

Partners

Part 14

It turned out that driving the boat wasn't that difficult at all. Jess sat in the control chair, glad of the restraints as they crashed through the waves in the darkness of pre dawn. Behind her, tucked in the hammock and wrapped in her new sharkskin jacket Dev was sleeping peacefully undisturbed by the motion.

Jess envied her. Her own eyes felt red and sore, and her body felt achy and tired, nightmares or no nightmares wanting to join Dev in the hammock in a huddle of warm comfort. But instead, she dutifully scanned the darkness, and worked to keep them on course as they followed a track through open seas now with no land in sight.

They were in no man's waters. Vast stretches of mostly dead ocean where the bottom was so far down nothing they had left could plumb it. Far too deep for fishing, home to once again unknown life on this side of the mid atlantic ridge left alone to repopulate after almost being fished to extinction.

Funny, how that was. Just before the change happened, they had come to a crisis point. The oceans had been raped to the extent that if the orbiting labs hadn't been functional, a huge human die off had been looming.

Chaos! Politics! Jess faintly shook her head, remembering the texts she'd scanned in school They had been heading for a melt down right up until the planet itself had taken control, wiping out ninety percent of it's problems in one long, horrific descent into death and starvation.

She remembered films of the time, watching as cities drowned and the flood waters rose and rose and rose, eventually washing clean to rock everything it touched.

Only the tough and the lucky had survived. Jess remembered, vaguely, her father saying that the harrowing had helped the species in some ways, but narrowed their biological choices to almost disaster in other ways. They had to be careful, now who bred with who, since they'd seen what happened when the genes got too close.

Humans adapted at an almost frightening rate. Far more and far faster than the other species left on the planet, that being the one true advantage they'd had. Already the families who farmed the seas for a few generations, down by the shoreline had developed webbing between their fingers and toes, and oily skins to protect them against the seawater they spent so much time in.

Jess herself had some of it. She regarded her hand, and stretched the fingers out, then curled them into a light fist. She'd grown up with the sea wind in her face, and her body in the water for as long as she could remember and now that she was here, in this seat, her hands on the controls there was some ancient familiarity about it that echoed softly inside her.

She took a sip of tea and shifted a little. Soon they would be crossing over into enemy territory and she sorted through her memory of radio codes, planning out the ones she'd need to use once they caught her on scan and contacted them.

Always a danger. Always the chance that some bored controller would decide to hunt them through the comp, and realize something wasn't quite right about this incoming fisher with only two crew onboard.

If they got past that, to the fishery itself, they were home free.

A soft sound behind her made her turn her head, to see Dev stretching her body out and peering over the edge of the hammock at her. "Hey there."

"Hello." Dev rolled out of the hammock and stood up, keeping one hand on the edge of it to steady herself. "That was very nice."

"The hammock?" Jess asked.

"Yes. It felt like our sleep pods in the creche." Dev explained, coming over and peering out the window. She looked down at the nav console and raked the fingers of one hand through her hair. "It's darker."

"We're almost to the edge of their waters." Jess said. "Why don't you grab a cup of something downstairs, then let me get out of this chair for a while."

Dev studied her for a moment. "Okay." She put her jacket hood up and bumped the outer hatch open, disappearing into the howling wind and shutting the door behind her.

The blast of cold air made Jess sit up straight, driving out the sleepiness that had started to overtake her. She could see ice lining the outside of the boat in the dim phosphorescence from the rail lights and briefly she felt homesick for the citadel and the warm blast of her own shower.

Ah well. She flexed her hands and leaned forward, watching the spray come up over the deck. Suck it up, Jesslyn. You're

the one who told everyone how tough you were. Don't blow your rep now.

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Dev looked around the gathering area, rubbing her hands together in the chill air. She was waiting for some water to heat up to make tea, having found a big carafe that would hold more than enough for both her and Jess. She'd gone inside and used the sanitary unit, and retrieved her kit and used that as well, and now she felt as reasonably awake, though her body was craving food and she was still chilled.

While she waited, she decided to explore a little, and almost hesitantly she started opening cabinets and peering at what was inside. Mostly supplies, all clamped down. Plates and things to prepare food with, none of which held any programming charge for her.

There was plenty of tea though, and she knew what to do with that since one of the prized events in the creche was being asked to tea by one of the proctors, or by an administrator. She had been so honored twice by Doctor Dan, and though the leaf shreds here on the boat were seaweed and not real tea, the process was the same.

One cabinet had odd belts and closed containers, and she studied one for a while, then realized that it must be for the people who worked the fishing things when they were outside for a long time. Experimentally, she put one around her and studied the result in the piece of metal hammered to the wall nearby.

It was far too big for her, but she could see how useful it could be, having a cup to drink from that was sealed, and a container that could fit maybe a fishroll, or something like it. That way they could keep working outside and in fact it wasn't that different from the kit she had for the carrier.

With a grunt, she took it off and put it back away, closing the cabinet after it. Then she went over to the warming unit and removed the water, pouring it carefully over the pile of shredded seaweed in the big carafe. The steam came up at once, and she blinked as it bathed her face with faintly spicy heat.

She actually really liked the seaweed tea. It was less pungent than the real tea she'd had, and didn't have the sometimes bitter aftertaste. She glanced at the countertop while the tea steeped, cocking her head a little as she spotted a big, brown pot with a spoon sticking out of it.

Experimentally, she lifted the cover, and her nose twitched as she caught a sweet scent. She put the tip of her finger in the substance inside, and brought it back to her lips, cautiously tasting the gummy stuff on the tip of her tongue. "Oh." She went back for a second try and sucked the end of her thumb that came back covered in it.

It tasted like the mead. She wondered if this could be honey. It reminded her of the mead. The pot seemed to have a place there, and she remembered Jess saying that the honey came from the other side. So that fit with notion her partner had that these fisher people would go wherever they needed to sell their catch.

She nodded, then she picked up the spoon and scooped up some of the substance, bringing it over and letting it drizzle into the still steeping tea. After it all went inside, she stirred it, then she put the top on the carafe and the spoon back where it belonged, picking up the tea and heading back to the control center with it.

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Jess paused in mid sip, turning around to look at Dev who was taking over the control station. "What's in this?"

Dev smiled, as she tucked the comm bud from her scanner into her ear. "They have a big jar downstairs. I think it's honey." She said. "I thought you might like some in the tea. It tastes nice, doesn't it?"

"Big jar?" Jess savored the sweetness. "Those bastards."

"Well, if they could get it, why shouldn't they?" Dev asked. "You got that bottle, right?" She put her own cup in the holder and adjusted the throttles, examining the board and pausing, then moving a switch into a new position.

Jess came over and leaned her back against the console, hooking one arm around a bracing bar and crossing her ankles. "Yeah I guess me taking that as a prize of war and then being pissed off at these guys for buying it legit is pretty hypocritical, huh?"

Dev gave her a sideways glance, then went back to her controls. "It looks like we're crossing into long range scan. I can see beams."

Jess turned and looked at the readout. "Yep." She sat down on the stool. "If they contact us, let me answer."

Dev nodded, tuning in the scanner a little more tightly and watching the screen. She could see the sine waves of the enemy scanners and the pattern they were running, a comprehensive sweep that would surely, eventually, go over them. She studied the scan output and typed in a request.

Jess stood up and went over to the grub she'd scrounged earlier, sorting amongst it and putting together a meal of sorts for

them. She braced against the wall as the boat lunged and rocked, and managed to make it back over to where the big chair was with everything clutched in her arms.

Waves were coming up. She peered out the window, checking the chrono. "Should get a little lighter in a bit." Jess commented as she handed over a packet of boiled fish. "Sounds like the weather's going to crap again though."

Dev pointed at the scanner. "That's the same kind of line we were avoiding the other day isn't it?"

Jess looked and exhaled. "Shit."

"I don't think it will affect the systems on this boat like it does the carrier." Dev said, placidly. She unwrapped her portion of fish and took a bite of it, surprised at the firm texture, and tasty flavor. Outside, as if in counterpoint, a blast of lightning showed in the distance, outlining the peaking waves in silver precision.

Jess got up and circled around her, putting her hands on the back of the control chair and looking past Dev, then moving over to the navigation station and studying the map "Storm could help us."

"Keep them from seeing us you mean?" Dev noted the waves getting larger, and she brought the throttles down a little, easing into one of the larger ones.

"Uh huh. Fast learner." Jess glanced over her shoulder and gave her partner a rakish grin. "I do like that about you, Devvie."

Dev finished her fish and neatly folded the bit of dried seaweed it had been wrapped in and put it back in the package. She could, she supposed, eat the covering but she'd found them to be dry and somewhat bitter, and not really appealing.

