

Partners

Part 13

Jess opened her eyes into darkness, her time sense telling her it was still before dawn outside. The ship around her was very quiet, and just gently moving under her, just a bobbing motion that was almost soothing.

Not nearly as soothing as the solid warmth of Dev's body pressed up against hers though. Jess found herself quite surprised at that, since it had never been her habit to remain in bed with anyone before past having sex.

She could have told Dev to go back to her own bunk. The small space was hardly big enough for Jess's tall form, and it was nothing less than squishy with the two of them there together but after they'd finished it had just seemed easier to stay where they were.

Besides, she'd said they had to work to keep each other warm, right? It certainly was warmer together under the covering than it would have been apart, and she'd noticed that Dev seemed to get cold a lot faster than she did.

Maybe it was her having been born in space, under all that atmo control. Jess exhaled, feeling the gentle movement as Dev drew in a slightly deeper breath and then she found herself wondering if her new partner dreamed.

She hadn't, this sleep. It had been a restful few hours, matter of fact, and her body appreciated that, especially after all the energy she'd expended in the fight.

Ah, the fight. Now, Jess could smile about it and she did. Even though the attackers hadn't been Interforce, it had felt curiously good to wreak havoc again and she didn't mind admitting that to herself as she lay here in the dark, her arm tucked around Dev's middle.

Dev had appreciated it, she thought. She'd noticed her bio alt cohort hadn't seemed to mind the bloody splattering and the bodies, she'd rolled them over to scan them with no emotional charge at all. That was a good sign. It had taken Josh a half a year to be able to handle that.

Good sign.

Dev seemed to be nearly perfect, in fact. Aside from her knowledge, and her driving skills, and her willingness to sleep with Jess, she seemed to have all the right stuff anyone would expect in a good tech.

Jess wondered, briefly, if it was really possible that this last minute project would get such a perfect candidate. Was it reasonable that Dev could have been picked at random? She blinked a few times, her eyes focusing on the faint tracer gleam from the collar around her partner's neck.

Was it just fate? She hadn't had that much luck in her career so far, so maybe this was just all that catching up and giving her a break for a change. The force worked at pairing people up, with greater and lesser results, but usually your partnerships were never completely successful.

At best, you hope you could work with your tech, that they had skills and that they knew how to get your ass out of trouble when you were in it. Bonus was if they had a good personality, and were comfortable to work with.

Double bonus was if they agreed to intimacy if there was attraction on both sides.

Jess let her eyes close again, as she the gentle rocking lulled her. She had at least two hours before dawn, and she figured getting as much rest as she could before they entered the other side was a very good idea. She felt Dev take another deeper breath and then they both jerked as the comp fastened to Dev's bunk chimed softly.

"Comms." Dev said, her voice soft and husky.

"The long arm of the nerdy." Jess reluctantly released her, unsealing the sleep sack and letting a rush of cold, damp air in. "Brr."

"Brr." Dev repeated, grimacing a little as her bare feet hit the deck. She sat down on the lower bunk and pulled her legs up crossed under her, opening the device and triggering the comms module. She felt herself start to shiver, and she rubbed her arms a little as she waited for the connection to clear.

"Hell of a way to wake up huh?" Jess had her head over the edge of the bunk and was watching her

"Not exactly pleasing." Dev agreed. She focused on the screen and studied the readout, watching the scan lines flutter.

"Squirt."

"Figures."

“They sent ident on the scan.” Dev said. “Ruthgart Chambers.”

“Huh.” Jess pondered that. “Doesn't mean a damn thing to me. Anything else? Any data?”

Dev stifled a yawn. “He was assigned to Virginia Bluffs. They lost contact with him two standard years ago.” She said. “They're asking for confirmation of death.”

Jess chuckled.

Dev continued studying the screen.

“Cold?” Jess suddenly asked.

“Well.” Dev sorted through the requests. “Having no clothes on is probably inhibiting my ability to hold this still enough to read if that's what you mean.”

Jess bounded out of her bunk and removed the oversheet from her bed sack, ducking her head and taking a seat next to Dev and wrapping the fabric around both of them. She peered over Dev's shoulder, feeling the bio alt's shivering abate after a moment. “Tell them I confirm the ident.”

Dev had to read the letters several times before they made sense to her, the sudden warmth around her distracting her completely. “Okay” She finally said, tapping in the code. “Should I send the vid now?”

Jess considered the question. “No.” She said. “Let's hold off on that until later.” She fell silent for a bit. “Something's still not right back there. I don't want to give them too much information.”

“Okay.” Her partner shut down the connection and hung the comp on it's strap back on the bunk support. “What do we do now?”

“We can get more rest. Got a few hours to dawn yet” Jess responded. “We're still in that ice split, no sense in wandering around the ship in the dark.” She looked around the cabin, lit only by the faint line of emergency illumination along the floor. “Glad we brought a couple flashes”

Dev considered the gloom, all the more gloomy since she'd shut down the comp. “Why is it so dark?”

“Saving power.” Jess promptly supplied. “They're lucky this thing runs on a converted ion generator. They suck in sea water and make ergs using chemical reaction but getting parts for the damn thing's a bitch. They turn it off when they can.”

“I see.”

“Got a point. If they don't have to move and everyone's sleeping, no sense in running the batts.” Jess added, after a brief pause. “Hate to see what would happen if they had to get moving fast though.” She rested her elbows on her knees.

Dev cleared her throat a little. “Should we lay back down?”

“Sure.” Jess unlatched the sleep sack on the lower bunk and squirmed into it, waiting for Dev to join her before she sealed it back up. Now, with the coversheet from her bunk, and the full sack on this one, it got nice and warm rather quickly. “Ah. That's better.”

She felt Dev relax, then she let her eyes close, only to open them a moment later when she heard soft footsteps coming down the hall outside.

Stealthy footsteps. Jess had heard them often enough to know. “Someone's coming” She whispered into Dev's ear. “Shh. Stay still.”

Dev pressed herself against the bunk as she felt Jess ease herself over her, unfolding her long frame and ending up standing at the foot of the bunks. She waited for her partner to clear the edge of the mattress then she sat up silently, reaching out to find her jumpsuit and slipping into it.

Once she'd sealed the catches she lay back down, aware of Jess's tense figure still locked in place. She herself couldn't hear anything, but she trusted that her agent partner heard what she had heard and was preparing to do something about it. That something might possibly mean light, and Dev wasn't sure their reluctant hosts were ready to find a bio alt in their midst.

Jess moved, silently but affecting the air pressure in the room, and there was a very faint sound as she drew her blaster from it's holster and put the holster back down on the small shelf. There was a brief flicker of red as she activated the weapon, then she put her back against the wall and got in position.

Dev heard the sound of metal cushioned in grease moving, the tiniest suggestion of an echo that stopped at once, and went silent.

Everything went silent. Then there was a rush of motion on the other side of the hatch and then a booming, solid thump hit the surface, making Dev jump before she flattened herself back down on the bed. But the hatch stayed shut, and a faint, soft course echoed through the steel, before she heard the distinct sound of someone walking rapidly down the hall away from

them in bare feet.

Silence came back, then Jess exhaled, and chuckled very softly. "Forgot I jammed my dagger in the lock." She admitted. "Poor bastard probably knocked himself silly."

"Who was it?" Dev whispered.

"Someone looking either for trade stuff or a roll in the hay." Jess reholstered her blaster and put it on the dresser. "Morons. Probably one of the kids taking a dare."

"Taking a dare?" Dev squirmed to the back of the bunk as Jess climbed back up into hers.. "In hay? What is that?"

Jess chuckled. "I'll tell you later." She stretched out on her back. "Sleep if you can. If I get what I want and we end up in the other side's clutches there won't be much time for rest."

Now what did Jess mean by that? Dev settled back down anyway, composing herself to stillness. When you were in the creche, you learned how to put yourself down when it was time for it and she did, taking in a lungful of air and releasing it as she let her body go slack and felt her breathing slow down.

Who had been at the hatch? What was Jess going to do? Where were they going to go, and if she was with Jess, who'd fly in and help them get out?

How did she feel about going with Jess into that kind of danger?

All questions for later. Dev heard the quiet chiming in her head and listened to it slow, as her heartbeat slowed, and her chest motion did as well.

She let go. The darkness around her and the relatively soft, gentle motion reminded her strongly of the creche, and her sleep pod and she went deeper and deeper into the rocking motion and drifted free.

And then, seemingly just a moment later there was a touch on her arm and she opened her eyes to the same darkness, but with a sense of Jess next to her. "Hello?"

"Near dawn." Jess said. "Let's get up and see what we can see."

Obligingly, Dev sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, as the room was suddenly lit with the warm glow from Jess's suit light. She looked up to see her partner's body outlined against it, and that made her smile as she stood up and retrieved her sanitary pack from her gear bag. "I don't think we've moved."

"Me either." Jess was pulling her jumpsuit on over her shoulders. "Ow."

