beacon in response that would provide the encrypted codes to the stations comp.

"Probably keep us circling out here for an hour." Jess was leaned back in her seat, her hands folded over her stomach and her eyes half closed.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Just jerks sometimes." Jess said. "They're the furthest on the edge, makes them a little nuts."

"I see." Dev studied the readouts of their own scan, which was picking up transports closer in to the station, and the signatures of turbo generators near the bottom of the cliff. "Do they think we might hurt them?"

Jess shrugged. "Meh." She wriggled into a slightly more comfortable spot on her surprisingly comfortable new seat. "Sometimes between stations there's a lot of ego. You know what that is?"

"Yes." Dev said. She trimmed their angle of flight and slowed a little more, not wanting to approach too close or too fast before the station responded. She glanced at Jess in the mirror, wondering if it was just the reflection that made it seem that way or if Jess's legs were really that long.

"BR27006, ident confirmed. Please approach and switch comms to channel 23, sideband 5."

"Ahahaha. We got lucky." Jess said. "They don't have a prick on duty this time."

Dev couldn't match her programmed definition of prick to anything applicable so she merely settled her ear cup and keyed the mic on. "North station, this is BR27006, acknowledge. Switching channels." She made the adjustment and reacquainted the station signal, then saw the landing beacon start to transmit and locked onto it.

So far so good. She ran a set of checks to make sure all the systems she'd need to land the carrier were functioning, and that they hadn't taken any damage during the storm. Everything seemed nominal, so she boosted up the speed a little and headed towards the gaping hole in the side of the pinnacle where the beacon was leading her. "The entrance isn't on top like ours." She observed.

"No. No flat surface up there." Jess agreed. "That's a natural cavern entrance they modified. Smaller, but at least the rain doesn't kick you in the ass when they open the doors like in ours."

Ours.

Dev liked hearing that. Ours. We. Us. She descended to the level of the landing bay opening and centered her approach as the big doors started to open. She could see the pale blue light inside the cavern and she focused on the opening, where a dim blue tracer was indicating an in path.

She cut in the landing jets and put the engines in idle as she came into the cavern, seeing carrier landing pads below her not that different from the citadel's. "North landing control, this is BR27006, requesting pad assignment." She cleared the entrance and let the carrier side to one side of it, putting solid rock at her back.

"You fly nice." Jess observed. "You never bounce my kidneys."

Dev flicked a glance in the mirror. "Thanks." She said. "I think?"

"BR27006. Landing assignment D23." The comm brought her attention back. "Stand by after landing for security scan. Remain sealed until notified."

"Mph." Jess snorted.

Dev located their assigned pad and gently lowered the carrier onto it, spooling down the main engines and cutting off the landing jets as the bottom skids touched and the carrier came to a halt. She secured the power systems and safed the weapons, glancing outside as she did so. "Oh."

Jess lifted her head and peered out the windows. A ring of security guards were surrounding them, heavy rifles pointed at the carrier. "Ugh. Idiots." She relaxed and let her eyes close again. "Just chill."

"I'm pretty warm, thanks." Dev sat back and loosened the chair restraints. She copied the logs to storage, and did the rest of her shutdown checklist, doing her best to ignore the ring of muzzles facing her outside. She saw a light come on and she studied it. "Jess, they are asking for a comp interface."

"Yeah?" Jess released her restraints and got up, coming forward to lean on Dev's chair and peer at the board. "Anything in comp?"

"No. I hadn't even plotted our next destination. Just this one." Dev said. "Some weather reports, is all."

"You know how to set a trace?"

Dev smiled. "Yes." She touched her keypads in a rapid sequence. "Let them in?"

"Yup." Jess leaned further, watching as her partner set up the connection. She studied the screen as the North systems linked in, watching the request for information intently. "Want to know where we've been eh?" She glanced outside at the security guards. "Good thing we didn't take a joyride into the arctic first."

After a moment, the connection shut down, and the audio came live in Dev's earpiece. "BR27006, you are cleared. Please prepare to egress."

"Aw. Guess we told the truth." Jess, said, with a mock pout. "Next time remind me to slip in a trip to space in there, see if they catch it." She pushed herself upright, and went to the weapons rack, sliding her handgun into its holster tucked under her arm and picking up the heavy blaster and seating it into the flexible web system that went down her right leg. "Let's go, partner."

Dev had stood and made sure her insignia was straight, then she uncoupled her leads from the carrier and clipped the ends in place as she walked over to join Jess. She paused behind her as Jess also paused, her hands on the hatch controls. "I'm ready."

"Don't let them freak you out." Jess said. "Just ignore what they say if they start talking crap."

Dev nodded, and then she twitched a little as Jess triggered the hatch and it popped outward with a thump and hiss. The ramp extended and they walked down it, just as two jumpsuited figures appeared from between two other carriers and approached them.

The security guards had withdrawn, save two that were stationed on either side of an inner door. Dev kept Jess's face in her peripheral vision, watching her reaction to gauge what was going on. She seemed relaxed though, so Dev relaxed and waited just behind her as the welcoming party approached.

It was two men, and the one in front was dressed as Jess was, the one behind him was in a standard jumpsuit in a dull orange color. Neither of them looked particularly friendly, but neither of them looked like they were about to start fighting with them either.

"Drake." The man said, as they came up even with them.

"Hello, Sydney." Jess drawled a little. "How are ya?"

"Very busy as always." The man said. "What can we do for you?" He glanced past her and looked at Dev, then returned his eyes to Jess's. "We don't have much in the way of spare parts or supplies to offer."

“Just looking for local info.” Jess said. “The bus just got overhauled. We don't need anything.” She half turned. “This is my new partner, Dev. Dev, this is Sydney Lang. He's the senior agent here at North.”

“Like you are in our place?” Dev asked, mildly, not missing the sudden jerk as the North agent focused on her. “How interesting. Nice to meet you.” She addressed Sydney, extending her hand out.

Warily he took it and pressed it, then released her, returning his attention immediately to Jess. “Did you get promoted? We hadn't heard.” His eyes shifted to her collar insignia. “Oh, yes, I see you have.” He extended his hand. “Congrats.” He indicated the waiting figure behind him. “Luke Turloute, my chief mechanic. In case you needed anything done to the carrier.”

Jess nodded at the man, who nodded back, but said nothing. “Shall we get a cup of kack and chat?” She suggested. “Don't want to take much of your time. The bus doesn't need anything, does it, Dev?”

“Everything is optimal.” Dev said. “We're fine.”

“Okay, certainly.” Lang's manner had changed completely. “Let's go to the my lounge. I'll ask Dom to join us. He was just assembling the daily recap.”

He turned and led the way to the inner door. It opened as he approached and Dev felt the familiar tickle of scan across her skin, noting that Jess's hands were clenching slightly at her sides as she passed through it. The hallway they emerged into was familiar looking, granite walls and the smooth cut floors, though a slightly lighter shade of gray.

Jess was on edge, it seemed. Her right hand was gently resting on the stock of the big blaster, a casual grip that wasn't entirely casual.

“So. When did you get promoted?” Sydney asked. “Really strange we didn't hear.”