There was another package though. She opened that one, then took a step back, leaving it on the console. "Jess?"

"Huh?"

"What is this?"

Jess craned her neck to look. "Crab."

Dev stared at the creature, a hard shelled animal the size of her hand. "Are we supposed to eat this?"

Her partner snickered. "Yes. You wanna bet me you'll like it?"

Dev eyed her with what could only be described as excessively polite skepticism. "Would you like it? I'm going to finish my seaweed." She edged away from the crab and went back to her tea, sipping it and trying to ignore the mischievous grin she was getting from across the room.

"Nah, nah nah, none of that." Jess left the map and came over, removing the big, heavy knife from its sheath and reversing it. With a casual motion, she brought the hilt down on the crab and cracked it, then picked it up and wrenched its legs off, putting them down and smacking them as well.

Bits of shell went everywhere, nearly nailing Dev who ducked at the last minute as one piece sailed past her ear.

"Now." Jess ignored the chaos she was causing. She pulled apart the shell and removed a chunk of white substance from it and handed it over to Dev. "Try it."

Dev regarded it for a moment, then she reached out and took the offering. It felt in her hand not that different from the fish, and she tentatively bit into it, extremely surprised at the rich taste. "Oh." She said, in a surprised tone. "That is good."

Jess took a piece for herself and popped it into her mouth. "Not too different from the shrimp at Quebec. Not as spicy though." She said. "These cost more creds than I have in the bank usually."

"Really."

"Really." Jess took a leg and went back to the weather map. "Damn these guys live good."

Dev investigated the shattered creature remains, pairing bits of the white flesh with her tea as she returned her concentration to the waves. "Jess?"

"Huh?"

"What's a bet?"

"Ahhh. I'll teach you all about that, my friend." Jess chuckled. "But first, let's find a way to drive through this mess and keep away from the bad guys. I don't think we'll stand up to a really descent scan."

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Dev finally sat back and took a breath, her entire body stiff and aching from the tension caused by having to navigate the boat through the storm. The rough weather had kept them hidden, but the boat had almost rolled again several times, and Jess had gone below the deck to make sure nothing was broken.

For now, the rain had stopped and the winds had died down, and she was beginning to see structures on comp coming up that she understood were the enemy's. They were just wiremaps for now, but she set the scanner up to passive and turned up the volume on the old style radio, right now just issuing a soft, hissing static.

It seemed a moment of calm for them. The waves had settled, and the water had changed from a dark and angry black to a lighter color, her scanner confirming the depth decreasing as they continued on.

She heard the sound of boots on the stairs outside and glanced behind her as the hatch opened and Jess appeared, well wrapped and gloved. Her partner swept the hood off her head and shook herself, rubbing her hands together as she crossed the deck.

"Looks good." Jess said. "I can hear those fish swimming around in there too. How far are we from. ah." She came to stand next to Dev, peering at the tracking map. "Nice. Good job." She touched her finger on the screen, pointing out a block on the wiremap. "There it is."

Dev stood by her chair and stretched her body out, pausing as she felt Jess's hands on her. They brought a warmth, and as she felt her partner's fingers kneading her back, a happy grin appeared on her face. "That really feels nice."

"I know." Jess smiled with her, moving her hands up the bio alt's spine as she rested her hands on the console, feeling the knots under her fingers. "Remind me to teach you this when we get back so you can return the favor."

"Absolutely." Dev agreed. "That seat is not really comfortable for a long time. Not like the carrier." She straightened and turned as Jess finished, looking up at her with a grateful expression. "Thank you."

Jess let her wrists rest on her partner's shoulders and met those eyes, in a breath losing track of what they were doing and letting herself get a little lost in that gentle regard.

Dev waited for a moment, then she cocked her head slightly. "Jess?"

"Yes?" Jess kept looking into her eyes, her face shifting to a mild introspection.

"Do we have to do something?"

"I'm sure we do."

Dev let her hand rest on Jess's hip and in the next breath they were moving together, and kissing. Jess's hand cupped her cheek and she wished that her partner didn't have her heavy jacket on as an intense craving erupted inside her.

It seemed crazy. They were in the middle of a mission.

Jess backed off a little, just enough to look at her. "Know something?" She said. "You're the first person who's made me want to forget about my job. Why is that, Devvie?"

Dev definitely wanted to go back to that whole kissing thing. "I don't know." She exhaled, after a pause. "But when you start doing that I don't really care about what's going on either."

"That bother you?"

"Does it bother you?"

Jess tilted her head and they kissed again, in a silence that lengthened quite a bit. Then she took a breath and let her head rest against Dev's. "Feels too good to bother me." She admitted. "That's never happened before."

"Well." Dev sighed. "Pretty much everything's never happened to me before so it's difficult to say."

Jess smiled. Then she looked past Dev to the comm console, which started crackling. "I think I hear my blaster calling my trigger finger." She growled.

Dev gave her a brief hug. "Did you want to talk to them?" She indicated the radio. "I'm going to take a walk downstairs."

"No I didn't." Jess returned the hug, startled by the jolt of positive emotion it gave her. "But I will." Reluctantly she released Dev, and eased into the chair. "I'm going to tell them we're pulling in with a full load, and bargain a little."

"Won't they know you're not the fisher people?" Dev asked, resting a hand on the chair arm. "You said they went to this place before."

"It's automated." Jess explained. "We swing the boat in and they hook up to the back of it and the fish go out that way. Nothing face to face." A faint smile appeared. "Too dangerous for both sides. They don't want to be able to identify the fishermen, and the reverse is true too. Everyone knows trade crosses the lines."

"I see."

"Market's like that too. I've been there." Jess said. "It's all barter for chits, no record of anything. No one wants to know, they just want your money."

"Maybe they'll have that honey mead." Dev said, with a slight grin. "That happened up on station too. Sometimes a shuttle would.. um.. 'get lost' or come in dock for repair from the other side. Doctor Dan has some things in his office that came that way. You weren't supposed to talk about it."

"We aren't either." Her partner told her. "It's against the rules. Everyone knows it. No one cares." She gave Dev's arm a squeeze. "G'wan and stretch your legs. Let me figure out what story I'm gonna tell them."

Dev tugged her hood up and trotted off, feeling oddly buoyant as she went out the hatch and rambled down the steps. Though it was cold outside, the spray had diminished and they were traveling relatively smoothly over the calming seas. Dev went over to the rail and looked out, blinking a little but sucking in a deep lungful of the salt misty air.

She felt a little strange. She felt like she wanted to jump up and down and laugh, which would be very inappropriate. It would also be very inappropriate for her to go back into the control center and pull Jess out of her chair and into the hammock.

She suspected, however, that Jess wouldn't mind it at all.

This was something she didn't have any programming for. Sex she understood, at least, she understood a lot more now than when she'd had classes about it. The class hadn't mentioned anything at all about this wild, warm, happy feeling that made her want to run around and laugh.

What did it mean? Was it correct?

Did she care?

Dev smiled into the wind, reveling in the rush as it pushed her hair back and moistened her skin. Then she turned and rambled towards the inner hatch, bouncing a little as she laughed, if only to herself.

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"Vessel Northern Star, come about to starboard, slip 6 Decca." The radio voice was rough, and harsh sounding. "Cut engines standby to offload."

"Check." Jess answered. "Put the chits on the deck when you're done. Crew's sleepin."

"Got it." The voice answered, then cut off with a burst of static.

The fishery was enormous. Dev was almost glued to the window as they approached, peering up and up and up at the structure that towered over the waves almost as tall as the citadel.

This wasn't rock however. This was steel, long and very heavy pylons going down into the ocean with spaces between them for boats, and huge hatches with solid doors just above the waves.

Above that was platform after platform, layered one atop the other with weather stained steel stretching up higher than she could see. "Wow."

"Big, huh?" Jess was standing next to her, hands tucked into her hip pockets. "Know what that used to be?"

"I have no idea." Dev trimmed the throttles, aiming for the slot they'd been directed to by the gruff voice on the radio. There weren't any people in sight, just the docks, and grapples, though she could see a shielded, glassed area mid way up that might hide a control center.

"That used to be an oil rig, Devvie." Jess said. "Way way back in the day, when we pumped petroleum from everything we could to power combustion engines."

"Ah." Dev regarded the structure. "That really is old then."

"It is." Her partner agreed. "Swing around and back us in. I'm going to watch the grapples." She moved to put her hood up, then frowned and carefully tucked her dark hair into it. "Hope no one's close enough to get a shot of my mug." She muttered.

There was an actual note of discomfort in her voice. Dev noticed. "Would you like to park this vessel?" She offered. "I could go watch. If they see me, they'll think I belong to the boat."