Dev paused in her motion towards the hatch. "Are you in discomfort?"

"Stupid shoulder." Jess muttered. "G'wan. We can look at it later."

Uncertainly, Dev nodded and then she went to the hatch, carefully untwisting the heavy dagger from the lock that was holding it shut. She examined the weapon briefly. Despite the impact against it, the metal was unmarred, and it had a dark patina to it that barely reflected any of the glow from inside the room.

"Like it?"

Dev turned to find Jess watching her, with a hint of amusement in her expression. She walked back and handed the knife over. "It's interesting." She said. "I hadn't held one before. It's heavier than I expected." She waited for Jess to take it, then she went back and opened the hatch, pausing to listen before she went through it.

"Huh." Jess slid the knife back into its holster. "Yeah, I guess they don't have those up there huh." She muttered to herself, grimacing as her shoulder wound protested. "How stupid was that? I'm surprised I didn't gut myself with a fishhook." She turned the light a bit higher and finished fastening the wrist catches on her suit, feeling the ship move a little under her.

Aside from the shoulder, she felt pretty good. There was a residual ache in her back from the old injury, but the stiffness she'd felt the night before had eased and she counted herself ready to face the day.

A minute later the hatch opened again and Dev slipped inside. "It seems very quiet." She said. "Do you want me to run a scan?"

"Sure." Jess shrugged into her weapons harness, the sound of the catches loud and solid in the room. "Let me take a peek." She went to the hatch and emerged into the hallway, also lit only by the emergency lighting along the ground. Jess straightened up and peered around, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the gloom.

The shadows faded into silver and gray and she studied the hall, now understanding what Dev had meant. There was a silence around her that set her senses on edge and she turned and ducked back inside the hatch. "Anything?"

Dev was standing near the bunks, her elbow resting on the top one as she studied her scanner, it's light outlining her features in a mix of pale blue and green. After a moment she looked up. "I'm not getting any returns, except for the animals

in the bottom of the ship.”

Jess's nape hairs prickled immediately. “No other life?”

“No.”

“Let's go.” She went to the locker next to the bed and picked up her heavy blaster, seating it into the side holster and pulling her jacket on. “Let's go see what the hell happened.”

“Okay.” Dev set the comp down and put her jacket on, snapping the catches on it and then slinging the scanner over her shoulder. She followed Jess out of the room and into the silent hall, hoping her comp had got it wrong since the results seemed to have caused her partner serious distress.

They walked through the silent darkness and Jess paused before the big hatch at the end, drawing out her light blaster and flipping off the safety before she worked the lock. “Ready?”

Ready. Dev considered the question. “Yes.” She answered, not entirely sure what she was ready for.

But Jess nodded, and paused a second, before she gently booted the hatch open and moved sinuously through it in a continuous motion. She cleared the space then paused again. “C'mon.”

Dev poked her head through and followed, finding the space beyond empty. She walked behind Jess as they crossed the common room, where only a safety light shone over the space the women had been fixing the meal on. Everything was locked down and put away, with bars holding the containers and cabinets closed.

Jess turned gracefully in a full circle, then continued on to the center, inner doorway. “Scan it.” She uttered softly, turning and making her way over to the porthole to look outside.

It was dark. She could see the outline of the ice around them, a ghostly gray surface that continued to where the crack they had entered through split into a much darker outline. After a moment, Jess turned and looked at Dev, who was studying her comp. “Anything?”

“No.” Dev joined her, turning the scan to show her the screen.

“Okay.” Jess led her to the hatch to the outside and carefully worked the lock, bumping the heavy metal door open with her shoulder as she peered out onto the deck. A cold blast of air hit her and she blinked, before she emerged into the inner deck area.

Still, all silent. The working gear was all put away, lashed against the deck, and only the soft clank of the anchor chain echoed softly in gloom. Jess walked across the open platform, turning as she did to take in the entire area as she crossed towards the big wheel in the back.

Dev continued to scan. She could see the motion below the deck where the fish were, the bio sensors detecting them without any trouble at all. But if she turned around and pointed the scan at the rest of the boat – all it showed was the electronics that controlled it, and the outline of its structure.

No bio signs. Dev wondered if perhaps they'd found a way to shield against the scan, remembering what Jess had said about them not liking intrusion. Curious, she tuned the comp, bringing up her matrix and shaping the waves as she probed the internal structure.

The sine waves rippled, and then she turned, as she picked up something off to the right of where the boat was. “Jess.” She called softly.

Instantly, Jess was at her shoulder, peering over it. “What?”

“Trace echoes.” Dev said. “From over there.” She pointed off to one side, and they both walked over to the railing to peer over it.

The front of the boat was moored into a chunk of ice, the long heavy chain disappearing into the white solid surface. From where the chain emerged was a roughly chopped path, visible now as it moved off into the distance, between two upthrust ice peaks and, just visible, disappearing into an unevenly shaped hole in the ice wall.

“Huh.” Jess said. “They all got off?”

“It seems so.” Dev agreed. “That explains why they turned everything off. They didn't need it.”

“And left us there.” Her partner's eyes narrowed. “Nice.”

“I don't think they really trust us.” Dev said. “Even though we helped them.”

Jess holstered her blaster and put her hands on her hips. “Wonder if this is one of their hidden hole ups.” She said. “I've heard about them, but no one ever really found one. Makes sense they'd put it in a place like this – only an idiot would risk entering the ice like this.”

Dev regarded the path, then she turned and looked at the anchorage. "Why is this a bad thing?"

"Because the ice can shift and close this gap." Her partner supplied readily. "Being crushed to death ain't my idea of fun." She exhaled. "I've seen the bodies it spits out."

"Oh." Dev now felt a bit nervous. "Does that happen often?"

"Hm." Jess grinned suddenly. "Let's go see if they left the keys in the ignition." She started across the deck heading for the control room. "Bet you could drive this if they did."

Drive this? Dev felt her jaw drop a little. Wait, what? "I don't think I know how to do that." She chased after her partner, who was already halfway up the ladder that led up to the control house. "We didn't have any sims for boats."

"Ah, can't be that different than the bus." Jess found the door locked. "Stand back." She took a step back herself and drew her gun out, pointing it at the lock and triggering the weapon. A bolt of energy smacked into the metal, turning it bright red, and producing an odd, spicy hot smell.

It clicked, and she kicked it, shoving the hatch inward and stepping over the verge. "C'mon."

Dev followed, finding herself in a space that held control surfaces on every inch reminding her suddenly of the creche's sim lab.

Her eyes went to the controls and much to her surprise, she felt programming kick in.

"Let's see." Jess went over to the main console. "Wonder if we can turn the juice back on. At least we could go down and steal breakfast."

"Not there." Dev went to a side panel. "Here." She ran her fingers over the controls and then, after a moment, she nodded and started pressing them as a programming overlay made the shapes and positions make sense to her. "I think.. yes." She flipped a cover off and pressed a button, and the deck started faintly vibrating. "Yes."

She turned to find Jess looking at her.

"I guess you do know how to do this." The agent said, dryly. "Got any other surprises?"

Dev let her hand fall to her side. "I don't know." She answered. "They're surprises to me sometimes too."

Jess nodded. "Okay" She gestured to the controls. "Get this thing powered up and see if you can retract the anchor." She went to stand near the front of the bridge. "Lets get out of here and do some of our own hunting."

"Those people will be in great discomfort if we do that."

"Yes, they will." Jess smiled. "Hope they've got supplies."

With a soft grunt, Dev went to the main console and sat down, letting her eyes scan the surface before she started triggering things and bringing up power. "This should be interesting."

Jess chuckled.

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It was interesting, and also hard. Dev flexed her hands, glad at least the control center was closed, and warm. She checked the power settings, hesitating a little before she engaged the heater that would warm the anchor line and get it to release. "Is this correct?" She asked Jess.

"Is what correct?" Jess was examining one of the old style comp readouts.

"Taking this ship?"

Jess glanced over her shoulder. "Was it correct for them to leave us here alone on it?" She turned the question back on her partner. "Don't get sentimental because that old salt liked you."

Dev thought about that for a minute. She checked the readings, then triggered the anchor chain retraction, hearing the rumble as it engaged. "We don't know why they left us." She said, after a long pause. "They might not have meant to cause us discomfort."

Jess snorted. "Just get us out of here." She said. "I don't like that ice."

Oh well. Dev settled into the operator's chair. They could always bring the boat back, after all. If the fisher folks had been somewhere off in the ice all this time, they were probably okay. She confirmed that the anchor was seated back on the boat, and then she engaged the engines, her hands moving the throttles with uncertain motions.

She glanced at scan, surprised that the noise of the boat coming active hadn't attracted any attention. "I would have thought they'd come if we were leaving with it." She remarked mildly.

Jess leaned against the console and regarded the ice. "Yeah, you'd think." She murmured.