Jess smiled with no humor evident. “Just recently. I did a long run on the dark side and did a bit of damage. Impressed someone I guess.” She said.

“Really. Last thing I heard you all were having serious problems there.” Lang lead them into a small lounge and the door shut behind them. He gestured to a drink dispenser then took one himself, and sat down in one of the chairs. “That's what I heard, anyway... matter of fact, I heard you almost got skunked.”

Jess took a drink and handed it to Dev, then took one for herself and perched on the arm of a second chair. “We're always in some kind of trouble, aren't we?” She asked. “We had some changes up top, and a new class come in. Nothing more than the usual.”

Sydney's eyes flicked to Dev, who had seated herself and was merely watching and listening. “I see.” He said. “So what can I tell you? Nothing new here but more and more storms.”

Jess nodded. “We noticed. I was just telling Dev here, that it seems they're coming in every half day. I can't remember a single day lately without one.”

“She doesn't know about storms?” He looked intently at her.

“She's spacer born.” Jess said, casually. “So no. But what I was really interested in is any word you have of snow pirates.” She added. “We got intel they've been infiltrated by the other side.”

Dev had to school her face quickly not to react, since certainly that bit of information was as much a surprised to her as it apparently was to Sydney Lang. His eyes opened wide and he put his drink down, straightening up in his chair as he looked at Jess.

“Snow pirates?” He said. “Are you kidding me? Those people haven't been seen in these parts in years. They're all dead, Jess. Where did you get that crazy idea from?”

Jess leaned back against the back of the chair. “Not according to the intel we got. We only thought they were gone. Two fishermen were found dead frozen in a berg with their gear stripped and a head cut in their chests not two weeks gone.”

Lang's jaw dropped.

The door opened and another man entered, this one in a tech jumpsuit. “Sydney, you called?” The man glanced warily at Jess and Dev, circling them to come up on the other side of Lang. “Hello, Jess.” He said. “Didn't know you were here.”

Lang shut his mouth with a click. “Sit down, Dom.” He said. “Jess is looking for intel on ice pirates.”

Dom chuckled as he sat down. “Want some on Santa Claus too? There are no ice pirates anymore.”

Dev studied the two of them. The newcomer was tall and very thin, and had brown hair and eyes, where Lang was more heavily built and shorter, with black hair and gray eyes. They were both older than Jess, and she got the impression that Lang was far from pleased about her partner's promotion.

Jess seemed to find that funny. Dev made a mental note to ask her why later.

“Apparently either that’s not true, or someone’s imitating them.” Lang said. “But that’s news to us, isn’t it?”

Dom snorted. “I’ll say.” He folded his arms and looked at Jess. “Where’d you get that wild tale from?”

Jess smiled. “Can’t share the source, sorry.” She said. “But anyway, me and Dev are going out to do a recon over the ice fields. See how true the story is.” She leaned on the arm of her chair. “So I was just wondering if you had any word of them.”

The tech focused suddenly on Dev. “Where in space?” He asked.

Dev studied Jess’s face in her peripheral vision, but her partner seemed both relaxed and inclined to let her answer her own questions. “Biological Station 2.” She answered promptly. “I’ve just been downside a week. I’m still learning all the differences.”

Dom blinked. “You’re the damned bio alt.”

Dev nodded. “Yes.” She agreed. “Biological Alternative set 0202-164812, instance NM-Dev-1. But please call me Dev.” She concluded. “It’s short, and it’s what they painted on the carrier.”

The two North agents stared at her as though she’d grown another head. “Are you kidding me?” Dom looked at Jess. “You really went along with this?”

“I did.” Jess appeared to be enjoying his consternation. “I had my doubts but Dev’s grown on me.” Her eyes twinkled a little. “She’s a kickass bus driver. Matter of fact, she helped put the damn thing back together after we blew apart Gibraltar a couple days back.”

Dev produced a mild grin. “It was the least I could do.” She said. “Since I kinda banged it up doing that.”

“I thought that was just a crazy rumor.” Sydney finally spoke up. “Something I heard on the ops report. She’s really a bio alt?” He stared openly at Dev. “She doesn’t look like one. Not one I’ve ever seen anyway, and most of the sets cycle through here for ice experience.”

“I’m an experimental set.” Dev offered up her general statement. “Developmental. That’s what the Dev stands for.”

Both North agents looked very uncomfortable. “Well” Sydney said. “No telling what comes out of Base 10.” He twitched a little. “I did see the report on Gibraltar. Bet you made some enemies with that one, Jess.”

“Bet I did.” Jess got up. “But, if you all have nothing to share, we’ll be on our way. Can I get the latest met?” She looked at Dev, who had also stood and was watching her. “And you said you had a daily recap?”

Dom got up and went over to a console, sliding behind it and into the chair. “Sure.” He said. “We sent a team to do ice measurement a few weeks ago. Looks like some glaciations building up again. Maybe drop the water table a little. Give you guys at 10 back your beach.”

“That trick at Gibraltar give you your gold bars, Jess?” Sydney asked.

“That and a few other things.” Jess smoothly replied. “Bain appreciated the effort.”

“Bain?” Sydney and Dom both looked up at her in surprise. “How’d you get involved with him? I thought he was busy in his fortress of solitude at Pichu.” Sydney said. “Haven’t seen him in these parts in years. Is he at 10? What’s up there?”

Jess shrugged. “Who can say what he’s up to? He’s the Old Man.” She said. “You’ll have to ask him if you want to know. I’m not gonna speak for him that’s for damn sure.” She held her hand out for the films Dom had retrieved. “Who knows? Maybe he’ll drop by here next.” She winked at Sydney, who managed a sour smile in return. “Thanks. C’mon, Dev.”

“Nice to meet you.” Dev told the two men, then she turned and followed Jess out of the room, and back down the hallway towards the carrier bay. “That was interesting.”

Jess chuckled. “Yes it was.” She guided Dev back through the scan, and ducked past a team of bio alts who were in exposure suits with the helmets removed, their hair damp with sweat. They were standing around a big block of ice, and Jess paused as she was almost passed them and turned back. “Whatcha got there, boys?”

The bio alts looked at her warily. “Agent.” One said. “This is an ice sample.” He glanced at Dev. “Tech.”

Dev cocked her head and studied him. The group of bio alts were older, possibly twice her age, and she wasn’t familiar with the set. Apparently, the bio alts weren’t familiar with her either. “Hello.” She returned the greeting. “Why were you taking a sample of the ice?” She asked.

“We were told to.” The man said. “Do you require something?” He looked from one to the other. “We are assigned work.”

“Thanks.” Jess clapped her hand on Dev’s arm. “We were just curious.” She nudged Dev ahead of her and they crossed the carrier deck and wound their way between the landing pads. “We can talk after takeoff.” She lowered her voice. “Not

before.”

“All right.” Dev led the way onto the pad, surprising a bio alt technician who was examining part of their engine pod. “Is there something irregular?” Dev asked him.

He jerked, and turned. “Nothing.” He backed away. “Just looking at the new intakes.” He pointed at the front of the engine. “Never saw them before.” He was an engaging looking man, almost Jess's height with curly red hair and freckles.

“Decco!” A voice rang out. “What are you doing over there? Get back to work!”