Jess stopped in mid motion. "Are you reading my mind?" She accused. "Can they teach you to do that?"

Dev merely looked puzzled at the question.

"Never mind." Jess pushed the hood back. "Good idea. These guys are pretty well known here from the response I got on comms. You do look like them. More than I do anyway." She traded places with Dev and watched as the bio alt shrug into her jacket and fasten it. "Be careful."

Dev cocked her head. "I'll try to." She said. "I'm going to go back in that area just behind where this is. It has that metal wall." She went to the hatch and ducked through it, moving quickly down the steps as she heard the engines change their

timbre.

The fishery was in a calm area, and the winds had dropped to almost nothing, so the boat was comfortable to walk around as she went across the deck and squeezed back between the walls so she had a view of the back. Jess swung the bow around and then reversed the drive, moving them slowly back into their assigned dock.

It was still very cold, but not the bitter cold of the white. Dev pushed her hood down after a few minutes, and watched the approaching dock, seeing the worn chains and bumpers meant to cradle them as they moved in. The sense of the age of the structure increased as she got a better look, the metal stained with weather and age and dented in many places.

A thing from before the change. Dev had once seen the genesis of the station she'd been hatched on, a small, old, worn set of chambers locked together that had been the first station section boosted, where the workers had lived who built the rest of it, almost hidden except for the small brass plaque affixed to one rounded wall, that Doctor Dan had shown them.

It had the same sense of age. Dev found it very interesting that they had reused the structure, and made a mental note to look up the petroleum thing when they got back.

As the boat closed into its position, she saw the grapples start to move, and she watched in mild apprehension as they shifted around the boat, one of them with a big hook aiming from the hatch in the back.

"Station keeping." A loud, oddly accented voice sounded out suddenly. "Lock on."

Dev heard a set of thunks and then the grapples were all over the back of the boat, pulling open the hatch as a boom came sweeping down with scan on it and dove into the big tank where the animals were.

She watched it for a minute, before she realized there was another figure on the dockside, watching her.

What should she do? Dev looked at the figure, who was slowly walking down the edge of the platform, with an unhurried motion. He seemed to be searching for something, so she climbed casually up onto the platform where the fishing controls were and perched on the wood topped steel seat, letting her hands rest on the knobs.

He paused as the boat settled into idle, its back end fitting neatly between the bumpers as they came to a halt. He studied her intently then, after a moment, he lifted a hand and waved.

Dev immediately waved back, leaning forward on her elbows after she let her hand drop. She was hoping that would be enough, but a moment later, the man made a motioning forward gesture to her, and seemed to expect that she'd obey it.

Well then. She got up and climbed down to the deck, moving out behind the wall and keeping near the rail to stay out of the way of all the grapples opening the hatches and starting to unload the fish, hooking up a chute to the rear of the ship making a path for them to swim out.

There was a space of water between the side of the ship and the dock, and Dev was glad of it as she came to the rail across from him. "Hello."

He leaned on the bumper. "Old man there?"

"He's sleeping." Dev said the first thing she could think of. "I could go wake him up if you want me to." She looked behind her.

He held a hand up. "No no." He shook his head to emphasize the thought. "Just wanted to know if you got any word about some renegades we heard about, stealing fish."

"Yes." Dev said. "They tried that on us. They came over and dropped people on the deck and tried to take us over, but we fought them off."

"Yeah?" The man's brows lifted. "You got guns onboard?"

"Yes." Dev didn't see any point in denying it.

He shook his head. "Careful with that, lass. You get caught with them, you'll end up bait." He glanced at the chutes. "Nice catch."

"It was hard work." Dev felt an eerie sensation, as though someone were standing behind her watching her back. She kept herself from turning though, reasoning that with the water between them, and the steel wall of the ship she was relatively safe.

He nodded. "Betcha." He straightened up. "Thanks for the news." Then he looked intently at her. "Know who they were?"

Dev shook her head.

He stared at her for a brief moment, then he merely nodded and turned and walked away. "Later." He lifted a hand, but didn't look back.

"Goodbye." Dev waved back even though he wasn't watching. Then she turned and crossed the deck, coming back inside

the metal wall only to be startled nearly out of her wits when she came face to face with Jess, fully armed, with her big blaster in her hands and an extremely serious look on her face “Oh.”

“Nice.” Jess complimented her. “You have any idea who that was?”

“No.” Dev shook her head. “Um.” She gently eased the muzzle of the blaster to one side. “Were you going to shoot him?”

“If he'd taken one step towards you, sure.” Jess informed her. “And then since the back of this thing is hitched to the wall we'd have both died together in one big ass flameball but there you go.” She put the blaster back into its side mount and sighed. “That was Davog Stern. He's one of the other side's big shot hot shot agents.”

Dev sorted through all that. “Like you?” She hazarded a guess.

Her partner smiled briefly. “He's got ten years on me, but yeah, sort of.” She acknowledged. “Maybe if I live that long I might get as nasty a rep as he has. Hard to tell.” She edged over and peeked across the deck. Now that the other side's big bastard had left, the place was deserted again but that itch was surfacing between her shoulderblades and she wanted out of the shackles. “Good thing you were on deck. If he'd caught me he'd have probably gutted me with the laser knife he had in his right hand.”

Dev blinked. “He did?”

Jess regarded her with a bemused expression. “Did they give you programming to fight?”

Had they? “You mean like you do?” Dev watched her partner nod. “Well, you sometimes don't know what you get but I don't think so.” She admitted. “Is that incorrect?” She asked, hesitantly. “I remember in the hallway, when the base was attacked that Brent didn't have anything to fight with.. is that usual?”

“Ah.” Jess exhaled. “No, well, it's fine.” She stepped back into the shadows. “Most of the time techs don't. That's not their gig. That's our job. But they know how.”

“I see.”

“Let's get under cover.” Jess nudged her towards the stairs, tugging her hood up and tightening the catches so it hid her face. “Hope they hurry up.”

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It took a while to get the fish out. Dev was aware of her partner's growing impatience as she paced around behind the console, stopping to watch the vid that showed the back deck being worked. No more people had appeared, but now that the dull gray light had brightened a trifle, she could see shadows behind the glass walls that were probably people watching them as they were watching the work.

“What in the hell's taking them so long?” Jess growled. “How many damned fish were in that thing?”

Dev consulted her scan. “The tank is almost empty of animals.” She reported. “I don't think it can count them though.”

Jess snorted softly. “What did you tell him when he first walked up?” She asked abruptly. “I missed that when I was falling down t.. I mean, getting to the back of the deck.”

“He asked for the captain. I told him he was sleeping.” Dev said. “Then he asked me about the attack.”

“And?”

“And I told him about the pirates.” The bio alt replied. “I said they tried to get our fish, but we fought them off, and they went away.”

Jess had her arms folded over her chest, and she was thinking hard, her eyes slightly narrowed. “You tell them who they were?”

“No, I said I didn't know.” Dev said. “He warned me not to get caught with weapons.”

“That's where I came in.” Her partner said. “I heard the rest. Bastard.” She paced across the deck again, her body language restless and almost jerky. “What's his angle... what's he looking for?”

Dev regarded her mildly, but didn't answer since she really didn't have anything to add.

“Now he's wondering if you knew who they were and didn't want to squeal, or what.” Jess went to the vid and studied it. “What's he doing here, Dev? I didn't expect to see one of them out here, they usually steer clear of the fisheries. Too many uncertain loyalties for it to be safe for them.”

“He didn't seem to be in any discomfort.” Dev offered. “He did seem very interested in who the attackers were, but..” She cocked her head. “It almost seemed like he was expecting me to say something different.”

“He expected you to ID the bad guys as Interforce. Most any fisherman would have.” Jess said, quietly. “So now he's wondering – was it because you didn't know, or because you didn't say that for a reason.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Dev frowned.

“It could be.” Jess leaned on the console. “C'mon, bastards. Get that tank empty before he decides to find out more about us.”

Dev sat down in the control chair and watched the waves go by the front of the boat. They were low and just slightly ruffled on top, and as she watched a seagull drifted by, outlined against the clouds. She watched, enchanted, as it floated, angling its wings as it made a lazy circle in the air. Looking this way, it seemed quiet and peaceful, and she spared a moment to check the scanner before she settled herself in the seat and let her hands rest on the throttles.

It seemed a way to get ready to do something since she was pretty sure that Jess was pretty sure that something was going to happen that would require her to do something.

Or something.

Dev ran that thought over in her head again, and then reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“C'mon.. c'mon.” Jess was repeating behind her, shifting restlessly. She already had all her weapons on her, and her jacket was unfastened over her armored jumpsuit.