They were drifting away from the ice wall now, and Dev turned on the sonar, seeing the faint return from the ice all around her. She looked over at the uneven opening in the wall again, expecting to see at least the captain come running, but the opening stayed stubbornly empty and she frowned, still not feeling right about all of it. "Jess..."

Jess's hand came down on hers. "Sh."

Dev closed her mouth, and waited. She watched Jess's face, which was tense and twitching a little. She had turned her head to one side, and Dev could see the muscles around her ears moving.

For a minute, they were both silent. Then Jess drew in a breath and straightened. "Get us out of here." She said. "Fast."

Dev shunted aside all her questions and responded to the urgency in her partner's voice. She laid her hands on the throttles and moved them forward, aiming the front of the boat for the opening in the ice.

"Faster." Jess said. "Hurry!"

She had no idea what the problem was, but Dev obeyed, moving closer to the console and standing up, leaning against steel and adding power to the engines. The boat surged forward, and as it did, she squinted at the opening "Is that getting smaller?"

"Yes." Jess bolted for the other side of the control space. "Hurry!"

Now the urgency made sense. "Hold on." Dev said, bracing herself and shoving the throttles full forward. The boat responded immediately and lunged towards the crack, not feeling at all like a carrier or anything else she'd ever sim'd. This was new, and strange, and she fought the controls to keep the boat straight as she felt the water crashing against the hull.

The walls were moving closer. Dev felt her eyes widen. She wasn't sure what exactly was happening but a very quick look to her right showed her Jess's face looking as alarmed as she felt. She pushed the throttles forward as much as she could, and heard a crash and heavy, scary crunching noise as a huge chunk of ice tumbled past her and thumped into the water next to them.

The boat rocked, but she kept it under control. Another chunk of ice struck the bow, but bounced off and then they were at the wall and rocketing between the edges of the opening which were closing against them as they squirted through. Then they were outside, and in higher surf, and she was grabbing everything she could to keep the boat on course as it bounced across the waves.

Dawn had broken outside, and the sea was alive with white froth, with a mist gray sky glowering overhead. Waves were crashing up against the ice and sending spray high up in the air.

"Whoa!" Jess grabbed the console and thumped into the wall as she stretched to look behind them. "Nice driving, Devvie!"

Dev got the boat under control, panting a little. "Thank you." She moved them away from the ice wall, turning the bow around so she could see the crack. "Are the..." She paused, looking at the now solid wall behind them, the only sign of an opening the newly floating bergs of ice bobbing near the center. "Oh."

"Yeah." Jess moved behind her and put both hands on the control chair to hold herself steady. "That would be ugly. I'm not much for being squash frozen."

Dev stared at the wall. "Did you know that was going to happen?" She asked. "Did they?"

Jess drummed her thumbs against the chair back. "Good question." She said. "Did I know? I had a gut feeling something was wrong." She admitted. "Did they know? Who knows?"

An iceberg floated past, it's white and gray exterior bobbing in the deep green blue ocean. "Are they dead now?" Dev asked, after a moment of silence.

"Don't know, don't care." Jess slapped her on the shoulder. "Let's get moving towards the bad guys. This makes it easier for me anyway, don't have to screw around talking Sigurd into taking us there." She said. "And we've got a ride back."

Dev settled into the chair and hooked her boots on the foot rest of it. She studied the controls, then she keyed up the navigation comp. "Do you have coordinates?" She asked. "To where you want to go?"

Thinking about the fishermen bothered her, she realized. She wasn't sure she was sentimental about it – actually she wasn't really sure what sentimental was, but the captain had been friendly to her, and it disturbed her to imagine him and his family crushed to death in the ice behind them.

"Ah, yeah, let me get em." Jess was busy at the navigation comp. "Basically east, then southeast from here. Gimme a minute."

Jess wasn't disturbed at all about them. Dev studied her partner's tall form. Was that what she'd meant when she said she had no conscience? That she really didn't care if other people died? But she'd helped that fisherman, hadn't she?

"Okay here." Jess was at her side, with a tablet. "There." She pointed at a set of coordinates. "That's their deep sea fishery."

We can pull in there.”

Dev plotted the course, hesitating a little over the unfamiliar, then familiar comp. “Won't they recognize you?” She asked, after she finished. “You said a scan would find you.”

“Not the fishery.” Jess said, with a note of quiet confidence. “Or – if they do, I'm not sure they'd care. What they want is the fish. Takes a lot of em to feed everyone.”

“I see.”

“Then we'll take the credits we get for the fish, and pick up luxuries in the black market there.” Jess rested her arm on Dev's shoulder. “And that, my friend, is what will get us into the science compound. No one likes fancies like eggheads do.”

Dev turned her head and looked at her.

Jess patted her on the back. “It's all good, Dev. We're back on track.” She paused. “So – you said you didn't know how to drive this thing, then you did. What's the deal?”

“I didnt think I did.” Dev put aside her disturbing thoughts with some effort. “I dont know why they would give me that, but when I saw the controls, I felt it kick in.” She said. “It wasn't something I sim'd or anything. They must have given it to me on the second long session.”

“So you dont know all of what they put in your head?”

“No.” Dev admitted readily. “Not until I need it. I really didn't expect to need this.” She set the course and activated it, feeling the keel come around as the engines engaged and they started off towards the east. She waited for the boat to settle into it's motion before she turned again to Jess. “Does it bother you?”

Jess studied her. “Every time I think I've got you squared, you change it up. I'm not sure how the Hell I should feel about that.”

Dev was briefly silent. “I'm sorry.” She finally said. “I don't think there's anything I can do about it.”

“No, me either.” Jess said. “But at least all the surprises have been pleasant ones so far.” She grinned a bit rakishly. “Time it would have taken me to figure this thing out we'd be bloody popsicles right now.”

“That doesn't sound good.”

“No.” Jess leaned against the chair. “Would have been a painful way to die.” She peered through the heavy leaded glass over Dev's shoulder. “Looks like the weather settled.”

Dev had to take her word for that. The overcast clouds, and the fractious seas looked the same to her, except that the water washing over the control center was splashing from the waves, not rain from the sky. Now that the boat was at speed though, it plowed through the surf stolidly, and she started to relax a little.

“Power on downstairs?” Jess asked. “I could use a cup of something hot. You?”

Dev glanced at her, and smiled. “That would be very nice, yes.”

Jess winked. “Be right back.” She went to the door and slipped through it, turning to climb down the ladder to the deck.

The engine roar was subdued and far off, the bulk of the ship blocking out most of the sound. Dev took a deep breath and released it, relaxing into the chair as she studied the controls.

They were far more rudimentary than the carrier's. Most of them were old, and very basic, just a raw sonar feed and basic comp, a sideband comms and the control sets for the power, and the batteries and the propulsion engines run by them. On one side was a small panel that showed the big tanks the fish were kept in, and the bio controls for that, and then another panel showed the systems for the living spaces, and the prep area.

All pretty basic. Once she'd gotten the scope of it, the programming she'd been given was more than sufficient to let her run the boat and now that she'd gotten them pointed in the right direction she started looking around at the space she now found herself in.

It was a relatively cramped space, with consoles on three sides, the chair in the middle, and lockers behind her. On one side of the workspace was a big book, and she turned her chair to get closer to it, opening it up and peering inside curiously. There were many pages, and a lot of scribbled lines and it took her quite some minutes until her eyes were able to translate the squiggles into actual letters.

It still didn't let her read it though. The letters made words, but the words were unknown to her and she decided they were in some kind of code. That she had programming for, but only very basic kinds, and she closed the book and left it for later perusal.

There were two stools clamped the the deck, and she reached behind her to open one of the lockers, finding a thick, heavy

suit inside not too different from her jumpsuit. There were things clamped to it, and she closed the door before the suit swung out of it with the ship's motion and fell.

So. Dev put her elbows on the chair arms and settled back. They were on their way again. She left the whole subject of the fisher people alone for now, and focused on the mission, as she knew Jess was. Regardless of why and how, she reasoned that it had worked out all right for them since she hadn't really been sure of how they were going to get the captain to do what Jess wanted otherwise.

He hadn't seemed like someone who could be persuaded easily.

Of course, Jess wasn't someone you could turn down easily. So she suspected it would have been very interesting, but possibly not in a good way if they had needed to force the question.

The door bumped open and Jess entered, carrying a box tucked under one arm leaving her other free to help her climb up the ladder. She closed the door behind her, locking the chill outside and set the box down on the side console. "Found some wraps too." She opened the box and started sorting things out. "Damn good thing, because I have no idea how to use that food machinery downstairs."

Dev kept her eyes on the seas, and her hands on the controls. "I don't think I do either."

"You said that about this boat."

Dev chuckled softly. "Yes I know I did, but I really don't think I have any programming at all about food." She demurred. "Everything in the creche was constructed by the processors. We never even really looked at what was on our trays."