The bio alt turned and rambled down the steps, ducking past a regenerator and disappeared into the shadows quickly.

“Hm.” Dev reached out and triggered the hatch, the scan tickling her palm. “That was also interesting, but in a different way.”

Jess chuckled under her breath. She followed Dev up into the carrier, slapping the door lock and just barely clearing the door before it sealed. She felt better, the moment it had. The itchy spot between her shoulderblades eased, and she could feel some of the tension come out of her as she unholstered her guns and put them back in their racks.

“Those men were not.. ah.” Dev sat down in her seat and started up her checks. “They were in some discomfort with us being there.”

“Oh yes.” Jess laughed and dropped into her chair. “Sydney hates my guts. He's at North because of me.” She said. “That's a long and sordid story I'll be glad to tell you after we get our asses out of here.” She swung her own console around and fed the films into it. “I loved doing that. Stuck up jacktard.”

“What's a jacktard?” Dev got her restraints on. “And.. what are ice pirates?”

“Hehehe. They're an old fisherman's tale, Dev. There is no such thing.”

Dev started up the power systems. “But you said there were.”

“I lied.” Jess cheerfully told her. “But I bet they now send out six teams to find the bastards because they think I know something they don't.”

Dev turned all the way around in her chair and peered at her partner. “Excuse me?”

Jess got up and came over, crouching down and resting her hands on Dev's knees. “What I was here for was to find out what they knew, and what they didn't.” She said, in a suddenly serious voice. “What I found out was, they don't have an ear inside Base 10. They didn't know about Bain, and they didn't know he offed Bricker. “

“But they did know about me.” Dev said, resisting the urge to get lost in those close by pretty eyes.

“They did know about you.” Jess said. “So their latest news is about a week or so back, right? They heard about Gibraltar because everyone on the damn planet's probably heard about that. We blew up half a mountain. But they didn't know the inside stuff they would know if they were in contact with anyone inside our base.” She reached up and put her fingertip on Dev's nose. “And that, is, interesting.”

“Hm.” Dev thought about that. “Should they know?”

“Something as big as Bain showing up? That's gold plated prime gossip, Dev.” Jess said. “The kind of thing the night ops revel in sharing in those little wee hours when it's just them, and the boards. You know what I mean?”

“Sort of. I know what gossip is.” The bio alt said. “We had to be really careful about that. If they caught you telling tales about people, you could get punished.” She watched Jess's expressive face react, her eyes narrowing and a bit of chill coming into her gaze. “So we used to find sneaky ways to talk about it that no one would figure out.” She smiled. “Some of us, anyway.”

“The smart ones.” Jess said, resting her elbows on Dev's thighs. “Right?”

Dev hesitated, then she smiled a little wryly. “I think so, yes. There were some of us there that understood more. Like me and Gigi.”

“Okay, so – it's the same with Interforce.” Jess said. “There are some really smart people around there, and some people not so smart. The not so smart ones we can use for our purposes. The smarter ones, it's harder.”

“Must be very hard with you then. You're very smart.” Dev let her hands drop and rest on Jess's arms. “That man, the other agent, was angry about you being senior. Why?”

“Ah.” Jess exhaled, and stood up. “Let's get on track and then we can talk about that.” She patted Dev's shoulder and went back to her seat, strapping herself in as she glanced at the console. She scanned the daily report, noting the unobvious gaps in it and shook her head. “Hope the met data's worth the plastic it was printed on.”

Dev settled her comms onto her ears and dialed in the landing channel. “BR270006 to control. Requesting lift.” She got

her systems ready as she waited for the response to come back. As the silence went on, she glanced outside, half expecting the men with guns to be back surrounding them.

But the carrier bay was empty. “BR27006 to control, are you receiving this? We are requesting lift permission and egress.” Dev said, glancing into the reflector and seeing Jess watching her, a quietly alert look on her face.

“Give me juice.” Jess said.

“If I activate the weapons systems, they will detect that.” Dev said.

“I know.”

Dev ran her hands over the controls, bringing up the power to the engines, and then opening the links to the weapons system, lights and readouts coming online as she heard the hum rising on either side of her. She looked out the front screen again peering around to see if anyone was going to react to it.

After a moment, a crackle in her ear gave her the answer. “BR27006 you are cleared to lift. Outer doors are open.”

Jess chuckled behind her. “Jerks.”

“Would you really have shot something?” Dev ignited the landing jets and lifted off the pad.

“Yes, and they know it.” Jess responded. “Anyway. You have the coordinates up there? Lets get out in the white. With any luck, we’ll run headlong into a storm and have to find a place to hide until it passes.”

“If we’re lucky?” Dev glanced in the mirror, finding Jess smiling at her. “I see.” She rotated the carrier and moved towards the outer doors at a stately pace. “This should be interesting.”

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The ice field astounded her. Dev saw the edge of it approaching as she came in low over the waves, feeling the tug of wind against the carrier's outer shell she had to compensate for. The water seemed very dark here, a deep almost black color under the gray skies that contrasted starkly against where they were heading

She glanced into the mirror. Jess was slumped in her seat, her eyes closed, and her body relaxed and after a moment, she realized her partner was sleeping. She had her hands resting on her thighs, and her chest was moving with a slow and steady motion.

Well, that was curious. Dev returned her attention to the screen, though she had the autonav on. She checked the chrono, and saw they still had two hours of flying left and decided to let Jess get some rest since she always seemed to have that just slightly drawn look Dev always associated to the programmers and the people who worked with Doctor Dan who had too much to do and too little time to do it in.

Doctor Dan himself looked tired sometimes, and Dev knew he worked very hard at the station doing all the calculations that made bio alts like her what they were. He took his work very seriously, and as far as any natural born cared about the results, she believed that he did care not only about his results but also about them.

He seemed a little sad sometimes, like Jess did. Dev knew Doctor Dan didn't seem to spend a lot of time with any of the other natural borns and she'd often seen him just quietly watching the stars in the small private lounge in the upper levels when she passed by there on her way back from classes down to the dorm.

He never seemed in discomfort, really. In her few, cherished classes with him he always seemed content, if very busy, but there was also a sense she had that there was something he often thought about that was sort of somber.

She had a feeling towards him that she didn't have for any of her other teachers. She'd talked about it to Gigi once, and Gigi had agreed in her serious, thoughtful way that while she liked her proctors, she wanted to always do especially well for Doctor Dan because she, too had this feeling inside towards him that she didn't have for the rest of them.

So there was that. But as Dev took another look at her mirror, and watched Jess sleep, she had a sense that in a way, she had different feeling in her for this new friend of hers that was a bit like the one she had for her favorite teacher. It was a funny sort of sensation in her chest, a fullness of the heart as she'd once heard the term.

She focused on the console. The scan had just retrieved some new data and she studied it, noting the meteorological component that seemed to indicate lines of strong thunderheads approaching from the west. That was interesting – she recalled the last couple of days and it seemed to her that storms did tend to approach from the west, and flow east. They'd followed one right into their last mission, in fact.

Why was that? Dev hadn't gotten much instruction on downside weather patterns, and she resolved to find some labs about them when they got back. Jess seemed to be concerned about the storms, so she decided to find out what she could about them so she could maybe provide some helpful information.