“Where do you want to go when they finish?” Dev asked, rubbing her thumb over one of the gauges, where the glass over it had gotten a bit cloudy.

“What?”

Dev half turned in the seat to face her. “When they're done. Which way do you want to go from here?” She was fascinated by the almost ceaseless motion of Jess's body, now channeled into a slightly rocking pacing stride. “Are you in distress? Should we do something?”

Jess went to the vid and stared at it. “I feel like a sitting duck.”

Duck. Dev's brow furrowed. She'd heard people say that word but it had something to do with crouching down, which she supposed could be related to sitting. Was a sitting duck different than a standing one? “All right.”

“I think they know something, Dev.” Jess said. “I think they're planning on coming at us.” She flexed her hands.

Dev got up and walked to where she was standing, looking up at the vid. It showed the back of the boat, where the grapples and arms were still busy, a heavy flow of water rushing down the chute and into the fishery's lower level. There didn't seem to be anything wrong, and yet, she could feel Jess twitching next to her.

It made her breathe a little faster. She wondered if she would be turning to the controls next, shoving the engines forward and trying to wrench them free of the fishery.

The radio crackled, making them both jump. “Northern Star, attention.”

Jess went over and sat down, picking up the commset and slipping it onto her head. “Star.” She said, in a brief, clipped voice.

Dev continued to watch the vid, seeing the water flow start to reduce.

Static sounded for a moment. Jess felt the tension in her ratchet up a few notches and she glanced quickly behind her to ensure her partner's position. “Dev, you might want to come over here and hold onto something.”

The bio alt obediently left the display and came over, settling next to Jess and wrapping her hands around Jess's arm.

“Okay”

It made Jess smile, despite everything, and after a moment her body relaxed a little. She clicked the comms a few times. “This is Star, who called?” She cocked her ears, and watched the vid, her body waiting for the sight of armored figures pouring down the dock.

Another crackle, then the voice came back. “Stand by for weighting. Check 98 percent live. Good stock.”

Jess stared at the speaker. “Thanks.” She said, belatedly. “200 fathoms.”

“Ice pack?”

“Not far.” Jess kept to the clipped tone.

“Weighting 7.5K, 2.5 chits per. Stand by for delivery.”

Wow. Jess did the math in her head and her eyes popped wide open. No wonder they had full jars of honey onboard. And that was for one load. “Holy shit.” Her eyes tracked to the deck, seeing a grapple coming over with a large can dangling from it. “That's our payoff, Dev.”

“Payoff?”

"That's what they get for delivering the fish. Trade spots. With any luck they'll let us loose and I won't have to start shooting."

Dev hopped into the seat her partner vacated, and got ready to start the engines up, not really understanding what was going on. Behind her, Jess went to the hatch and drew her blaster, inching the door open and watching the dock intently.

The grapple descended, and then they heard the loud, hollow sound as the can hit the deck. Then the grapple arm released and lifted clear, and the next moment the locks and shackles surged into motion, making Jess lurch against the door and start forward before she paused and relaxed. "Damn."

"Is there something wrong?" Dev asked.

"Plan worked." Jess admitted. "I wasn't really expecting that." She put her gun back in its holster and dogged the hatch shut, feeling the boat float free as the last of the grapples let loose of them.

"Northern Star, egress to starboard, keep to your lane." The voice warned. "Stay clear of station."

Jess got back to the console and grabbed the comms. "Acknowledged, out." She answered. "Dev, take us out and to the right. Don't go anywhere outside those markers. They've got the waters mined."

"What does that mean?" Dev got the engines started, and gently nudged the throttles forward. "What's a mine?"

"Big boom." Jess turned and watched the vid, her trigger finger still itchy. It didn't quite feel right, the normalness of the transaction. It was hard for her to believe that the fishery, greedy as it was for take wouldnt question a thirty crew boat where only one crewmember was visible, and a unfamiliar voice on the comms.

Not after seeing Davog. Her guts clenched a little, thinking of him. Remembering the first few missions of her career, when she'd run full into him and nearly got her rookie head blown right off her body. She'd gotten lucky and gotten out, but she'd never forgotten his canny, icy precision and how his almost black eyes had bored through hers.

Davog there and they just let them go? A thought occurred to her, and she turned back to Dev. "Trade a minute. Run a scan on that barrel they dumped on the deck. See what's in there." She took over the throttles as Dev stepped to one side, feeling the vibration of the engines through the palms of her hands.

Dev turned and adjusted the scanner, opening up its field and walking to the back of the control room, watching the analyzer finish its sweep. She hoped it ended up finding what it was supposed to, because Jess's agitation was starting to get her nervous and she wished her partner would relax a little.

The scanner focused in on the barrel and she adjusted it, running first a bio sweep, which was negative. Then she went on for a threat portfolio, watching intently as it went through the various possibilities that included destructive things.

Also negative. "Clean so far." She called over her shoulder. "What am I supposed to see in there?"

"Gold."

"Ah." Dev nodded. "Atomic element 79, isn't it?"

Jess sighed, as she took the boat out and into the carefully lined lane. "I feel like such a dipshit around you sometimes."

Dev straightened. "What?"

"Never mind."

The bio alt came over and showed her the display. "The barrel is, in fact, filled with that element." She said. "So that is a good thing?"

"That's a freaking amazing thing." Jess said. "It makes me not trust it. Davog should have stopped us. We didn't look right." She increased speed a little and resisted the urge to look behind her, the spot between her shoulderblades itching fiercely. "We didn't look or act right and they should have held us."

"But they didn't." Dev commented.

"No."

"Do you think they will?" Dev set the scan down and watched the waves come at them. They were heading away from the fishery and back into open water, and the motion made itself evident as they moved further away.

"Damned if I know." Jess admitted. "I'd be very surprised if we weren't followed. Even though we turned over legit catch, and they paid us in legit chits, I know we were out of spec." She slid out of the way. "Here you take it."

Dev took the controls. "Maybe they didn't notice." She suggested.

Jess went back to the hatch and opened it, keeping her hood up and tucked around her head in case long range scan was focusing on them. She watched the rapidly retreating docks, spotting another boat heading in behind them, but saw no sign of the being chased.

Was Dev right? She scanned the huge structure, looking for a flash of motion or a reflection where there should not be any. But the stained and battered metal remained just that, as they came around the side of the facility and went past the processing stations.

On this side, prepared product was loading onto trundles, the short haul delivery boats that would make the trip across the water to the isolated communities on the islands all around them.

As she watched one of the trawlers started out from the bay, two men on the deck watching them idly. Was it really a trawler? Jess watched it closely, her fingers closing on the blaster at her side. But the other boat curved away to the south, while their route was north, and in a minute they had left them far behind.

So they were out. She had what she wanted, and they could head to the Highland Island market and pick up the tempting delicacies that would gain them entrance to the secure space they needed to get into.

It was all working great. Jess gazed unhappily at the empty sea. Wasn't it?

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Dev watched the approaching sea station with a sense of bemusement. It was a little like the fish place, but this was two of them, smaller, between a set of rocky escarpments so they formed a sort of gate. The boat would have to go between them, and she could see that there was something strung there blocking the way.

She was dressed in some of the fisher people's clothes that Jess had found belowdecks, a high necked thick fabric shirt and a pair of somewhat funny pants that had straps that went over her shoulders and held them up. It was all quite comfortable, and she had her sharkskin jacket to wear over it when they got to the market.

Dev slowed the engines as another boat ahead of her did the same, coming close enough now for her to see men on the little towers, holding guns.

That was confusing. She turned her head as Jess entered the control space, her partner's body also encased in borrowed clothing. "They seem in some discomfort ahead." She pointed at the gates.

"Nah." Jess came up to stand next to her. "That's normal. They don't like people to make trouble in the market." She rested her hands on the console. "I've been here about a dozen times. None of them as myself."

"I see."

Jess studied the boat ahead of them, which was longer but narrower than theirs, and had a haphazard pile of fishing equipment on the back of it. "Crabber." She indicated the boxes on the back, which were stacked up high all over. "Those guys make credit like crazy."

"That crab was good." Dev admitted. "Do you think they'll have some more of them here?"

Jess laughed. "That's the least of what they'll have here." She draped her arm over Dev's shoulder. "Market's sort of a no man's land in a way. The other side knows we come here, we know they come here, everyone pretends they don't know anyone but everyone's trying to get goodies to take home."

"It's something you have in common." Dev ventured.

Jess looked thoughtful, then she shrugged. "It's what all humans have in common I guess. We all like to get stuff. Get luxuries.. know that we can take a few chits and get some comfort."