"Ah." Jess brought over a cup and a roll, and handed it over. "Well, I've got something on ya then but not with machines." She said. "One of the things we used to do in the citadel when we went swimming is bring up some grub, and I can actually make that taste like something."

"Really?"

"Really." Jess assured her, seemingly in a good mood. "The Drakes have lived in a stone house by the sea for a dozen generations. I had a lot of practice." She paused. "Well, six years of it anyway." She glanced out the window. "After that, it was spotty, in school"

Dev took a sip of the seaweed tea, once again enjoying the taste. "Did it bother you to leave your family and go away?" She asked. "One of the proctors in the creche did that. Left their family behind and come up to station."

Jess went and got her own meal and took a seat on one of the stools. "Did I." She mused. "It was a really long time ago. I don't think I remember how I felt."

Which was a lie, she realized, even as she said it. She did remember, being that five year old child and coming back into the house soaking wet, to see mom and dad standing there watching her with that look.

She remembered her mother turning away, and her father taking a deep breath, and kneeling down to talk to her, telling her she'd done so well on the tests that she'd earned her place at the school.

At his school, the one daddy had gone to. He'd seemed so proud, but so sad.

She remembered the transport picking her up, and that sudden spurt of fear as she waved goodbye, not truly understanding that home, and life, and family would all change its meaning for her as fast as it had.

"Jess?" Dev touched her arm.

She looked up, to find her new partner studying her with a quiet, serious expression. "It was fun, at school" She said. "I met a lot of other kids there and we had a pretty good time." Her pale eyes shifted, then went back to Dev's face. "Until they start teaching you to kill."

Dev sucked in a tiny breath. "That's something they didn't program me for."

"Sure?"

"Yes." Dev glanced at her. "I knew that when I saw you do it. When I saw.. Bain do it." She paused thoughtfully. "I think they wanted to, but we ran out of time."

Jess nodded. "It wasn't in your script. I looked through it." She said, in a casual voice. "You know they teach us.. they make us kill a seal first. They take us out on the ice, up in the back of beyond in the north and they find one, and you have to slit its throat."

"But it didn't do anything to you." Dev frowned.

"That's the point. Sometimes you kill things just because." Jess leaned her elbows on the console. "They're sort of cute, seals. They have pointy faces and whiskers, and big dark eyes."

Dev adjusted the throttles a little, turning the bow so they were cutting through the waves. "I see."

"Mm." Her partner picked up her roll and took a bite of it. "I killed the instructor instead." She munched the fish and seaweed inside. "I should go find that seal. He owes me one."

Dev had gone quite still, and now she turned her head to stare at her companion.

"Completely stupid. Got me tossed in lockup for two months." Jess took a swallow of tea to wash the mouthful down. "Everyone thought I was on the crazy side after that. Not sure if it helped my career or hurt it."

"Why did you do that?" The bio alt finally asked.

Jess pondered briefly, using the time to ingest more of her roll. "I liked the seal more than the teacher." She finally admitted. "Guy was ugly as hell and he'd tried to bugger me in the shower. I figured he had it coming anyway."

Dev blinked. "Well." She turned her eyes back to the console. "I'm really glad you like me then."

Her partner chuckled. "That seal would have been stew if it'd been him or you." She reassured Dev. Then she exhaled. "You know, I did miss my family. I missed home." She admitted. "I think we all did for a long time.. just no one said anything because you weren't supposed to. They didn't like it when kids acted like kids."

The bio alt thought about that, as she adjusted the throttles. Did she miss the creche? Not the way Jess had her family, she guessed. She missed a few of her proctors, a little. Some of her fellow bio alts, especially Gigi, a little. But there was a lot more not to miss. "I don't think I know what that's like."

"No loss to ya." Jess said. "Just makes your guts hurt. Not worth it."

Looking at Jess's face, though, made Dev think that wasn't entirely the truth. There was a sadness there that she could see plainly, a look of melancholy that was really very unlike her. She reached out and touched the taller woman's arm again, closing her fingers around it and gently squeezing.

She didn't know what to say so she didn't say anything.

Jess looked up at her, her eyes half hidden by thick, dark hair.

For a moment, she felt a pang in her chest, odd and strange and discomfiting.

Then Jess winked, and bumped her. "Let's stop being sad sacks." She said. "Past's the past. Can't change it." She straightened up and started eating again. "This thing going what, ten knots?"

Dev put her hands back on the controls. "Twelve." She said "A lot slower than the carrier." She admitted. "This will take us a long time to get to those coordinates."

"We can trade off driving." Jess said, observing her. "Doesn't look that hard. Got most of it on auto, right?"

"Right." Her partner agreed. "It's a lot simpler than the carrier. Just these engine controls, and this one, that steers." She indicated the rudder control. "You have excellent reflexes. I'm sure you could easily handle this."

Jess smiled at her. "You sweet talker, you."

"Excuse me?"

"Thank you for the compliment." The taller woman said. "Especially since I've been known to drive a carrier right into an iceberg."

"Really?"

"Really."

Dev picked up the roll and took a bite. The knots that had in fact formed in her stomach relaxed, and she settled back in the big chair, wondering a little at all the strange feelings she'd had over the last little while. She wasn't sure about a lot of them, but one she knew she liked.

And it was strange, because there was nothing really to like about what Jess had told her. But she thought again about that seal, and felt herself smiling all over again. Was it strange? She thought maybe it was terrible that she was glad the animal had lived and the human had died, but really she didn't feel like it was terrible.

She was glad. She was very glad Jess had disobeyed her orders, and saved the seal. She wasn't even really sure why she felt that way, but in her head, she had a picture of this animal, and it's eyes looking at Jess, and Jess deciding not to hurt it, but to hurt the one who'd ordered her to kill it instead.

That seemed correct to her. She wondered what Doctor Dan would say about it.

She remembered finding Doctor Dan in the botany lab once, and he'd been leaning over his comp station, staring at a plant. When he heard her come in, he'd turned and shown her what he was looking at, a small thing he called an insect that was

living on the plant.

It had been pretty. Red with black spots. He'd let it walk on his finger and brought it close for her to see. Someday, he'd told her, someday when plants lived downside again, this bug would make the plants grow.

It hadn't made complete sense to her, because she hadn't gotten that kind of programming, but she remembered the fond look he gave the bug, and how carefully he'd put it back on the plant. She decided that Doctor Dan would have approved of what Jess had done, and he probably would have very much liked the seal.

"Jess?" She looked at her partner. "Can we see a seal? Are they out here somewhere?"

Jess grinned at her. "After we find the bear?"

Dev smiled back. "I'd like to see one of those too." She admitted. "The scan got some pictures of the one we saw before. I didn't have a chance to look at them though."

"Tell you what." Jess finished up her tea. "You keep driving, and I'll hang out on the rail and see if I spot any seals." She promised. "Or bears." She added. "Or whales."

"Whales?"

"C'mon, Devvie. You'll be surprised what we can find out here." Jess ruffled her hair, and then she picked up her cup and returned it to the box. "Let's try to enjoy the trip." She tugged her jacket up and ducked back out the door, moving to the outer railing and shading her eyes.

Dev watched her. Then she sighed. "I would like to see a bear." She snapped a few switches, and then wondered if the portable scanner could help Jess look.

And, after all, they could go back when they were done and find out about the fishermen, maybe even rescue them and give them back their boat.

Dev nodded in satisfaction. It would all work out.

**

Jess leaned her elbows on the rail and watched the sea go by, very content with how her plan was progressing. Like most of her schemes, it had no real structure, and left a lot of things up to chance, but she had a clear place to start, and a goal, and everything in between would usually fall into place.

Stealing the boat was a good example. It hadn't been part of the plan, but as soon as she'd realized what Dev's scan had found, there wasn't anything else she wanted to do. It gave them a transport, and a way in to the other side, and took away all the fishermen impediments all in one fell swoop.

She'd just been lucky that she'd heard the ice creaking, and that Dev had known how to drive the thing. But her luck was like that. When it was good, it was really good, and when it was bad, she usually courted death with it.

Now she just had to find Dev a seal. Or a bear. She scanned the ice pack, just off their port bow and watched for either the telltale blow holes, or something white moving on white. There was plenty of time to look – she figured they'd be two days to the fishery.

Two days, to find a critter, as they cruised past the ice pack, there boat's belly full of live fish she knew the fishery would pay top dollar for, even from a fishing boat conspicuously missing its big family crew. Jess figured she had time to hunt up something to put on over her blacks so at least she wouldn't be glaringly obvious but maybe Dev could talk to the intaker, since she actually did look like she was Sig's kin.

That seemed to be falling in line for her too. Jess smiled, and swung her head from side to side, watching the passing water and ice intently. The one downside was that they'd have to take turns sleeping, and that meant they wouldn't be sleeping with each other during the ride.

Jess sighed. Oh well. On the other hand, they did have tank full of fish, and if she caught one, and she could figure out how to turn the heating apparatus on in the prep area, she could treat Dev to fresh broiled filets and toasted sea grapes. She licked her lips, tasting it in her memories.