She checked the scan, which had come back empty of targets to it's terminus. The carrier had far more limited systems than

either the station they'd just left, or the citadel they'd come from but still it surprised her to find the scope so empty of anything.

Ah well. She settled down to fly and monitor, letting the time pass as she studied the information the carrier's systems had on their destination. After a time, a very soft chime sounded, and she returned her attention to the screen.

The ice line was approaching, and Dev sat forward a little, looking out at it with great interest as they left the ruffled waters and skimmed over the white surface. It was not as flat as she'd thought from afar, it was full of folds and rises, and as she glanced down between them she saw bits of reflected blue in the hollows, a rich and bold color that surprised her.

It was pretty. It was also bright and she blinked a bit as her eyes refocused after so many hours of going over the dark sea. It reflected some of the wan, gray light up too, and she shaded the screens as she didn't want it to wake up Jess.

A quick glance behind her reassured her it hadn't. She checked her coordinates and resumed looking out the window, fascinated by the beautiful contrast of white, gray and blue. Far ahead of her, she could see a line of mountains, and she knew their course would take them up near them before they turned and went east.

She settled her ear cups on and turned on the outside sensors, sending the output to her panel so it wouldn't hit the inside speakers. At once she could hear wind outside buffeting the carrier, and beyond that, a soft, irregular crackling. It sounded odd and strange, and then a flicker of motion caught her immediate attention and she tracked to it, seeing a moving form cross the ice and disappear behind a big crack.

She inhaled slightly in surprise, not really sure of what she'd seen. It had been small, and fast, and she hoped the scan had caught it so she could show it to Jess later since she was confident her partner could identify it.

The wind started pushing against them a little harder. Dev took the throttles into her hands and curled her legs around the mounts of her chair, requesting another scan and looking to her left, seeing the already tightly clouded sky growing darker in that direction.

Reluctantly, she half turned, then she released the restraints and got up, crossing back into the back of the carrier quietly. "Jess?" She called softly. "Jess?"

Her partner's eyes remained closed. Dev eased up next to the gunner's chair and put a hand on Jess's shoulder, pressing it lightly. "Jess?"

For a moment there was no response, then she saw Jess's body take on tension and her eyes fluttered open to blink at her with some bewilderment. "The weather's getting worse. I thought you needed to look at it." Dev said, in an apologetic tone. "Sorry about waking you."

Jess raised her hand and rubbed her eyes. "I fell asleep?" She asked, in a disbelieving tone. "Are you kidding me?"

There didn't seem to be a reasonable answer to that, so Dev merely went over to the dispenser and retrieved a container, bringing it back over to her partner. "I think maybe you were tired?" She suggested, handing it over. "Nothing occurred of interest."

Mechanically, Jess took it. "It's not that." She looked bemused. "There's nothing I like better than a good catnap but I don't usually do it in the middle of a damn mission." She opened the container. "Must be the fault of your extra comfy chair here."

Dev smiled and went back to her seat, resuming her headset.

Jess sipped at her drink and studied the pale head just visible over the seat. She could still feel sleep's hold on her, faint wisps of some formless dream drifting out of her awareness as she took stock of her surroundings. Had she been that tired? She sighed, acknowledging the fact that her body still hadn't truly recovered yet. "How long was I out?"

Dev glanced behind her then looked back at the console. "I didn't notice when you went down." She said. "But at least two hours."

Went down. Jess wrinkled her nose at the statement, not entirely sure it was comfortable. What had been comfortable though, was the fact that she apparently without much conscious thought about it had determined that Dev was completely and honestly trustworthy in a way she hadn't really expected.

Maybe that had started when she'd unlocked the portal between their quarters. She'd been trained to such an instinctive degree that the sound of the door opening would wake her, as it always had when Josh had done it. She'd never slept in the carrier with him driving.

Never.

Now, this bio alt had been her bus driver for what... a week? And here she was going completely out without any care in the world apparently on her second flight with Dev. What the hell was that? Was she that convinced Dev was so totally on her side?

Really? What was her subconscious saying there? And more importantly, could she trust that? Could she trust her own judgement when she'd been so damn wrong about Josh? Jess studied the reflection she could see in that mirror up front, the pale eyes watching through the window, so intent, and so serious.

Was she just fooling herself? Or was having her tech be another woman changing the dynamic so much? Less competition? More? Different?

Dev looked up and their eyes met. Jess felt a sense of warmth spread across her chest and the uncertainty faded before the unambiguous steadfastness she saw in that expression. This was not a Josh. Jess smiled and watched Dev smile back. This was a construct that had been designed and developed to be able to be trusted. That's what the difference was. Josh – they only knew what he decided to reveal to them, and the background they were able to check.

Dev?

There was nothing they didn't know about her. Kurok had handed over her programming to them the day they'd gotten there, and she'd already leafed through it. Jess's shoulders relaxed, and she took a longer sip of the kack. Her falling asleep just proved it. She could think whatever she wanted but her instincts were bred in and bone deep and if her battered subconscious, which had kept her on a hair trigger since the ambush allowed her that level of trust then she had little choice but to accept it.

So now that she'd talked herself into believing what she really wanted to believe, it was time to get the hell up and work. She unlocked her restraints and stood, stretching her body out, aware at some level of an ironic understanding that there was something a little out of control going on with her.

It felt good. She'd always been attracted to risk and somehow, this new and uncertain change in her life was flushing out the recent dark memories in a surprising way. If she went back and tried to recapture her gloom of just the week prior, it felt old and faded.

She didn't want to feel old and faded anymore. Life had pitched her out back over the cliff edge. “So what do we have here.” Jess went over and leaned against Dev's console, peering not at the readouts but out the window. “Ah.” She studied the line of clouds racing towards them. “That's not good.”

“No.” Dev agreed. “I didn't think so, but I wanted to see what you said.” She trimmed the carrier's flight again, adjusting the side jets to compensate for the stiffening wind. “The autonav's having a problem keeping level.”

No, Jess could feel it in the shift and motion of the craft. “Get me a topographical.” She said. “Can you kick the speed up a little?”

“Yes.” Dev keyed the report back to Jess's station, and rocked her head from side to side to release a little of the stiffness from her concentration. She adjusted the throttles and keyed in the change to the autonav, inhaling in surprise when she felt Jess's hands come down on her shoulders and start to squeeze them.

It was warm and strange feeling and for a moment she went still and wasn't sure what to do.

“I'm not hurting you am I?” Jess asked. “You looked a little stiff.”

Dev thought about that. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a massage.” Jess said, in a mild tone. “Usually it's supposed to relax you and make you feel better.”

“Oh.” Dev felt the squeezing pressure intensify and she focused on it, letting her head rest back against the back of her seat. The pressure worked the tension out of her neck, and she found the sensation really very nice. “I like that.”

Jess chuckled. “Paybacks for my cushy seat.” She said. “Besides you've been working here the whole afternoon while I sacked out.” She finished her massage and gave Dev a pat on the shoulder. “Let me go see if I can find a route for us that doesn't involve getting this thing blown ass over teakettle.”