"I like that too." The bio alt adjusted the throttles again, backing them down as the boat ahead of them went to idle speed. "So I guess you're right, if even bio alts do it."

"Even?" Jess bumped her. "You're a great barterer. I heard you in Quebec."

Dev smiled.

"Now. Keep it nice and steady as we're going through." Jess instructed as the boat ahead of them passed through the gates and they were coming up on them themselves. "This boat's known here."

Dev nodded, watching the men on the towers. They were examining them closely, but as Jess had said, they apparently knew the ship because the gate drifted open and the man on the right hand tower waved at them. She waved back, just as the radio crackled to life.

"Northern Star, over."

"Answer it." Jess said quietly.

"This is Northern Star." Dev keyed comms. "Go ahead."

"Welcome. Third dock, inside jetty, first space, the usual. Compliments to Sig."

"Oh ho. They really really do know them here." Jess murmured. "Bouncy little bastard. This could be trickier than I

thought.”

“Acknowledged.” Dev said. “The captain sends his regards.” She added, pausing slightly then going on. “He says he hopes you have something worth buying this time.”

Jess turned her head and stared, round eyed, at her partner.

The radio erupted in laughter. “Tell him I hope he's actually got chits this time not polished fish scales.” The voice called back. “Over.”

“I will, thank you.” Dev unkeyed the comm. “I hope that was not really incorrect.”

“How in the hell did you know to say that?” Jess said, after a long moment's silence. “Where did that all come from?”

How did she know? Dev piloted the boat carefully through the gate and regarded the space past it. To her surprise, it was a very big but enclosed stretch of water, with jagged pieces of rock sticking up on the edges in a strange kind of way. Ahead of them was a mound of land that was covered in structures with docks sticking out from all sides of it. “I thought about what he might have said to that, and that's what it was.” She finally answered. “Was it incorrect?”

“No.” Her partner said. “I think it's pretty much exactly what he would have said. But how did you know that? You only just met the guy.”

“I don't know.” Dev admitted. “Can we talk about this after I finish piloting? I don't want to hit anything.”

Jess chuckled wryly. “That's the nicest way anyone's ever told me to shut the hell up.” She gave Dev a light scratch on the back with her fingertips. “Sure. Third dock's that way, portside. One's up at the top, that's the ritzy harbor. Then three's on the east side.”

Obediently, Dev steered toward the right, as the other boat pattered off to the left. She could see the many docks clustering around the edge of the island and it seemed rather busy with traffic. Very different. Very interesting.

Jess was watching everything with a look of intense alertness. Her eyes were sweeping all the other ships and searched diligently for outlines she might recognize, or people she knew. Highland Market was a fun but dangerous place, and having seen Davog at the fishery, she suspected she would find more of his ilk here.

It happened. Sometimes, between the escalations and insertions, she'd even shared a cup of grog with one or the other of them here, since it was recognized as a truce area. No nasty business allowed, or you ended up in the Highland lock down and what she'd heard of that...

Wasn't something she wanted to experience. No one wanted to be outed, which they would be, and have their organization embarrassed, which they would be, and end up being punked and demoted which they definitely would be as she'd seen it happen to others including Jason.

So all of them kept up the facade and pretended not to be who they were, and ignored old grudges while they were there on the island. Jess, however, suspected that regardless of that, and of the unofficial rules, if she was spotted and recognized the rules would go out the window.

Not after blowing up half a damned mountain.

They motored around the edge of the island and Jess pointed at the entrance to the harbor they'd been assigned to. This one was about half full, and most of the boats were empty and bobbing quietly at rest. They passed between them and found the slip they were to park in, up near the front and handy to the long ramp leading up.

Dev managed to park without much trouble, and the side grapples clamped onto the dockside rings with a sound of brassy solidity. The boat stopped moving, only bobbing lightly on the surface as she shut down the engines and the vibration of the deck stilled to nothing.

“Okay.” Jess put her hands on her hips. “We're peace bonded here.”

Dev's blond eyebrow inched up.

“No weapons.”

“I see.”

“We're going to go out there and browse the market. You're gonna be the moneybags.”

Dev's other eyebrow crept up to join it's mate.

“You're the one who looks like Sigurd.” The agent explained. “So you'll carry the chit record. I'm just along to protect you.” Jess went on. “I'm not going to pretend to be someone else this time. I'm just gonna be an Interforce agent Sigurd hooked into protecting his patch.”

“All right.” Dev actually managed to follow that. “What about.. I'm here by myself because I .. um..” She frowned.

“Remember that bet thing you mentioned? I looked it up in comp. What if I bet the rest of the fisher people that I couldn't take this boat here by myself?”

Jess grinned wholeheartedly. “Oh I like that.”

“So he agreed but he sent you along to make sure I didn't get into trouble.” Dev concluded “Does that work?”

Jess leaned forward and gave her a lingering kiss on the lips. “You're the bomb.”

“I am?” Dev felt confused. “So that was incorrect?”

“No.”

“I see. So in this case, bombs are good?”

“Yes.” Jess wrapped her arms around her pilot and hugged her. “I don't know what Bricker was thinking when he asked for you but I'm damn glad he did.”

Dev smiled in relief, returning the hug. “I'm glad too.”

They shut down the control center and dogged the hatch, and Jess led the way down the steps to the side of the ship that was close to the walkway.

“Here.” Jess handed Dev an embossed card. “That's the value of that can. They'll lift that up and bank it, see?” She pointed at the shoreside grapple latching on to the can and picking it up. It was placed in a weatherworn casing right next to the dock marked with the same number as the ship had. “You can't carry all that around with you.”

The container bong'd softly, and a number registered on the side of it. Jess grunted. “They also take a percent off for the service, but that's okay.”

Dev merely nodded.

“So now you can use the card to get stuff. When they deliver it to the ship, they put their cards in that slot, and register chits to it. Then they pick up the chits before they leave.” Jess continued her explanation. “It's totally local to this island. Not worth anything anywhere else but it keeps people from being hit over the head in the market and getting their chits stolen.”

“I see.”

“Its anonymous in that, the card is only matched to that dock number.” Jess concluded. “So let's go shop.”

They crossed over onto the dock and walked up the ramp. It was late afternoon and the walkways were mostly empty, only two or three people strolling in the opposite direction.

It was cold, but not the icy chill of the white, Dev noticed. Her jacket kept her reasonably warm, and she stuck her hands in her pockets as they reached a set of chiseled steps and started walking up them. There was some moss on the rocks, but otherwise it was clean, and as they got to the top she almost stopped at the view below them.

She had thought Quebec was chaotic? It had nothing on this place. The whole inside of the hill was full of stone shelters, lines and lines of them in concentric circles around a big tower in the center. Between the shelters were aisles full of people, and she could hear noise and the sound of people talking brushing against her in waves that matched the confusion of smells and colors. “Wow.”

Jess chuckled and led the way down the steps. “C'mon.”

As they walked, the cold wind was cut off and it became a lot more comfortable. Dev pushed her hood back and drew in a breath full of strange scents and her ears caught the sound she now recognized as music somewhere in the mix. She followed Jess down the carved steps into one of the aisles, and as the stone walls rose up next to her she put her hand out and touched one. “Oh.” She looked at it. “It's warm.”

“Yeah.” Jess paused to scan the aisle, and then moved forward again. “This is what's left of one of the smaller volcanos that went off back in the day. That outside ring was the crater, and this island's what's left of the cone that got drowned when the seas all came up.”

Dev wasn't sure she liked the idea of being inside a volcano, but she did enjoy the warmth and she was able to open up her jacket as they entered the area where all the stone shelters were.

Like in Quebec, there were people inside the shelters with all kinds of different things. It seemed more organized though, and the people around them were dressed both more richly and far more strangely to her eyes. Some had seashells decorating them, she noted, and others had colored marking on their skin that was a little like what Jess had.

“Hey there kid! What'cha looking for? Want some of this?” A male voice sounded just ahead of them. Dev realized belatedly he was addressing her, and she peered into his little shelter. It had some of the strange clothing, strips of one color intertwined with a second, looking more like undergarments than anything else.

"No, she doesn't." Jess answered, steering her past. "She likes to wear things more than once."

Dev wasn't sure what that meant, but she saw the man glare at Jess until he saw the insignia she'd pinned to the collar of the fisherman's overall she was wearing and then he turned away and turned their back on them.

He was afraid. She saw it in his face before he turned. "What are those?" She whispered to Jess as they moved past. "I like the colors."

"Women wear them and dance in them to let people know they want sex." Jess responded straightforwardly. "I'd rather we keep that private between us, if you don't mind."