A flicker of motion caught her eye, and she turned her head, shading her eyes from the cloud glare as she searched for what had alerted her. It was waterside, and she peered eagerly ahead, hoping it was a whale, and not too disappointed when she caught sight of the sleek, surfing forms of porpoises.

"Hot damn." Jess reached over and tapped the glass, looking inside to see Dev watching her alertly. She pointed ahead of the boat to the motion ahead of them, and waited until she saw the bio alt jerk and then peer over the bow. She circled the control center and stuck her head in the hatch. "Slow down! You see them? They're dolphins!"

Dev immediately slowed the engines down and put them in idle, setting them to rocking glide in the waves as she engaged

the auto pilot. "What are they?"

"C'mon" Jess guided her out to the bow and pointed "See there? They're jumping... they're coming this way."

Dev glued herself to the chilly rail and watched as the motion resolved itself into moving animals, gliding through the water in a rhythmic way. She could see puffs of water coming out over their heads, and now that they were closer, she could see the sharp fin on the tops of them, and the rounded heads. "Are they fish?"

"Matter of fact, no." Jess leaned on the rail next to her, thoroughly enjoying herself. "They breathe air."

"They do?" Dev's eyes opened wide as one of them came right up out of the water and splashed back into it. "Wow!"

"Be right back." Jess loped off towards the fishing deck. "I'll get some bait for em."

"Bait?" Dev frowned. "We're not going to try and catch them are we?" She asked the icy, empty air.

The animals came even closer, and as she looked at them, they seemed to see her, and veered right towards the boat's hull. Her eyes got bigger and bigger as they slowed and cruised past, apparently watching her out of one round, dark eye.

"Hello." She called out.

Jess returned, with a pail. "They here? Oh, yeah." She pulled something out of the pail and tossed it in the water. The closest porpoise immediately chased it down, grabbing it in it's mouth and swallowing it. It then opened it's mouth and made a sound at them, an odd, discordant chittering.

Dev's jaw dropped, and she stared at it in delight. "Is it laughing?" She blurted. "Wow!"

Jess chuckled. "Sure sounds like it." She tossed another piece of bait at them. "Look at those suckers.. they're huge!"

Dev leaned against the rail and felt the cold wind against her skin, blowing her hair back as she avidly watched their visitors. "You said they were dolphins?" She whispered. "And they breath air???"

"Yeah." Jess nodded. "I went swimming with them once. Really cool." She leaned closer. "Look at the hole on their head, see that? Thats how they breathe."

"No way."

"Yes way."

Impossible to really imagine that. "Can I give them some?" Dev edged over next to her partner, taking a chunk of bait from the bucket when Jess offered it to her. She tossed it gingerly into the water, delighted when one of the smaller animals retrieved it and flipped it in the air, bolting it down when it fell into it's mouth.

It watched her hopefully with it's round eye, nodding it's head up and down as if encouraging her to throw some more.

So she did.

She could see them blowing air out of the hole, and she leaned over further, watching them in utter fascination. "That's amazing."

Jess grinned wholeheartedly and tossed more bait in the water. She was very glad she'd found the dolphins, and even more glad that they'd come over to the boat and showed the intermittent curiosity she'd seen from time to time from them. "Hey buddy!" She stuck her arm over the side of the boat with a big chunk of fish in it. "C'mere!"

"Jess!" Dev's eyes widened as one of the dolphins swam away, then back at the boat, moving faster and then leaping up out of the water to grab the fish right out of her partner's hand. "Oh!"

"Hah." Jess chuckled. "Did you see that? Jumped right up here."

The dolphins chittered at them, and Jess gave them the rest of the bait before turning to Dev with a regretful smile. "Gotta get going."

Dev leaned on the rail and watched the dolphins swim off, admiring the bow of their bodies, and the sinuous movement.

"That was awesome." She told her partner. "Thank you, Jess."

"Anytime."

Dev headed around the deck to the hatch to the control center and ducked back inside, still thinking about the dolphins. Just looking at their faces had been interesting, and she wished she'd taking her scanner out side to record them so she could look at them again later.

Oh well. Maybe they'd see more of them later on. Dev took her seat and picked up the remainder of her roll, nibbling on it as she checked the controls and started them off towards the east again. The boat came up to speed and she settled back against the cushion, watching Jess from the corner of her eye as she roamed around behind her. "Tell me about the swimming thing."

"With the dolphins?" Jess sat down on the stool and hooked her feet up on the rungs. "Ah. Well, yeah. I was goofing around near the citadel one morning, just collecting some shells on the beach, that sort of thing. We had some time off and it wasn't raining. Anyway..."

Dev smiled, adjusting a throttle with a tentative nudge.

"They dared me to dive off one of the ledges.. almost underwater now but then it was pretty high and I climbed up there and did." Jess said. "Midway down I saw the water start moving and freaked out."

"Oh."

"Yeah, thought they were sharks." Jess said. "I flipped around and got myself in a ball so when I hit the water nothing was sticking out. Next thing I knew they were bopping me around like I was a damn ball and making that chittering noise."

"Did they hurt you?"

"Nah." Jess smiled in memory. "Made me laugh. I uncurled and they swam around me, bumping me with their noses. I touched one of them. Their skin's softer than I thought it would be."

"Wow." Dev sighed. "That would be so interesting."

"Next time." Jess patted her knee. "I'm going to go exploring. See if there's anything we can use on this crate and get us some sleeping bags." She got up and went out the hatch, leaving Dev alone with her controls and the white ruffled sea they were cruising through.

Whistling, Jess went down the steps and through the hatch into the common chamber, closing it behind her to keep the cold wind out. She crossed the floor and went to the inner door, not surprised when the hatch didn't open to her touch. She looked around for something to pry with, and then, finding nothing, shrugged and drew her blaster and aimed.

The bolt touched the latch and the very next moment her own reflexes reacted without her conscious thought as she threw herself across the room and behind the table just as a loud blast rocked the boat. Jess ducked her head behind the table base and heard metal shrapnel rattling against the other side of it just as the boat's engines cut off and she heard a slam outside.

Ah. Jess surged up and over the table just as the hatch flew inward and she caught Dev just as she came inside and pushed them both back against the wall.

"Ugh!" Dev's eyes were wide "What was that?"

"Just me blowing up things." Jess told her, peering cautiously around the still open hatch door to look at the one she'd blasted. "Your six times removed fourth cousin Sig apparently figured he'd made sure his family jewels were safe and put an explosive trap on the hatch to his digs."

Dev absorbed that. "I see." She peered around the door. "Is it safe now?"

"Probably."

"Would you like to let me go?"

"Nope." Jess had her arms wrapped around Dev and she felt the bio alt's body relax against her as Dev tilted her head back and looked up at her with a wry grin. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

Dev blushed visibly. "I wasn't sure what was going on." She admitted. "I heard a loud noise."

Jess gave her a brief hug then released her. "Yeah, bombs are loud. G'wan back up and get the bus moving."

Her partner hesitated. "Are you sure there aren't more bombs?" Dev studied her gravely. "It would cause me great discomfort if you got damaged by one."

Jess studied her for a moment in curious silence. "Would it?"

"Yes." Dev said, after a pause. Then she ducked out the door and trotted along the deck back to the ladder.

Jess closed the hatch, a thoughtful look on her face. She picked her way through the debris of the door and paused, drawing her blaster again before she entered the family quarters, this time with very cautious motions.

She felt the engines start up again and braced herself as they moved, slowly letting her eyes roam around the space, a faint smile still tugging at her lips. "Now would it, Devvie?" She murmured. "Sure damn would discomfort me to see you get squashed, that's for sure."

That was odd, and new. While she had always been expected to work together with her tech, and keep their skins whole, she never, not even with Josh, had been personally fond of them. Not.

Not like she had become, so surprisingly quickly, fond of Dev. And just as apparently, her strange new bio alt partner had become fond of her.

Was it the same thing? She'd never heard of bio alts having relationships of any kind, in the citadel or elsewhere though she had heard more than once of them being used for pleasure.

Was that what she was doing? Jess felt an uncomfortable twist in her guts thinking that. Was she just taking advantage of Dev because Dev thought she couldn't say no?

Or did she realize she could say no?

Did Jess want her to realize?

"Peh. Later." She gave her body a little shake and continued her exploration.

The inside of the fisher family quarters was full of odd things. Jess suspected they were family heirlooms, and remembered a couple of counters in her own home that had something of the same. Old pics and holos, bits of carved white substance she thought might have been bone, old spears, a few stuffed big fish on the wall.

She liked it. She moved carefully from room to room, not letting her nostalgia get in the way of looking for more booby traps. The beds were thick and looked comfortable, and the kids room had hammocks in them the sight of which made her smile.