Dev would have been content to have the squeezing go on longer, but she shifted a bit in her seat and retracted the restraints, the gimballed chair moving forward as she reached out to put her hands on the throttles and Jess retreated back to her station.

Of the last statement, she had to regretfully discard understanding most of it. She knew what a teakettle was, but that was about it and she seriously doubted actual tea had anything to do with what Jess was talking about. She considered the context, and decided it probably had something to do with the storm.

“All righty let's see what we got here.” Jess said, from her position. “Oh, Dev, Dev, Dev... this ain't good.” She sighed. “Damn it. I wanted to get past the big wild before we ran into that storm... son of a bitches in North skewed the data.”

“On purpose?” Dev felt a little shocked. “I thought they were on our side?”

Jess snorted. “They wouldn't deliberately send us into hell but if they could screw up my pitch or embarrass us they would.

It's not about sides, Dev, it's about status." She scanned the limited net they were getting from the carrier's sensors. "If I had to call for rescue? Get lost? Sure. They'd love it."

"I'm not sure I understand." Dev adjusted the trim again, then took the carrier off autonav as the buffeting became more pronounced. She could feel the engines struggling against the wind, and a fast look at the console made her eyebrows hike up. "We are in force 12 conditions."

"So I feel." Jess tapped at her pad. "Hang on, just keep her steady, Dev."

What, again was she supposed to hang on to? Dev got her boots settled on the thruster pedals and studied her options, noting the winds were driving the carrier off its course to the east. She altered the angle and tuned the jets, flying the craft off its axis to counter the pressure.

Then something caught her attention. "Jess?"

"Hm?"

"It appears a large cone is coming towards us. It looks like it might b.." Dev stopped talking when Jess hit the back of her chair, thumping her forward and nearly sending her into the console. She worked hard to keep control over the carrier as Jess leaned next to her, looking out the front window. "Yes, there."

Jess stared at the cone, then looked forward. "See those mountains?" She indicated the range they were heading for. "If you don't get to them before that cone catches us we're going to splat." She pointed at the nearest of the cliffs. "If we can duck in there we might be okay."

"I see." Dev uncapped the triggers for the engine afterburners and adjusted the power to send all of it to the drive systems. "You might want to sit down."

"I'm fine, g'wan." Jess said.

Dev threw the throttles forward and hit the burners, dumping everything into the engines as a roar built around them and they slammed ahead at full speed. The force drove her back into her chair and detached Jess from the console, sending her partner tumbling back in a roll of long arms and legs.

"Okay, so maybe I wasn't." Jess grabbed the base of her chair and hung on as the gravitational force increased against her, flattening her against the deck of the carrier as it picked up speed.

"Sorry about that." Dev said.

"You did tell me to sit my ass down." Jess agreed mournfully. "Let me know when it's safe to get up."

Dev felt the air changing around them and she focused on the screen, checking the power levels and adding the side jets in a bit as she felt the carrier start to pitch. The outside sensors were bringing her the sound of the wind now and it was a rising roar.

Frightening. Dev saw the fold in the mountain that Jess had pointed out and she laid in a course directly for it, hearing thumps and bangs as debris started hitting the craft and she saw a huge chunk of ice flash past them from behind. "I would stay down there for now." She advised Jess. "I'm not sure we're going to make it in time."

Jess untangled herself from her chair and squirmed around to face forward, moving towards Dev with a powerful, sinuous motion. She ended up next to her boots, and wrapped her arms around Dev's seat base, turning over onto her back so she could watch the bio alt pilot. "In that case, we'll go to Hell together."

The distraction was almost lethal. Dev yanked the steering back as the carrier almost turned on its side, following her body motion as she found herself attracted to the tall form now practically hugging her feet. "Woah." She muttered. "What's hell? Is that where we're heading?"

Jess snickered. "In ancient mythology, it was a place you went when you died if you were an amoral bum like me."

Dev focused on holding the carrier steady, feeling it jerk through the air as it was buffeted from behind. "Is that sort of like the incinerator?" She asked, distracted. "Why would it matter ... wait, what's a bum?"

Jess patted her calf, not helping matters any "Relax. We can talk about it later once you make it to that canyon and if we don't maybe you'll find out the hard way." She took a tighter hold on the chair and relaxed otherwise, crossing her ankles as she looked up past Dev's knee at her face.

What a nice clean profile she had. "C'mon, Dev. I know you can do it." She saw a faint line of color work its way up the bio alt's neck, and a faint smile appear on her face. She took a hold with her free hand on the catch bar bolted to the console and reveled in the feeling of uncontrolled motion as the carrier was suddenly thrown sideways.

Dev was working hard. She could see the lines of fine tension in her body and the narrowing of her eyes as she leaned forward as if it would help them go faster. She had both throttles gripped in her left hand, and she was trimming the side jets

with her right hand, and both boots were controlling the thrusters with a frantic intensity.

Jess could drive the carrier. She'd done it on more than one occasion, for a number of different reasons but watching Dev, she had to admit this was a kind of skill she really didn't have. Josh had always mocked her a little about that, and she'd always had the sense that he felt himself to be a more complete agent than she was.

"I'm going to have to go high G." Dev said, apologetically. "Really, really hang on."

Jess did, then her eyes nearly came out of her head as the carrier banked hard right and went on it's side and the only thing that kept her in place was her dual grip. She muffled a curse as her back protested, her recently healed injury sending a bolt of pain down her spine into her lower thighs.

Then she was slammed back to the ground and the craft arced upward, the g force holding her in place until Dev crested something, then dove down abruptly just as something hit the carrier with tremendous violence from behind. Then they righted just as abruptly, and the speed cut to almost nothing, the roar of the engines reducing to a low rumble.

Jess looked up. "Are we dead?"

Dev looked at her for a brief fraction of a second, then went back to her piloting. "I don't think so, since we're in the canyon." She remarked. "Unless this is Hell. You'll have to tell me."

Cautiously Jess rolled over and eased up to her knees, peering over the console top. They were between two rock walls, moving at just over idle, over a covering of ice covered in blue streaked crevices. It seemed very cold, and very desolate, but at the same time heartstoppingly welcome in it's shelter. "Good job."

"We probably need to look at the back of the carrier." Dev said, with a plaintive sigh. "I'm getting all kinds of damage alerts from there."

"Okay." Jess pointed at a looming darkness ahead and to their left. "We're going to have to squeeze through that pass there between the walls, then scoot into that cave."

Dev regarded the gap. "Is that an ice cave?"

"Yes." Jess chuckled. "It is. Are we at.." She inched over and studied the map. "Ah yes." She nodded. "Real good work, Dev. Not only is that an ice cave, but it's one of our ice caves, and it's safe." She paused. "I hope."

"Me too." Dev was nursing the engines. "Please hold on. We need to go sideways to get through there."

"Tip right." Jess felt the craft move and she let her body move with it, ending up wedged against Dev's chair with her ear just within reach. She blew in it and heard Dev laugh lightly as she got through the narrow spot and righted the attitude. Then they were sinking down and entering the cavern, a wide, open space that featured a floor of solid ice.

It was dark. Dev switched on the running lights and turned the carrier around in a complete circle to give them a chance to see what else was inside. It seemed to be empty, but she spotted a ledge halfway in that was chipped clear of ice and was ringed with tech casements. "Oh."