Dev felt her face warm as the blood rose to her cheeks. "I see."

"Besides, that's not something the science boys would like. Now..." Jess led her down a cross alley and into the next ring. "This is more like it." She slowed down as they came even to a bigger shelter that was full of steel barrels and rows and rows of drink dispensers. "Ice wine."

Dev had absolutely no idea what that was, but she went with it and found herself face to face with a ginger haired woman in a deep purple one piece outfit that ended at her knees and left most of her arms exposed. Dev felt chilly just watching her. "Hello." She said, as the woman focused on her.

"Top of the day to ya." The woman amiably responded. "Looking for a bottle or two?"

Dev waited to see if Jess was going to intervene, but when she remained silent, she figured just being straightforward would be the best. "I don't know. What is it?"

"Ahh." The woman didn't even look at Jess. She picked up a small glass and uncapped a bottle, pouring a bit into the glass and offering it to Dev. "Taste for yourself."

Dev took the glass and sipped it gingerly. It tasted like... well, nothing she'd ever tasted was like it. There was a clean sweetness to it that was very appealing, and it seemed to evaporate on the back of her tongue. "Oh. Wow."

The woman grinned.

"How do you make this?" Dev asked, curious. "It tastes excellent."

There were two other men in the shelter, and they were watching, but kept their distance, and looked for other people walking by to pitch their product to. Everyone ignored Jess.

"Family secret." The woman winked at her. "Let's just say we've got some family upside and we provide the ice. Like it?"

Dev nodded. She felt Jess lay her hand on her back, and her fingers tightened twice. "I think I would like two bottles. How much are they?"

The woman sat down on a box and they settled in to bargain.

Jess was content to listen. She was aware of all the eyeballs on them, but she'd put her insignia on for a reason and there was a bit of gratification on seeing the wariness. The crowd was light, she noted, far lighter than the last time she'd been on the island and the merchants around looked more than a little discouraged.

Was it the weather?

"You're a hard bargainer, shippy." The woman was sighing.

"We work very hard for our chits." Dev said. "So we don't like to give them up."

"And well you're known for it. All right." Two bottles were marked off, and Dev handed over the card. She waited for it to be recorded, and then she took it back. "Delivery's first bell."

"Thanks." Jess spoke for the first time. "We'll see you then."

The woman nodded briefly at her. "Agent."

Jess smiled at her, and they moved on. This ring seemed to be mostly edible and drinkable items, and they moved further in stopping here and there to taste. "Haven't seen most of this stuff in a long time." Jess admitted, after they tried some small crackers with fish eggs on them. "See that? It's made from octopus." She sampled a bit of the meat and watched Dev try some. "See if you can get a couple packages of that, and some of the snails."

Dev wasn't sure about the snails, but the octopus tasted nice, slightly briny with a chewy texture she liked. They had stacks of cryopacked product, and she met the eye of the man selling them, giving him a little smile that drew him over at once.

So far things seemed to be going well. She glanced up at Jess, who was searching for more things to nibble on, but who was also sweeping the area every few steps looking for trouble. Her insignia flashed briefly in the light and Dev wished she'd been allowed to put hers on as well.

Octopus secured, they continued further on towards the center of the ring, where it seemed it was busier, and the narrow

path they were on got crowded with other shoppers. These shelters were full of more exotic things, and Dev found herself pressing closer to Jess as they had to slow way down.

Jess put her hand on her shoulder, keeping herself between Dev and most of the crowd. So far she hadn't seen anyone she knew in a bad way, though she had spotted a few people who she had a slight acquaintance of and many more who recognized her collar bug and kept their distance.

That was fine. When she'd decided to wear it she knew she was going to be advertising what she was and though they were peace bonded everyone knew that didn't make it safe. Didn't make them safe, either her, or her counterpoints on the other side.

"Oh, Jess." Dev stopped, and frowned. Her stomach turned at what she was looking at, and she felt a sense of muted horror fill her.

What? Jess peered around her and spotted a stall with furry animal skins on it. White fur, and big. Had to be bear. "Bear skins." She agreed, distracted by the distressed look on her pilot's face. "We should get a few. Great for some bigwig's office."

Dev went over and peered at the skin, which had the bear's head attached with it's glassy eyes and lurid, poking tongue. She turned back to Jess and put a hand on her arm. "Do we have to?" She asked. "I don't like this."

Jess studied her, intrigued by the fact that her partner had rolled over dead humans without a flinch but freaked out about a dead bear. "You're wearing a shark skin." She commented.

"I know. But.. " Dev looked behind her.

"But your jacket doesn't have eyes." Jess gave her a tolerant grin. "No problem. Let's move on." She guided Dev further, starting towards the stall she saw had golden jars prominently displayed across from what looked like a shop stocked with more stuff from upside.

Halfway there, they heard a loud commotion ahead, and Jess felt her instincts prickle. She immediately got ahead of Dev and looked quickly ahead, where an open space between the ring made a crossroads. There were shouts and laughter, and she flexed her hands, wishing not for the first time that she'd chanced the peace bond.

They reached the edge of the crossroads and stopped, as the crowd closed in and made it impossible to go further. Jess straightened to her full height and got a look at what the fuss was about, seeing two men in expensive looking clothing kicking a third man, who was dressed in a threadbare jumper.

The man sprawled on the ground, covering his head with both arms.

An older man, also in worn clothes darted into the opening, going over to the man on the floor and kneeling down next to him. "Leave him alone you bastards." He yelled at the two attackers. "He didn't do nothing to you."

"Why are they harming that man?" Dev asked in a very low tone.

"People are assholes." Jess responded promptly. "They don't really need a reason."

"Yeah? Shut your mouth!" One of the men kicked the older man in the side. "Your kind should go back where you came from we don't need you here."

"Are you going to assist him?"

Jess sighed. "I shouldn't."

Dev remained silent for a moment, then she exhaled. "I wish you would." She said mournfully. "Doctor Dan always would do that for us."

"That's not a bio alt." Jess objected. "He's just a scrub."

"Would they treat one of us any different?"

Hm. Jess studied the two fancy pants, realizing why one of them seemed familiar to her.

He kicked the man again, and the in a quiet flicker of motion Jess moved, bumping her way through the crowd and getting across the open space before he could try a third time. "Stop." She said, in a quiet yet firm tone. "No place for this."

The man whirled and lifted a hand, then stopped, his eyes fastening on her neck, then darting away. "You've got no influence here." He said, as the second man came over, watching Jess warily.

"Neither do you." Jess had her hands clasped behind her back and she merely looked at him. "But making noise in the middle of the market is never a good idea." She stared him in the eye. "No one wants a bad rep, right?"

Both men glowered at her, then the shorter of the two slapped the other on the arm. "Let's go. It stinks around here."

Jess waited for them to leave, then she went over and extended a hand down to the older man. "I'd get out of here if I were

you.”

The man took her hand and let her pull him up. Then he squeezed her fingers. “Thanks, agent.” He said. “My son didn't mean to cause trouble. He's just a little clumsy.” He tapped the boy on the head. “Get up, Jeso.”

The huddled figure got to his feet, blinking painfully. He kept his shoulders hunched, blood running from a cut on his head. The older man ducked his head in respect to Jess, then led the boy off down the crossroad away from the center as the crowd started milling around again, the entertainment seemingly over.

Dev ducked between them and arrived at her side. “That was excellent.”

“That was idiotic, since everyone in the place now knows I'm here especially the two agents I just pissed off.” Jess sighed. “C'mon. Let's get some tea and honey and get out of here before someone decides to make trouble. She pulled Dev back into the side aisle in the direction they came from, aware now of all the eyes sticking on her, and the whispers following her through the crowd.

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They were halfway around the ring before Jess sensed the presence and turned, tucking Dev behind her in a single fluid motion. Facing here were two men, in plain woven clothes made of sea plants and the only sign on them was the metal bracelet on their right wrists. “What?”

“Man wants to see you.” The one nearer her said. “Says with his compliments, would you please come up the hill.”

Jess sorted through the invitation and relaxed a little, realizing it was an invitation and not an order. “Sure.” She said. “Lead on.” She motioned Dev to go ahead of her.

“Just you.” The man said, not moving.

“No.” Jess answered, and then stopped talking.

“The man just wants to see you.” He replied, still in a quiet and calm voice.

“I don't leave my partner behind.” Jess replied. “So you get us both, or neither, your choice.”

The man reacted with some surprise, looking intently at Dev, and then tilting his head to one side. “Wasn't indentified. That's fine. Let's go.” He turned and started down the aisle, turning at the next crossroads and heading up the hill with his companion and the two of them at his heels.