To one side there was a storage bin. She nudged it open and looked inside, making a soft chuckling sound under her breath as she spotted the packaged rations they probably used when the seas were too rough for them to cook. It was a relief to find them, since it meant she and Dev probably wouldn't starve before they could get to the fishery.

Another storage bin coughed up two spare hammocks and thickly woven blankets, and she happily shouldered them along with the hooks the hammocks hung on.

After another sweep, she backed out of the space, gently booting the hatch closed on it's broken and twisted hinge. "Waste of metal." She sighed, as she holstered her gun. She went over and collected a thermal carafe full of the tea she'd brewed, and headed for the hatch with her burden, whistling softly under her breath.

Dev was occupying her time looking at the log book she couldn't read. She was leafing through the pages, looking at the small sketches she found there most of which she figured probably had something to do with fish. They were interesting. It seemed like the captain had been drawing bunches of them, using squiggles, and indicating how they looked when they were together.

She wondered if there were any pictures of dolphins in the book. She leafed through it, hoping to find one, looking up when the hatch opened again and Jess reappeared. "Did you find anything?"

"Nah." Jess set the tea down and then put down her armful of hammocks. "Just stuff to make us more comfortable." She examined the hooks, prowling around the command chamber looking for places to hang them. "They use these things down at the kelp factories."

"What things?" Dev divided her attention between the control console, and her partner, though they were on a reasonable course and there was nothing in front of them but water.

"These." Jess pointed the hammocks. "Hanging beds."

"Really?" Dev sounded surprised and interested.

"Uh huh." Jess found an eye bolt in the wall and slid one of the hooks through it, then she went over to the right angled wall and found another one at just the right length. "Heh." She put the other hook up and then went back to get the hammock, stringing it up between the two hooks before she stepped back to examine her handiwork. "What do you think?"

Dev half turned to look. "Oh." She said. "That's sort of like what we use when we have to sleep in null."

Jess sat down on the hammock then rolled into it, stretching her body out and putting her hands behind her head. She rocked back and forth with the ship's motion, and grinned in satisfaction. "Almost as comfortable as our beds back at base." She decided. "Since we're gonna trade off driving, I figured it made sense to bunk up here."

"Excellent." Dev nodded approvingly. "I think that would be the safest thing too, especially if there are bombs onboard."

Jess rolled out of the hammock and wandered over next to her, taking a seat on the stool again. "Whatcha looking at?"

Dev showed her the book. "I was seeing if there were any dolphins or whales in the pictures. I can't read the words." She said, regretfully "Can you?"

Jess studied them. "No." She said. "I think it's his language."

"His language?"

"Yeah." Jess propped her head up on one fist as she idly thumbed the pages. "They didn't teach you about languages?"

Dev considered the question. "Well." She said. "I know machine programming languages. Is that the same thing?"

“No.” Her partner chuckled. “Believe it or not, before the whole world went to crap there were enough of us human bastards around to have each bunch of us talk a different way. A different code, I guess.”

The bio alt blinked. “How did you understand each other then?”

“We didn’t.”

“I see.”

“They still speak some different stuff on the other side, but mostly there’s so few of us now when it all went down they picked the easiest and most bastardized language which was what used to be called English and pushed some other stuff into it and that’s what we use on our side.”

“I see.”

Jess looked up in amusement. “Doesn’t make sense, right? But that’s where some of the weird crap I say comes from. Old times.”

“We only got taught to talk one way.” Dev admitted. “Everyone talked the same up on station. I’m not sure why you would want to do it any other way, and not understand each other like I don’t understand these notes.” She pointed at the book.

“Ah Dev.” Her partner smiled wryly. “It’s just how we were. It was more important to find ways we were different, because that meant we were better than the other guy. If we were all the same, no one wins.” She saw that look of utter confusion come over Dev’s face. “It’s still like that. Look at what we’re doing here. We’re going over there to try and screw the other guys up because that takes away the chance that they’ll do something better than us and get ahead.”

“I don’t really understand that.” Dev admitted. “But I’ll take your word for it.”

Jess chuckled. “So anyway, this must be the old language of Sigurd’s people.” She pointed at the book “They’ve been doing this forever, doesn’t surprise me they still write in it. It is like a code you know? This is probably where he puts down all his tricks about catching fish, and if it’s in this language, only his family can read it.”

“Oh.” Dev nodded. “Okay, that I understand. Up in the creche, sometimes, the scientists would do that, put their notes in code if they thought someone was trying to copy something they did. That’s the same thing, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Doctor Dan thought that was so silly.”

“Bet he did. He seems like a pretty sharp guy.” Jess said. “Wonder where he did his field training?”

Dev’s head cocked to one side again. “His what?”

“C’mon. Didn’t you see him with that blaster? He knew what to do with it as much as I did, and my bio bomb didn’t scatter him to pieces. He’s friends with Bain. He was one of us.”

“Oh no.” Dev shook her head. “He’s been a scientist up on station his whole life practically. He told us so.”

“Practically.”

Dev stared at her, feeling anxious. Jess seemed to sense that, because she pushed the log book away and put a hand on Dev’s knee instead.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to freak you out.”

Had she been freaked out? Was she? Dev let out her held breath, and thought about that. What was it exactly that Doctor Dan had said once? That he’d spent his life in the creche, except...

Except, now she remembered, for what he’d called a mis spent youth. She studied Jess’s intense, planed face. Had he misspent that time with Interforce? Really? Gentle Doctor Dan? She remembered how shocked she’d felt seeing him holding a gun, and holding it with...

Yes, he’d known well what to do with it. She remembered too, how he’d reacted when Bain had shot the man, coming between her and the rest of them, making sure she was safe. Had he been like Jess?

“Relax.” Jess patted her knee. “It’s a good thing. He knows and so he made sure you know.” She said. “He was probably a kid.... but you saw how he talked to Bain. He knew him.”

“Yes.” Dev finally said, in a soft voice. “He told me it was okay to trust him. Bain, I mean.”

“He did?” Now it was Jess’s turn to be surprised.

“Yes. Him, and you.”

“And me? Damn man hardly knows me.” Jess protested. “And I don’t know him at all.”

Dev shrugged a little. "Well, he knows me. So maybe that's why." She said. "And also... he really understands people." She fell silent, a faint crease forming on her forehead. "He cares about what happens to us." She added, after a pause.

Jess wondered if that were really true. Certainly, watching her new friend with the doctor had given her the impression that the man was fond of her, but it was a business. Wasn't it? They had hundreds of bio alts doing all sorts of menial jobs around the place, after all.

But Dev was different, wasn't she. "Your'e different." Jess spoke her thoughts aloud. "You're special. Not like the others. I've seen bios around for years, none of them are like you. He made you like us."

"What do you mean?" Dev adjusted a setting, looking briefly at the console before turning her attention back to Jess.

Jess leaned on the console and regarded her. "He made you like us. He made you to pass as human, didn't he? Way before he was asked by us to."

"What?"

"All the other bios, they're like s.. like machines." Jess said. "They can't think for themselves. That's the biggest problem in using them but also the reason no one's killed them yet because they're inferior. No one cares about them. But you're different. Your brain's like mine." She studied Dev's face. "It always was."

Dev's eyes shifted and went unfocused for a long moment. Then she looked back at Jess. "Is it... am I incorrect?" She asked, in a very soft, almost scared tone. "You think that's bad."

Jess felt her heart thump uncomfortably. She stared into Dev's eyes, seeing a deep emotion there that made her feel terrible. "N.. no." She managed to get out. "I just wondered why." She reached out and touched the hand Dev had resting on the console. "How he knew."

"How he knew what?" Dev reached up and rubbed her eyes with her free hand. "I don't like how this feels."

Jess stood up, unsure of what to do. "Hey.. I didn't mean to make you feel bad." She hesitantly clasped Dev's shoulders in both hands. "I like how you turned out. I like that you can talk to me, and think and all that stuff whatever the hell his reasons were."

Dev exhaled, her shoulders relaxing under Jess's hands. "If there was a reason, he never told me." She finally said. "Maybe he just wanted to see if he could do it." She stared pensively at her partner. "He likes to do hard things."

Jess moved her hands and cupped Dev's face in them. "Fine by me." She could feel how chilled Dev's skin was and she rubbed her thumbs against it for warmth. "I like you just how you are."

Finally, that got a smile from the bio alt. "Well, I'm glad since I don't really have much choice in it." Dev said. "Could we have more hot tea? This is a cold place."

"Sure." Jess released her and went for the thermal. "Some tea for the insides and I'll see what I can do for the outside"

Dev took a steadying breath and went back to the controls, wishing the boat could drive itself.

**

Driving the boat in the dark was hard. Dev kept one eye on the sonar and one on the dimly see waves ahead of her as she concentrated on steering. The control room was dim, and behind her Jess was curled up in the hammock, getting some rest.

Dev was looking forward to taking her turn at that. Her entire body was aching with the tension of doing this somewhat unfamiliar activity, and the uncertainty of piloting the boat through the night seas was wearing on her.