"Set er down." Jess exhaled in relief, since a glimpse outside had shown her a heavy wall of snow falling. "We made it." She pushed herself to her feet and went back into the back of the carrier, going right for her service locker and opening it. She removed a small bottle of painkillers and shook four of them into her hand, closing the bottle and putting it back.

Back in her seat, she swallowed the pills with a swig from her drink container and waited, feeling the gentle bump as the carrier seated itself on the pad and Dev cut the engines.

"Is there service tech here?" Dev was peering outside.

"Basic." Jess confirmed. "And an emergency stock of food and water. This area isn't really owned by anyone, it's wild, and getting caught out is dangerous. We've got ten or so of these caverns scattered around up in the ice fields just in case." She waited a minute for the pills to start kicking in then she got up and went to the equipment locker. "I'm going to check it out. Can't be too careful."

Dev privately didn't think Jess was careful at all, but she nodded and released her straps, glad she'd been able to get them away from the cone. She joined Jess at the locker, and copied her in donning the heavy jacket and gloves. "How long will we stay here?"

"Long as we have to. Storm's got to go past, for one thing and you need to fix your burners, and.." Jess leaned against the locker and regarded her. "We can relax and talk about our plan." She smiled faintly. "Or just talk."

Dev felt a pleasant mixture of anticipation and confusion fill her belly. "Okay." She said. "I like talking to you." She leaned next to Jess and looked up at her. "Sorry the ride was so rough. Did it give you any discomfort?" She asked. "I thought I heard you.. um.. " Yell? Scream? Grunt? "Make a noise before." She concluded.

Jess's eyes dropped and then lifted again. "Bumped my back. Maybe you can look at it when we get back inside."

“Of course.” Dev agreed gravely. “Maybe you can show me how to do that massage thing.”

“Of course.” Jess winked. “So let's go and get this over with so we can get all this personal investigation done all the sooner.” She turned and keyed the hatch open, nudging it all the way when it was reluctant to fully retract.

A blast of icy cold air hit them, and at once their breath became visible as the environment inside the craft released outside and crystalized on the edge of the door. “Brr.” Jess blinked her eyes. “Don't lick your lips, and keep your tongue away from any of the metal.”

With a cautious look, she stepped out and down onto the pad, since the small ramp didn't want to extend either. One look at the outside of the carrier explained why. “Wow.” She put her hands on her hips. “What the hell hit us?”

Dev hopped out and joined her, eyes going wide at the dent in the side of the craft. “Oh no.” She said. “We just fixed it!”

Jess draped her arm over her partner's shoulders. There was a long crumpled crease in the outer skin and part of the engine guard was completely missing. “Nothing we can't make better.” She said. “But it'll take a little while so it looks like we're stuck here for now. Interesting, huh?”

Jess released her and went over to the other side of the pad, down a set of steps that had been chiseled into the rock. She drew her blaster and started around in a circle, searching the shadows cast by the carrier's outside lights.

Dev watched her for a moment, then she stuck her hands in her pockets and wiggled her rapidly chilling nose. “Getting more interesting every minute, actually.” She remarked to herself. “But I better close that door or where to put my tongue is going to be a much bigger problem than it is right now.”

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Jess got to the edge of the cavern in time to see the storm redouble, sending a mixture of heavy snow and ice pellets rattling against the stone all around her. She checked the entrance carefully though, finding nothing much to interest her save the fading light and the worsening weather.

Behind her she could hear the steady, light hammering as Dev banged the creases out of the carrier's alloy skin, and as the snow fell harder, and the wind started to whistle through the ice canyon she fell back, content that no one had used the place at least very recently.

As expected. There were a million slot canyons and a million caves and crevices in the wild ice, she knew about this one only because of it's mapped coordinates and the chances of someone happening on it by accident were extremely limited. She hadn't told anyone at Base 10 she was intending on landing here, except for Dev, and therefore she hadn't expected the information to have gotten out to anyone else.

It was bone chilling cold. Even with her heavy coat, and the thermal gloves on her hands she could feel herself shivering a little and she pulled her lined hood up, fastening the throat flap. She walked across the ice surface, her boots crunching and the tough steel spikes she'd extended on the bottoms preventing her from slipping.

She detoured around the edge of the cleared platform and unlatched the storage shed, the temperature making any automated system impossible to maintain. Instead, you had to know how to unlatch the catches, a metal puzzle system designed to frustrate anyone who didn't know the sequence to unfasten them.

This was her fifth or sixth time using the ice cave, so Jess was well aware of the puzzle's answer. She bumped the door open and pushed her way inside as it scraped to over the layer of ice on the floor. Inside were neatly packed and labled rations, spare parts, ammunition, and other supplies all quietly waiting for use. She made a mental note of the stock, then she backed out and closed the door, turning as she heard a thump and a latch coming home.

Dev had just re-seated the engine cowling and was stepping back to survey her work. She had her hood up and her collar sealed and now she tucked her hands back inside her gloves then tucked her hands under her arms.

Jess promptly trotted over. “How's it going?”

“I think that's all right now.” Dev said, her breath visible in a steady stream. “But I think I need to get warm before I start working on the back. My hands are really cold.”

Jess could see the blue tinge on the skin of her face. “More than your hands.” She triggered the carrier hatch. “Let's get some hot stuff in us.”

They got inside and Jess sealed the hatch, reaching over to her own console to start up the internal environmental systems. “Guess you didn't have cold like that up there, huh?”

Dev kept her arms wrapped around her, her entire body shivering. “Actually we did.” She said, after a moment to make sure her teeth weren't going to chatter. “Space is a lot colder than this, and you could feel it, through the airlock glass sometimes. But never for a long time.”

Jess walked over and opened her arms. "C'mere." She folded Dev in them, pulling her close as she felt the shivers working through her body. "Let me give ya a hug. We'll put our thermal undersuits on before we go back out there again." She rubbed Dev's back. "But it's getting dark outside, so we should set up camp in here anyway."

Dev was finding this whole hug thing absolutely delightful. She was perfectly content to forgo the thermal undersuits, and the outside, and just remain encircled in Jess's arms, her shivers already abating. She felt warm blood surging to pretty much her entire body, as a matter of fact, and after a moment she gave a sigh of relief. "That feels excellent."

It did, didn't it? Jess smiled, as the carrier internal systems warmed up and she had to reluctantly release her hold. She took a step back and started unfastening her jacket. She watched Dev take off her gloves and stick them into her jacket pockets, then undo the catches with slightly hesitant fingers.

As if she sensed the attention, the bio alt looked up. "All this clothing's a little strange." She admitted. "It's kind of hard to move around in."

"It is." Jess stripped hers off and hung it up, then took Dev's. "It's always a pain in the ass operating up in the white. But here, there's no people to have to worry about watching you and the fields wide open, as they say." She went over to the provision area, aware of Dev trailing along at her back.

She felt stiff from the cold. There was an ache in her bones that bothered her, and she looked forward to the warm beverage and a refresh of her painkillers. She set the dispenser cycling and stood waiting, her arms crossed, thinking over the next step in her plan.