Jess remained silent as they walked, one hand resting lightly on her pilot's shoulder. They quickly rose up out of the market and then were passing through the circles of stone houses that spread out right and left.

Dev wasn't sure what was going on but she was sure it wasn't the time to ask about it. She glanced to either side as they walked, noting small signs of people living in the stone huts, strings of clothing drifting in the breeze, and once a small child running down the stone path, and darting into one of the buildings.

It was quieter up here, and she could hear the sound of the surf crashing gently up against the harbors down below.

There was a gate up at the top, and it swung open as they approached. Dev glanced up at Jess's face, but her expression was calm, and so she walked obediently through it and only flinched a little as the gate closed behind them. They walked to a door, and paused.

Jess took advantage of the pause and fished something out of her pocket, reaching over and fastening it to Dev's high collar. “There.”

Dev reached up and touched it, unsurprised to feel her tech's insignia there. It made her feel a lot better to have it and she suppressed a grin as the door opened and they moved through it. They walked down a long stone hallway, passing several roughly cut doorways leading to rooms with people in them doing various things.

It smelled like rock, and salt, but it had a faint scent behind it that was oddly spicy and different. They entered through a doorway and crossed a big, busy room until they came to a table that had a half dozen people around it, and one man sitting at the head.

“Drake.” The man stood up and came around the table, extending his hand. “Good to see you.”

Jess took his hand and exchanged grips. “Hello, Charles. Same back.” She half turned. “This is my partner, Dev.”

“Tech.” The man ducked his head towards her in respect. “This was very unexpected.” He returned his attention to Jess. “I sure didn't expect to see you in these parts after what we heard.” He said. “Josan told me what happened down the hill. I'm glad you kept it quiet.”

“They complain?” Jess asked, as they moved a few steps away from the group.

“No.” Charles shook his head. He was a tall man, with broad shoulders and tightly curled gray hair and a roughly

weathered face. "And that in itself should be a warning."

Jess nodded. "I won't be here long." She said. "I don't want any trouble."

"Nor do I." Charles agreed. "So I would advise you to keep to your plan and leave as soon as possible. There are odd rumblings and I don't want anything to disrupt the market, Jess. Times are hard and as you know, we don't take sides."

"I know."

Charles turned and regarded Dev. "So this is your new partner." He said. "Somehow we heard it was one of Sigurd's pups."

"Intentionally since we borrowed his boat." Jess said, straightforwardly. "We're shopping."

"Using fisherman chits?" His eyebrows lifted. "Dangerous."

Jess shrugged lightly.

"No, that wouldn't matter to you would it." The man smiled briefly. "Don't tell me anything. But I'm reasonably glad to see the rumors of your demise were somewhat exaggerated." He lifted a hand. "As long as you're spreading someone else's credit around, don't forget to stop at the spa. We've got some new treatments I think you'd like."

"Maybe we'll go there now." Jess said. "Seems like a good time for it."

"Excellent idea." Charles said. "Miklos, will you guide our friends here to the private door? Enjoy." He shook Jess's hand, nodded at Dev, and went back to the table where he sat down and picked up a pad he'd been looking at.

Miklos, the taller of the two men who had sought her out, gestured in a different direction than the one they'd entered from. "Please to come with me."

"Lead on." Jess put her hand on Dev's back and they followed Miklos through the back door to the room and into a set of quiet hallways that were lined with woven pads and had inset lights spaced evenly on the walls. After a minute or two of even walking, they started downward again and they passed dozens and dozens of closed doors on either side.

A door opened and a man started to emerge, then he spotted them and ducked back inside, shutting the portal as they came even with them. Miklos didn't say anything, and when Dev looked up at Jess, her partner put a finger up to her lips and then let it drop.

It was all very strange. Dev felt that there was danger there, and that Jess was unsettled, but she just kept walking with a calm look on her face.

They reached another door, and Miklos opened it, then stepped back and indicated they should go through. "Enjoy." He said, waiting for them to move past and then closing the door behind them.

Dev blinked. They were in yet another hallway, but this one was round, and there was light coming in from the ceiling. She glanced up to see slanted holes going up through the rock. She looked at Jess, who was frowning.

Was it okay to talk? She watched her partner's face, and after a moment, Jess looked back at her.

"Okay." Jess said. "So, let's go see what they have." She pointed towards an opening that showed a larger room behind it, and they walked through.

It was a big space, with a high, arched ceiling and there were quite a lot of people inside. Dev looked around and stuck close to Jess, following her across the space to a rock desk with three or four women behind it. She paused, and almost jerked when she saw the collars around their necks, not expecting at all to find fellow bio alts here.

"Good day." One of the women greeted them. "What do you wish?"

It wasn't a set she knew well, Dev realized. They were perhaps ten standard years older than she was, slim and tall with uniformly pretty faces. They reminded her just a little of Gigi.

"Private bath." Jess said. "With the works." She pulled out two big chits and set them down.

"This way." The girl picked up two large, folded pieces of fabric and bowed in their direction then walked behind the desk to one of a set of doors behind it. They followed her, and she opened the door to one of the rooms and offered them the fabric. "Enjoy."

"Thanks." Jess ducked inside, and waited for Dev to join her, then straightened up as the door closed behind them leaving them alone.

Dev wasn't sure where to look first. The initial thing she realized was that the air was very warm, and moist. It bathed her face and she blinked into it, smelling a rich, mineral scent as it entered her lungs. "Um."

"Um." Jess went over to one of the four stone beds and put the towel down on it. Across from them was a big misshapen pool with steps cut into it, full of water that had steam rising off the top. "Wasn't going to indulge in this but what the hell."

“What is it?” Dev went over to a second couch and put her own wrap down, jerking back as she touched the top. “Oh. It's hot.”

“Yeah.” Jess sat down on hers, then lay back letting out a small groan as the heat penetrated her body. “Good a place as any to hide for a little while.”

“Are we doing that?” Dev sat down on the stone, pleasantly surprised when the warmth penetrated the pants she was wearing.

“Uh huh. When Charles gives you advice, it's a good idea to take it.” Jess said. “I'm not really sure what he was trying to tell me but it's clear he doesn't want trouble.”

“I see.” Dev got up and went to the pool, kneeling down and putting her hand in it. “Oh.. this is really warm.”

“I sure hope so given what I just paid them for it.” Her partner remarked dryly. “At least we can enjoy ourselves before we go out side and probably have to fight our way to the boat and escape.

Dev came over and sat down on the edge of her stone bed. “Is that what's going to happen?”

“Probably.” Jess let her hand rest on Dev's thigh. “Someone's hunting me. That's why Charles sent us down here. He doesn't want trouble and he knows if whoever's hunting me finds me there'll be lots of that.”

“I see.”

“So he's got local info, but not current intel from our side, since he didn't know about you.” Jess said. “So we'll get our splurge and then get back to the boat. With what you ordered so far, we can get into the science center.” She studied Dev's concerned expression. “Don't worry, Dev. We'll get out of this.”

“I didn't expect to find those of my kind here.” Dev said. “I thought Doctor Dan said the people over here didn't have them, but I know that set.”

Jess looked at her. “This place is different.” She said. “A lot of cred comes through here, most of it out of spec for both sides. You got enough cred, you can have anything you want.” Her hand warmed suddenly as Dev's dropped on top of it. “It's the old story of humanity, Dev. The haves and the have nots. Charles and his family have plenty – they've run this place for generations.”

“I dont think I understand.” Dev said, apologetically.

“Your bio station is on our side.” Jess said. “But Charles offered them enough to get them to give him what he wants.”

“He's not on our side.” Dev clarified.

“He's not really on any side.” Her partner said. “He's glad to suck in all of us ready to spend money on stuff we can't get anywhere but here, legally.”

Dev frowned. “I really don't think I really understand.”

“Don't worry about it.” Jess stretched herself out, savoring the feel of the heated stone leeching into her body. “Just enjoy yourself, Dev. We don't get this kind of treatment often. Give e a little bit to warm these old bones and we'll go in the pool.” She went on. “Then we can get some steam, and a rub and get our hair cut.”

That all sounded very strange. Not unpleasant, but strange. Dev looked around. “It's nice to be warm.” She concluded. “Is that why the walls were hot?”

“The walls were hot because we're in a volcanic cone.” Her partner said, placidly. “Charles' family led a bunch of renegades from the other side and found this place a long way back. They built it up.. word has it that they catered to pirates and outlaws first, then after the market built up, word got out and anyone with chits came here”

“I see.”

“We always thought it was funny, on our side. Perfect capitalism.” She patted the stone bench at her side. “Lay down. Enjoy the heat.”