On the other hand, she was glad to be saving Jess from the effort. Her partner had scrounged around and brought up enough odds and ends to feed them, and she was relatively full from it. She had a big, insulated cup in a clamp next to her with still hot tea in it and Jess had taken pains to try and make things as comfortable for her as she could.

That was gratifying. She even had found a thick, soft blanket some where and now it was tucked around Dev's shoulders as she sat in the big pilot's seat.

It felt good, to have Jess be concerned about her. It made her warm inside, having nothing to do with the blanket. She had decided to see what she could do in return once they changed places. Surely there was something she could do for her partner.

Her partner. Dev risked a glance over her shoulder at the somnolent form in the hammock. Once Jess had conceded her that title, she hadn't looked back and then the rapidness of her acceptance of Dev had really surprised her. It felt good, and maybe that was why their discussion earlier about Doctor Dan had rattled her.

It had.

She had only lost the stomach ache from it when Jess had wrapped the blanket around her, and then simply stood there for

awhile behind her with her arms draped over Dev's shoulders, breathing softly in her ear.

Dev didn't want to think about being different, or made a certain way or something that someone else shaped. It made her feel strange, but thinking about being a bio alt bothered her.

She knew that was incorrect. She knew she wasn't considered a person, not by anyone that was naturally born. And yet...

And yet. Just thinking about failure, about being sent back to the creche and having to go back to being like she was made Dev feel so bad she stopped it, just like that, because she didn't want to get that stomach ache again.

But it kept creeping back. Had Doctor Dan made her like a natural born? Dev caught sight of her profile in the reflection of the glass, a faint, ghostly figure outlined in the dim blue of the controls. She certainly looked like one. But then, they all did. You couldn't tell from the outside a bio from a natural.

What Jess had said was, it was something on her inside that he'd made the same.

The same as Jess. Dev considered that, soberly, acknowledging in her head that she had always felt a little different. Hadn't she? Or had that been wishful thinking? Didn't they all want to think that? Dev exhaled a little, then she picked up her tea and sipped it, enjoying the mellow taste.

Didn't they all want to think they were special? Why else would they compete for the proctor's notice, and that rare, cherished good word from Doctor Dan?

And yet, Dev knew, that in certain ways she was in fact different. She was a dev unit. She was the only produced member of her set. That had given her status in the creche, and she had begun to be aware of that, these last time sections, as she moved through the last of her classes and approached assignment.

Gigi had been so excited, when she'd gotten hers. To be given an assignment as the assistant to the director was about the best thing one of them could hope for, if you weren't specialized and Dev well remembered how jealous the other bios in her class had been when they heard about it.

What would they think about her assignment? Dev adjusted one of the throttles, and had to smile at her reflection. She had hoped for something interesting, and though she'd never mentioned it to him, remembered wishing for an assignment in the lab with Doctor Dan.

Being his assistant? Now that would have been something for them to be jealous of, if she'd stayed topside. The director was the director, but everyone knew the most important person in the creche was Doctor Dan. He was the one who decided everything.

He was the one who made them all, sitting in his quiet office with his big drafting board, sketching out DNA molecules and plotting genetics by hand in complex ways that even the comp couldn't do with any consistency. He didn't of course do everything personally – there were many scientists and doctors under his leadership, but the over all plan?

That was his. And there were a few sets, selected sets, that had literally felt his hand in their creation and no matter what they ended up doing, they always had that little extra status regardless of their level.

Dev had been one of them, and so, given her classes and the programming she'd gotten, she'd secretly hoped that when it came her turn, Doctor Dan would tap her on the shoulder, and become her mentor.

So instead, here she she was, down world, in a fish boat, driving across the water in the dark, in a storm, with a partner who liked killing people and enjoyed practicing sex in dangerous places.

Life could be quite unexpected. Dev smiled briefly. Now that she was here, though, she had a feeling she wouldn't trade this experience for all the status in the world, and even for a place in Doctor Dan's lab. This was something none of them had ever done.

She had done things already that no bio alt ever had, and experienced things she didn't think maybe a lot of natural born had. Though it had been so short at time, she absolutely knew she didn't want that to change. No matter how dangerous, no matter how scary and difficult, she wanted this.

Going back to the creche? "Ugh." Dev grunted softly, giving her body a little shake.

She heard Jess stir, and she quickly looked back, hoping the small sound hadn't woken her. But her partner was merely shifting in the hammock, it's knotted surface swinging gently in the motion of the boat.

Relieved, she returned her focus to the window, sparing a brief glance to her scanner sitting propped on the console next to her. It had, by far, more intelligence programming than anything on the boat, and she was using it to check the onboard primitive scan.

The route was basic – but the scanner had picked up rocks and escarpments that the ship's system did and Dev was being cautious, aware she was only operating in one plane now, not the three she'd come to anticipate in the carrier. She found

herself missing the power of the craft, and the speed of it. Her progress over the waves seemed, in comparison, painfully slow.

The seas were also rough, and it was raining again. She could feel the wind pushing against the boat, shoving it sideways and the engines could only gain so much torque against that and the heavy waves that rocked them.

Not really comfortable. No way to put the thing on auto pilot, which was why she'd stopped it cold when she'd heard the explosion below.

A lot more tiring than piloting the carrier at least in a long haul. Dev took another sip of her tea, and set the cup back in it's swinging holder. Her scanner beeped, and she quickly looked at it, her hands going to the controls and adjusting the course as the wiremap drew in a rock escarpment the sweep of the ship's radar had missed.

How did they manage? If she hadn't had the compact comp scan she'd have plowed the ship into these unexpected islands of rock at least three times already. The captain must, she reasoned, be a really excellent driver.

A soft sound made her look around again, and she frowned, not entirely sure she'd heard it. As she cocked her ears though, it happened again. At first she thought it was maybe the hooks swinging, but then she saw Jess shift again, and cry out, her body and hands tensing visibly.

Oh! Dev's eyes widened, and she rapidly switched her attention back and forth between the window and the hammock. "Jess?" She called out softly.

Jess cried out again, twisting in the hammock.

Dev pulled the throttles back and slowed the ship, feeling the bow pitch down as it came off plane and they went with the motion of the waves. She glanced anxiously at the scanner and hoped there was enough free water around them as she left the controls and bolted back to where her partner was struggling and gasping. "Jess!"

She grabbed hold the hammock as they pitched and in the next instant found herself gripped in an iron hold around her neck as Jess sinuously twisted around and slammed them both to the ground.

Dev reacted instinctively. She got her hands around Jess's wrists and clamped down on them, tearing the hold off her and shoving herself and Jess off the deck reversing their positions. She landed on her partner and held her down. "JESS!"

For a moment the staring blue eyes bored through her, then they blinked, and she felt the powerful form under her lose it's tension.

Another long silence as they looked at each other. Dev was very surprised to see wetness around Jess's eyes and she shifted to one side and released her, afraid she'd done her some damage. "Are you all right?"

Jess lifted her hand and covered her eyes, breathing hard. "Fuck."

The hand, Dev noted, was shaking. She cautiously touched Jess's shoulder, feeling a shivering in it as well. "Jess? Are you in discomfort? Is there something I can do to help you?"

"No." Jess finally answered. "Get the boat moving again. I'm fine."

Dev didn't think that was true. But she understood that refusing to do what Jess asked would not make her be in less discomfort. She very gently squeezed the shoulder her hand was resting on, then she pushed herself to her feet and went back over to the controls.

She settled into the seat and started up the engines, applying power and steadying the boat's movement as they shifted forward and plowed back into the waves. Once she was up and planing again she looked back over her shoulder, to see Jess sitting with her back braced against the cabinet, her head held in her hands.

Dev almost stopped the engines again, the urge to go do something to help overpowering her. "Jess?"

Her partner's shoulders shifted and she straightened, resting her forearms on her knees before she slowly pulled herself up and walked over to the stool next to Dev, dropping onto it with a grunt. "Shit."

Her last few offers of help having been rejected, Dev sorted around to figure out what she should try next. "Would you like some tea?" She picked up her mug and moved it closer. "It's still hot."

Jess rested her hands on the console. "Soon as I think I won't throw it back up sure." She uttered softly. "Crap I hate that."

"Throwing up?" Dev asked, cautiously.

"Hallucinations." Her partner answered shortly. "Dreams." She paused. "You know."

Hallucinations and dreams. Dev rifled through her programming quickly, then went over it again. "I'm sorry." She finally answered. "I really don't know. What are they? They sound uncomfortable."

Jess turned her head and looked at her. "You don't dream at night?" She asked. "See pictures in your head? Go to different

places? While you sleep?"

Pictures in her head. "Well." Dev mused. "Sometimes, when I got a lot of programming, I saw some pictures when I was waking up." She admitted. "But they weren't really different places. Just a flash or two, like a person's face, or a smell."