Dev's hand touched her shoulderblade, and the plan evaporated effortlessly. She looked sideways and saw that her companion was watching the dispenser, but after a second, those light, clear eyes turned to her. "Can I interest you in a ration pack, some hot seaweed tea, and a nice bunk made out of survival bags?"

The bio alt considered that for a bit. "Yes." She finally said. "That would be excellent."

"C'mon." Jess left the tea heating and went over to the storage locker, popping it open and sticking her head inside. As she'd asked, there were two ice kits in there and she turned and hit a latch to one side of the locker releasing a shelf that came down to cover the back section of the carrier.

It hooked into the other set of storage lockers, making a platform that was just large enough for two people to sleep on and it had a few inches of padding on the top. "Not as comfortable as our beds." She turned and removed one of the kits, loosening the velcro straps and opening it up.

Inside was a sleeping bag, and survival tent. She left the tent alone and pulled out the bag, turning to spread it out over the platform.

Dev removed the second kit and did likewise, copying her. She smoothed down the surface of the bag and surveyed the platform. The soft plush of the bags and the snug space reminded her a little of her sleep pod in the creche, and that made her smile. "I like it."

"You do?" Jess eyed her.

"Yes."

"You're weird. I like that about you." Jess went back and retrieved two ration packs, and pulled down another ledge between her seat and the dispenser at knee level to make a small table. She set down the packs, and retrieved the tea, and motioned Dev to join her on the floor.

It wasn't nearly as nice as lunch had been, but they shared the contents of the ration packs, and sipped their tea. Outside, the light faded completely, only the dim emergency led's of the carrier casting the faintest of glows against the windows. Jess adjusted the interior lights to match, and she leaned back against the lockers, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "So."

Dev looked up from nibbling on her crackers. Despite the terrible weather outside, she found their present location actually sort of nice. It was quiet and warm in the carrier, and the cramped surroundings were familiar to her from station – making it seem more homelike than she'd felt in the citadel.

And, of course, it was nice having Jess there without even a hatch to separate them. Dev suspected the night would be interesting, and she was definitely looking forward to it. She took a sip of her seaweed tea, finding the taste mild and astringent and just a bit sweet.

"Not like real tea, huh?" Jess spoke, having been silent for a while apparently deep in thought.

"It's nice. Its like green tea." Dev licked her lips. "It tastes like theres a little bit of honey in it"

Jess smiled. "A little." She said. "Wish I could have brought that bottle of honey mead with us. Should have looked for some in Quebec." She studied her glass. "So, from here we go find the fisherman's village."

“You didn't give me coordinates for that.”

“It's on an iceberg.” Jess said. “It moves I know.. basically where it is but we'll have to land the carrier off one of the ice escarpments on the Greenland cliffs and then hike.”

“Hike.” Dev said. “That sounds like it might be difficult, if it's as cold as it was here today.”

Jess nodded. “We'll take ice axes. It won't be easy, especially for my aching old bones.” She looked up as she felt a touch on her knee, and saw a look of concern on Dev's expressive face. “Cold's murder when you've been kicked around as much as I have.”

“I think you would like the sun.” Dev said. “There was a place in the creche where the ceiling wasn't all polarized, and you could feel how warm it was when the sun hit your skin. I remember I was up there after gym one day, and my shoulders really hurt. It felt so nice when the sun was on them.”

Jess released a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh. “Warm would feel nice right now.” She admitted. “It's never really warm. Not outside, not up here in the wilds, not in the citadel. Only place I ever get warm is in bed.”

A little silence fell. Then Dev looked over at the padded platform, one eyebrow lifting as she turned her gaze back to Jess. “Would you like to get warm?”

The thought of climbing into the survival bag and having Dev next to her put a flush of another type across her skin. But at the same time, she suddenly felt a little shy. “We should get some sleep.” Jess said, after a pause. “It was a long day today, and tomorrow'll be worse. Those fishermen...they're long off kin of mine but that doesn't mean they'll cooperate with us.”

Dev packed up her rations and took the remains of Jess's. She put them in the trash container strapped to the edge of the carrier frame and turned, offering Jess a hand up. Her palm was gripped and she leaned back to brace herself against her partner's weight, tilting her head back as Jess got to her feet. “If we're staying here until the morning, we have good length time to get some rest.” She said. “And get warm.”

Jess undid the wrist catches on her suit and let them hang open, then loosened the seals at her throat. “I think that's a good idea.” She agreed quietly. “The boats go out at dawn, and come back in at dark. So we should leave before it gets light to catch them. It's not far from here.”

Dev tried to make a picture of that in her head as she took off her outer suit and it was difficult. There was a very tiny, very cramped sanitary unit in the carrier and she used it, wondering briefly how Jess or the muscular Jason managed. “This is a very restricted facility.” She commented when she rejoined Jess.

“Ugh.” Jess seemed to relax a little. “One of our biggest gripes about these old model carriers. Most of the guys just open the hatch and go freestyle.”

Unfortunately for Dev, she could make a picture of that in her head and she grimaced a little. “Unfortunate for anyone beneath you.”

Jess started laughing. “You're probably the only one in the corps right now who can fit in there without bending something. Enjoy it I guess. The newer model of this bus has a better internal arrangement.” She was in her gray undersuit and she removed her boots. “Let me suffer and get it over with. I end up with a lump on the top of my head or a bruise somewhere whenever I use it.”

Dev hopped up onto the sleeping platform and scooted back, laying down flat and evaluating the relative comfort of it. It wasn't was, as Jess had said, as comfortable as their beds in the citadel but it wasn't terribly uncomfortable, and she thought they could get a reasonable amount of rest on it.

Jess emerged, rubbing the top of her head and giving Dev a wry look. Then she joined her up on the platform, laying down next to her and dimming the overheads.

They both exhaled a little, and looked at each other.

Jess cleared her throat and pulled a control pad on an arm next to her over to review some information. She keyed in a few things, and then studied the results. “Want to make sure the sensors are reading right. Storm or no storm, wild or no wild, I want to know if anyone's trying to sneak up on us.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” Dev regarded her own data pad, which was displaying the technical information about the carrier, and its internal systems. She could see the skin temperature reading, which made her shiver a little, and she was glad she'd connected the carrier up to the embedded power cell in the pad to make sure their internal heating systems would continue to cycle and not drain off their internal batteries all night.

Where did the pad get the power, she wondered? “Jess?”

“Huh?” Jess jumped a little. “What?”

Dev turned her head, surprised at the reaction. "I just wanted to ask you about the pad. I know we had a power lead, where does it come from?"

"Oh." Jess scratched the bridge of her nose. "Um.. let me think.. here... there's some geothermal activity I think. They use temperature energy exchange to store in the embedded cells." She clipped her pad to the locker wall and folded her hands over her stomach. "Damn useful."

"Very." Dev clipped her own pad down, then she let her head rest on the built in soft puffy area the survival bag used as a pillow. It was very basic, but she felt her body relax. "Otherwise it would be really cold in here."

"In the old days, they'd have burned trees for warmth." Jess eased over onto her side and propped her head up as she regarded her partner. "I saw that once."

Dev turned her head. "Really?"

"When I was little. They found some old, dried up driftwood on the beach near our house." Jess said. "My father gathered it all up and set it on fire, and we sat around it and grilled some fish over it."