Dev did, settling on her back next to her partner, feeling the heat from the stone but also from Jess as she felt her body relax. “That does feel good.” She regarded the lamps in the ceiling, which had come on and were bathing them. “Is that sunlight replacement?”

“It is.” Jess said. “One of the few places out here you can get it out here.” Reluctantly, she sat up and started taking her clothes off “Might as well take advantage of it.”

“What do the fisher people do?” Dev undid the suspenders on her outfit and slipped out of the pants, then sat down to unlace her boots. “Scan didn't pick up anything on the boat that could do that.”

“They don't.” Jess left her borrowed clothing folded neatly on the couch and went to the pool, walking slowly in and then

rolling over with a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Damn that feels good." She relaxed in the hot water, grimacing a little when it touched the puncture wound she'd paid scant attention to since their arrival. "Ow."

Dev joined her a minute later, holding her hand up over the pool's surface as steam gathered against her skin. Then she moved closer and examined the wound. "It seems to be all right."

Jess regarded her from half closed eyes. "Like the pool?"

Dev sat down next to her, thinking about that. The heat did feel good. She'd been so cold for so long on this mission, just sitting here in this hot water was letting her body fully relax for the first time in days. The rough rock felt a little abrasive against her bare skin, but the bouyancy of the water kept it from being uncomfortable. "So this is from the volcano?"

"The heat is." Jess let her head rest against the rock. "The water comes from the ocean and they pipe it through the rock. They couldn't afford to mechanically do it, well.. " She lifted a hand. "Maybe Charles could, now. I don't know."

"So, people come here, and they give them credits so they can sit in the water?"

"Yup."

Dev pondered that. 'So all you get for that is feeling nice?'

"Yup."

"That seems odd."

Jess chuckled. "Yeah I guess it does. But I guess... too.. it's a little piece of how it used to be. Kind of like the stuff we do, the dinner thing in the citadel. Things people remember their grandparents remembering about the old days.

Like the place Doctor Dan had taken her, Dev realized. The place where they had eaten, up in the top of the station. The scientists could easily have had that served in their offices, or in the natural born eating place but they chose to put a table and chairs up where you could see the stars and have it given to you that way. "I get it."

"You do?"

Dev nodded. She stretched her legs out and crossed them, leaning her elbows on the little shelf they were sitting against. "It's nice."

"It is nice." Jess picked up a piece of sea sponge resting on the shelf and half turned. "Here, see if you like this." She dunked the sponge and started rubbing it along her pilot's arm, not missing the slight jerk as Dev reacted. "That's supposed to make your skin feel good. I never really was much for it myself since I always came here by myself and you can't reach everywhere."

"That feels very interesting." Dev said. "It reminds me of the flash rad cleaning we did in the mornings in the creche. It took layers of skin off."

Jess stopped and eyed her. "Is that good or bad?"

Dev smiled and held her hand out. "Let me see if you like it." She moved around and got behind Jess, applying the sponge to her partners' back. She could see the old injury there, still red and little swollen and she carefully avoided the spot. There were other scars there too, one that went right across her spine from right to left, old and tense. "You were hurt a lot."

Jess exhaled. "Yes." She leaned against the wall, savoring the sensation of the sponge scouring her skin. "I take too many chances, they tell me."

"Why?" Dev was actually enjoying herself, exploring the storied skin in front of her.

"Why did they tell me that or why do I do it?" Jess put her head down on her folded arms. "I don't know why I do it. I just get into things and what happens to me doesn't matter, I guess. Jason once told me that's why I was as successful as I've been because I always go all in. I don't hold back."

"But you get hurt." Dev started down the backs of her legs. "I hope that doesn't happen too much. I don't like to see you in discomfort."

Jess remained silent for a bit, the water of the pool lapping gently at her back. "You really care about what happens to me?" She asked suddenly, turning her head and looking back over her shoulder.

"Of course." Dev answered placidly, as she scrubbed her way back up Jess's back and over her the tops of her arms. "I've never cared about anyone as much as I do about you."

The matter of fact honesty of it surprised Jess. She had no doubt at all that what Dev was saying was true, or as true as she knew it to be but it touched her unexpectedly in a deep way. Did she feel the same way? She could scarcely remember what caring about someone meant, after that last visit home.

How did she feel about Dev?

“Does that cause you discomfort?” Dev asked. “I hope not.”

“No.” Jess finally answered, with a faint smile. “It makes me feel good because I think I care about you a lot too.” She rolled over and put her hands on Dev's knees, studying the compact profile outlined in the dim golden light of rad. “I don't think I've ever felt like this about anyone else before.”

Dev regarded her with a pleased, if puzzled expression. “Is that good or bad?” She reflected Jess's earlier question back at her.

“I don't know.” Jess responded in a soft voice. “I don't think I'm suppose to care about anyone. At least, that's what my mother told me.” It still stung, that last meeting. That back turned, that door closed. There hadn't been any animosity in it, no dislike, just a kindly worded dismissal of her as something no longer part of the core of what was left of their family.

“We can't care about you, Jess. You're lost to us. You belong to them now.”

Surprising, how much that had hurt. She remembered the tears, and the terrible constriction in her throat, as she'd turned and walked away, heading back to the transport center. Back to the citadel.

Her brothers had always kept in touch though. Paid to have an in with Interforce, after all.

“Well.” Dev put her hands on Jess's shoulders. “They never told me that. So I do care about you. I want to care about you. It makes me feel really good.”

Jess felt a smile forming on her face. So she did want to care about Dev. Maybe it was wrong and maybe it was dangerous, like they'd told her, but she hadn't gotten to where she was by listening to anyone, now had she? “C'mere.” She reached out and took hold of Dev's waist and pulled her forward.

Pressing body to body she wrapped her arms around Dev and hugged her wholeheartedly, letting herself indulge in a rare happiness. “It's good, Dev. It's very good.”

Dev was aware of a pungent moment of delight. She returned the hug with enthusiasm, and then as Jess released her, she backed off so she could look at her partner's face.

It was so nice, to see that smile.

She felt like she could look at it for a long time and not get tired of seeing it. She smiled back and saw a distinct twinkle appear in Jess's pale eyes. As she exhaled, she could sense a shift inside her, just a bit of settling that made her less of a stranger in a strange land and giving her a sense of belonging.

Strange and odd and endearing. The beginnings of a partnership in truth instead of just in a name.

Jess stood and held her hand out. “Let's go finish our pampering. Put that towel around your neck so we don't freak anyone out, and I'll show you what a steam bath is.”

Dev had almost forgotten about her collar. She followed Jess out of the pool and took the smaller piece of fabric, wrapping it around her throat before she followed Jess through a small hallway at the back of the chamber into another one that smelled more strongly of the smokey scent and was full of vapor.

It was dark. She felt sweat break out on her skin in a sensation both interesting and slightly uncomfortable. She felt short of breath. “Wow.”

“Hot, huh?”

“Very.”

“Want it to get hotter?”

Dev thought about that. “Not really. It's a bit hard to breathe now.”

Jess chuckled, and took her hand, both their skins slippery with sweat. She led her further, past a heat source that almost made it unbearable, then on to another hallway where it cooled down.

Dev exhaled in relief. “That was interesting.” She commented in a neutral tone.

“Didn't like it, huh?”

“I liked the pool better.”

They moved into another chamber, this one with set of pipes in the ceiling. Jess waved her hand and a moment later they were drenched in cold water, making Dev inhale so sharply she nearly bit her tongue. “Yipes!” She got her hands up to protect her head just as the water turned off, and the sound of it was replaced by Jess's chuckling.

“Better?” The agent asked. “You said you were hot.”

“Brr.” Dev shook herself hard, spattering droplets from her body. “I didn't expect that!”

Jess started laughing. "It's supposed to be like that. You get hot, then you cool off." She regarded her pilot, who was standing there next to her, dripping with cold seawater, drenched hair half in her eyes. She reached out and pushed the damp blond locks back and watched an abashed grin appear.

So adorable.

Jess leaned forward and kissed her, tasting the saltwater on her lips. And she's all mine. She pulled back and lightly rubbed noses with Dev, then straightened up. "Okay, let's go dry off. Feel like getting your hair cut?"

Dev ran her hand through hers as she followed Jess through yet another hallway. "I don't know. In the creche we just had to let the sets who were being trained for that work on us."

"Oh. That's sounds like fun."

"Not really. There's not much programming for that they just have to figure it out."

"Oh."

"I don't really look that good with most of it shorn."

Jess put her arm around Dev and laughed. "Me either. But I don't have teaching to blame for it, we all get scalped for basic."

"Oh. Well."

"I'll show you pictures when we get home."

**

[Continued in Part 15](#)