"Not the same thing." Jess said. "But if you don't have them you're damned lucky. Wish I was a bio in that case." She rested her forehead against her wrists.

Dev put a hand on her back, gently rubbing it. She wasn't really sure why she'd done that, or if it was helpful, but under her fingers she could feel, just a little, relaxation in the stiffness of her partner's body. "I was just thinking." She said. "About how much I wished I wasn't one."

Jess reacted, turning her head and looking back at her, the faint glow from the controls reflecting off her pale eyes.

"I mean, how much I'm really enjoying getting to do everything." Dev clarified. "And how much better it is than being in the creche."

"Ah" Jess grunted, grimacing a little and rubbing her temples with her fingers. "Well, crap right now I'd trade ya." She exhaled. "Thought I was past them from last time."

"What does that mean?" Dev asked, softly. "Are you sure you don't want some tea?"

Jess sighed and straightened up a little. "Nevermind. It's a stupid thing and I don't want to talk about it." She accepted the cup though, and took a sip. "Show me how to drive this thing and you can go get some sleep." She got up and came close to Dev.

Then she stopped, and put the cup down and put her hands on her hips. "Wait a minute."

Dev glanced sideways at her. Then she looked back out the window, as the boat twisted under them, and made her grab the controls a little harder. "Yow."

Jess leaned on the console so she could see Dev's face. "Did you just pick me up and body slam me?" She watched as a flush of color darkened the bio alt's face, visible even in the dim light. "You did."

"I." Dev felt nervous and suddenly very anxious. "I didn't mean to cause you discomfort." She said. "Did I hurt you?"

Jess was more than glad enough to let this distraction drive her recent nightmare out of her thoughts. To have had one at all shocked and infuriated her and she was embarrassed that Dev had witnessed it. "No." She said. "I just didn't think you were that strong. I'm bigger than you are."

Dev smiled briefly, relieved that her partner really didn't seem upset. "Well, we did work a lot in plus grav." She reminded her. "So I guess that's why, but I wasn't sure what was going on and I didn't want you to hurt yourself." She paused. "Or me."

"You?"

"You were grabbing me by the neck."

Jess felt a shock go down her entire body. "I did?"

Dev glanced at her for a brief moment, her lips tensing into a faint smile. "I think you were sort of still asleep."

Well, that wasn't good. Jess frowned. "I..." She stopped speaking, and took a step back, half turning and folding her arms across her chest. Then she sat back down on the stool and studied the deck. "Sorry." She managed, after a moment. "When you've done all the..." She paused again. "Sometimes we relive stuff that's happened in our sleep. Agents. Like me."

"I see." Dev said, gently.

"And I guess we don't have any really good things to relive." Jess went on. "So we get all the bad things. All the attacks that went wrong, and the friend's we've seen die and..." She stared at the ground. "Anyway. I'm sorry. I really don't want to do anything to hurt you."

"It's okay you didn't." Dev remarked. "I just wanted to hold you still long enough for you come back up." She adjusted a control, and glanced at the scanner. "Sometimes when we.. when bio alts that is, are down for programming they come up and if things aren't right security has to hold them until they integrate everything."

"I'm not a bio alt." Jess stated, flatly.

"No, I know." Dev said. "But it was the same sort of thing. You weren't really.. um... here."

"Oh." Jess sighed. "Thought I was past them from this last clusterfuck." She rubbed her temples. "I had them after for weeks. Couldn't sleep worth a damn. Anyway, if you see me like that.. just stay the hell away from me. Let me suffer."

Dev was silent for a long moment. Her hands were resting on the controls, and her breathing was even, but her eyes were slightly unfocused and after a long, silent pause, she turned her head and looked at her partner. "I don't think I can do that."

She said in an apologetic tone. "Seeing you suffering causes me a lot of discomfort."

Jess blinked. "Does it?" She watched the bio alt release one hand off the controls and extend it, and then felt the warmth of Dev's touch against her cheek. She was unable to look away from those eyes and there was something so compelling and so intense in them, it made her a little short of breath.

"It does." Dev said. "So I'll try not to get my neck in the way of your hands, but don't ask me to not try and help you. Please."

The feeling of shortness of breath intensified. Jess felt a sense of almost lightheaded confusion as her cheek was gently stroked and she had the sudden suspicion that if she had been standing her knees would have buckled under her and she had to wonder seriously what the hell was going on.

Why was she feeling like this? Her stomach felt strange, and she reached up to cover Dev's hand with her own as the memory of the nightmare rippled into shreds and released from her mind. It felt like getting a wash of seawater over her, and her body relaxed. "You're a funny old thing, Devvie." She finally said. "Just don't be afraid to pick my ass up and toss me if I turn crazy on ya, okay?"

Dev smiled faintly. "Okay." She agreed. "But you know, Jess, I really hope you get to see some happy pictures in your head sometime."

The sincerity of the tone got down into Jess's awareness and lightened her heart in a curious way. She got up and came closer, leaning forward and very gently kissing Dev on the lips. "Thank you, my friend." She said. "I appreciate that."

It was a pity that the seas were so rough, and they had someplace they had to go. Dev regretfully broke off their intense eye lock and caught sight of a huge wave heading their way. "Yike!" She grabbed the steering controls as Jess grabbed the chair and gunned the engines to full power just as the wall of water bowled over them.

"Shit!" Jess yelled, wrapping her arm around Dev and around the seat as the boat pitched over and for a very long moment, threatened to flip.

"Oh my gosh." Dev's eyes were big as she saw the sea crashing down on them.

The boat creaked and groaned, and alarms started going off, as they were shoved sideways and tipped up onto one side, and Jess would have crashed against the wall if she hadn't had both arms and both long legs wrapped around Dev.

Jess's eyes popped open wide as the tip turned into a roll and she waited for the boat to turn turtle, her mind already spinning with what nexts, marking the door position and sucking in deep breaths as she anticipated the cold, stunning rush of the water entering.

But Dev had a death grip on the throttles and she shoved them forward, twisting the steering controls as she plowed the bow through the wave and they emerged on the other side with a thunder of water cascading over the top of the boat. They rocked back and forth and then she got them moving forward again, as they both let out a long exhale at the same time.

"Some bitch!" Then Jess started laughing. "Nice move!!"

Dev had no idea on earth what was funny, but she chuckled as well, and all of the strange tension in her body relaxed and she wanted to lay down all of a sudden. "Ah, thanks. I think."

"You think?" Jess shifted her grip and wrapped her arms around Dev from behind, giving her a squeeze. "I don't think there's anything you can't drive."

Ah. Dev savored the contact, liking very much how it made her body feel. "Thank you." Really, she wanted to lay down with Jess. Not to practice sex, but just to be near her. The whole driving the boat thing, and how far they had to go were abruptly annoying and she really wished they could just stop, and park in some cave or something.

That surprised her, and yet it didn't. "That was amazing."

It occurred to her that there was a certain lack of dedication to the mission that was rising and she wondered a lot about that. She knew she had a job to do.

Jess knew they had a job to do, certainly.

"That was suicidal." Her partner disagreed. "We could have rolled over and you don't swim that good."

"That's true." The bio alt agreed placidly. "But you'd take care of me."

And that, Jess acknowledged, was true. "I would." She draped her arm over her partner. "I never want anything bad to happen to you if I can help it." She added. "I .. um..." She paused for a long moment. "That would make me nuts."

Dev digested that. "What's a nut?" She asked, after a pause.

Jess pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know something? I don't have a fucking clue what a nut is." She admitted. "But I

know what that means is, I'd be very upset.”

It occurred to Dev that it wasn't really regular to have a natural born feel that way about a bio alt. It made her feel strange, though in a good way. “You would?”

“Yeah.”

Maybe Jess really didn't think of her as just a bio after all. She hoped that was true. With a smile, she went back to the controls, finding a course through the waves as the weather came down harder, the rain going sideways in front of the console window. “Wow.”

Her partner regarded the storm, and smiled. “Ah crap.” Jess leaned against her. “Show me how to run this thing.” She said. “One of us should get some rest.” Her shoulders shifted and she exhaled. “Least the damn weather will keep me distracted.”

“All right” Dev said. “These are the engine controls.”

Jess rested her chin on Dev's shoulder. “Engines.” She agreed. “Hey you know something, Dev?”

It was all Dev could do to keep the boat going forward, her hands clenching lightly on the throttles as she felt Jess's cheek press against hers. “What?”

“Thanks for waking me up out of my nightmare.” Her partner said, in a quiet voice. “And for caring what happens to me.”

The soft echo of plaintive wistfulness in that voice went right through her. Dev felt at once happy and at the same time sad. “I think you're my favorite person ever.” She said. “Even more than Doctor Dan.” She added, feeling the motion as Jess smiled. “Thanks for making me feel real.”

“You are.”

Dev tasted salt on her lips as she licked them. “Am I?”

“Oh yes. There's no going back for you now”

**

[Continued in Part 14](#)