Dev now turned onto her side, her face alight with fascination. "Really?"

Jess held her hand out in front of her. "Yeah. It was..." She rubbed her fingers together in memory. "It was warm and it had a good smell to it. I've always remembered that. It always..." She hesitated. "It was kind of a link back to the past." She let herself call up that image, the cool breeze off the water and the smell of salt and sand and the family all there.

Last time, really. She'd gone to basic camp five or six months later and they'd never managed to all get together again. But for that night, they'd enjoyed the moment and it had left her with a mental picture of melancholy happiness. "We cooked marshmallows."

"What?" Dev reached over and touched her hand, clasping it gently.

"Marshmallows. It was a really old package, I guess my father had been hiding it for a very very long time or maybe..." Jess chuckled. "Maybe he got it from someone but they were these puffy sweet things, like tiny pillows, and when you put them in the fire they got all brown on the outside and soft and gooey on the inside."

Dev wasn't really sure what that would be like, but she could tell by the smile on Jess's face that it must have been good. "I've never had anything at all like that. It does sound interesting."

Jess exhaled. "Anyway. So here's the thing with tomorrow." She was aware of Dev's fingers, lightly clasped around hers. "I was going to leave you with the carrier, but I think it'll be better for me and safer for you if you come with me."

"Okay." Dev looked pleased.

"I just have to figure out what the hell I'm going to tell them you are. Spacer I guess, but why are you here?" Jess pondered.

"Well, you could tell them that I'm a scientist who wants to take sea measurements" Dev suggested, clearing her throat a little. "Maybe I'm looking for a new kind of fish."

"Hm."

"You could say I was from Bio Station Beta. They do all kinds of experiments there." Dev warmed to her subject. "I remember we had one of the scientists come and give us a speech at the creche, about how we could be assigned there and help them find new ways to use the ocean, or breed special fish."

"What about me?" Jess asked, an intrigued look on her face.

Dev studied her. "Do these people know who you are?"

"They know who I am, but not what I am. They're cousins of my mother's." Jess said.

"So maybe the station hired you as a guide. They did that, when they came downside." Dev said. "I remember Doctor Dan telling me about going downside with some people from the fabrication station and they hired some guides who took them someplace."

Jeff smiled. "You know what, Dev?"

"What?"

"I think you've got a talent for fabrication."

Dev considered that. "You mean lying?"

"No." Jess squirmed a little closer, pulling the light cover from the bags over her and tossing the other end of it over Dev. "You make up good stories we can use in the field. That's a big plus." She said. "Not everyone can do that. Josh couldn't. He had the imagination of a rock."

Dev smiled, and felt a surge of happiness at the unexpected praise. “Thank you.” She squeezed Jess's hand and then released it, as she stretched out her body and put her head down on the raised, pillowish area. She watched her partner do the same, and then reach out and turn down the already dim lighting.

Beneath the light cover she was suddenly aware of the warmth coming from Jess's body and she felt her heart start to beat just a little bit faster. She had never been this close to another person for this length of time before, much less with the prospect of spending the night next to them.

It felt strange. She wondered if it was strange for Jess, but then, she figured, Jess had probably had many such experiences before.

Hadn't she? Dev had spent her entire life alone. “Jess?”

“Yes.” The taller's woman's voice came quietly through the gloom.

“Why is everyone so afraid of you?” Dev asked. “I don't understand.”

Jess exhaled. “I told you. Because I'm crazy.”

Dev rolled over and tucked her arm around the pillow area. “I don't think you're crazy. You don't act crazy, at least not like they taught us about.”

“No, well. Not crazy. Just...” Jess squirmed a little closer. “I don't have a conscience. I don't... it doesn't matter to me what I do to people.” She plucked a bit of the survival bag, making a soft sound. “So people are scared of me.. and the other ops agents I guess, because we can and will kill people just like that.”

Dev reached out again and put her hand on Jess's wrist. “Is that really true?”

“It's true.” The quiet response came back. “I've killed thousands of people in my career so far. They were either the enemy, or just people who got in my way when I was on a mission. I didn't care. I don't care. You saw Bain. That guy he blew away was his nephew. He didn't care.”

“But – even Clint was afraid. He isn't your enemy.”

“Ah.” Jess smiled and it was audible in her voice. “That's a different thing. He's known me a long time, and he knows I have a wicked temper. He's seen me lose it. I guess he thought I was in that space the other day.”

“Were you?”

Long silence, there in the dim light. Then Jess laughed very softly. “Maybe I was. I didn't like him messing with you.”

Dev remained quiet for a time absorbing that. “Me?”

“You.” Jess gave in to the craving and leaned forward, finding Dev's lips in the darkness without any trouble at all. “You're my partner. He thought I thought he was poaching.”

Dev was losing interest in the explanation. She was much more engaged with feeling the electric buzz in her guts at Jess's touch, and the sense of wanting that erupted in her. She felt Jess shift a little closer, and she mirrored the motion, her breathing going unsteady as their bodies pressed together and Jess's hand came to rest against her hip.

Oh. That felt so interesting.

“He thought I might hurt him because of that.” Jess broke off for a moment, watching Dev's eyes track to her. “Maybe I would have.”

“He didn't do anything besides work on the carrier with me.” Dev said. “I don't understand why you would be upset.”

The mixture of innocence and desire facing her was making Jess's breath come very short. She kissed Dev again and felt the bio alt's hand touch her thigh, gently stroking it. That sent a rush of passion through her, and she welcomed the wash of energy, driving back both the aches and her fatigue.

It felt clean, and good.

“I didn't find him attractive at all.” Dev went on, pausing between kisses. “Not like you.”

Not like me. Jess felt a lightness in her heart she hadn't for a very very long time. Dev was so honest and open it made her a little giddy. “I didn't want him to mess with you because I felt the same way.” She admitted. “I think he knew that.”

Dev thought so too. But she wasn't very worried about it at the moment. She felt Jess's lips touch her neck, and then nibble softly at her earlobe and she was sure she wasn't worried about Clint, or the citadel, or the mission for that matter.

Doctor Dan had been right, of course. She wanted this feeling, and she wanted it to keep going just like he'd told her she would.

There was, however, one minor issue. “Jess?”

“Hm?” Jess shifted closer and ran her fingers through Dev's hair. “Still got questions?”

Dev blinked at her. “Well, sort of.” She admitted. “We just got that one vid. I really don't have any idea what to do next.”

Jess's brows drew together and she paused, her thumb brushing Dev's cheekbone. “You're not programmed for this?”

A faint smile appeared on the bio alt's face. “Jess.” She reached over and put her hand on Jess's chest. “They program our heads. They can't program our hearts.”

Hearts. Jess felt hers start to pound. “Ah.” She replied faintly. “This is a heart thing.”

They both regarded each other.

“I guess they just thought we'd figure it out.” Dev said, finally. “But I really don't know where to start.”

Jess exhaled, and closed her eyes. Then she opened them and gently drew Dev closer. “We'll figure it out.” She said. Then she looked briefly down at Dev's hand. “And you've already got a pretty good idea where to start.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

**

[Continued in Part 11](#)