

Partners

Part 15

“Is this length all right?”

Jess glanced in the three part mirror in the tight alcove she was sitting in. “Sure.” She said, after a moment. Her hair tended to be unruly at the best of times. “Try and get it shorter here.” She tugged the lengths near her ears, then leaned back and let the bio alt work, as she turned her attention back to her partner.

Dev was sitting quietly on an stool nearby, having finished with her turn under the scissors. Dressed in her fisherman's overalls and sweater, her burnished blond hair neatly trimmed and layered, she was just so appealing to Jess's eyes it was hard to look away from her.

The overalls fit snugly around her slim form, and the sweater with it's high collar framed her face neatly. The new cut seemed to lengthen her jaw a little and the light in the parlor they were in brought out the highlights in her hair and the intensity of the color of her eyes.

So damn cute. Jess watched her lift her head and meet her eyes, a grin appearing and compounding the adorable factor. She grinned back, idly wondering how Dev felt being here, being catered to by these other bio alts, who had fluttered around her so attentively.

Was it strange? Certainly Dev seemed relaxed, one boot hiked up on a brace of the stool, her elbow resting on her knee. She was watching the bio alt work on Jess, but every few seconds, her eyes would drift back to Jess's face, and that little twinkle would show, and damn it, she felt like melting into a puddle.

Weirdest ass feeling of her life. “What in the hell is wrong with me?”

“Ma'am?” The little bio alt snipping her hair paused and drew back. “Is it wrong?” She asked anxiously.

“Nah, fine. I'm just talking to myself.” Jess waved her on, shifting a little in the chair. “G'wan.”

The girl went back to her work. “Almost finished.” She said, softly. “Soon soon.”

Soon soon. Jess was getting restless, her instincts now starting to drive her on from their hiding place and she had to force herself not to fidget when the old style, hammered scissors tickled her temple. Her mind started to shuffle through routes to the docks, wondering if they had any space at all to pick up anything else before the got off the island.

“Okay?” The bio alt asked, stepping back. “Good?”

Jess turned in the chair and studied her head, outlined in white lights. “What do you think, Dev?”

“I think you look beautiful.” Dev responded straightforwardly. “Is that what you were asking?”

Jess felt herself blush, the heat on her cheeks surprising her. She found she couldn't either meet her own eyes in the mirror, nor Dev's eyes in her reflection and so she just cleared her throat. “Something like that.” She muttered. “Yeah that's fine.” She added, glancing at the bio alt. “It's good.”

The girl looked relieved.

Dev regarded her reflection in the mirror thoughtfully, as she waited for Jess to get up from the low chair behind her. She rather liked the way the bio alt had trimmed her hair, neatly layering it back from her face and making it a bit shorter. It fell around the high collar of her sweater, and she found herself smiling a little as she watched the blush fade from Jess's cheeks.

She really was beautiful. Even the stark lines of her agent's blacks didn't take away from that.

“Nice work.” Jess complimented the hair cutter. “Takes some talent to make this mop look like something.”

Dev turned, watching the bio alt next to Jess blush and stammer. She really had done a nice job on her partner, Dev decided, Jess's long, dark hair was cut back off her face, the slight wave in it now framing her angular features and shortened to just past her shoulders. “It's very nice.” She agreed. “I like it.”

Jess stood up and ran her fingers through her hair, then fished a chit from her pocket and handed it to the cutter. “Here. Go get you and your buddies a treat.”

The cutter grinned, her hazel eyes lighting up as she tucked the chit away. “Agent.” She bowed respectfully at Jess. “Tech, it was a great honor.” She ducked her head at Dev. “Have a profitable day.”

“We'll try.” Jess put her hand on Dev's back and guided her towards a ramp leading to a large door. “I think we've wasted enough time to let the goons wander off. Let's try and get back to the boat.”

“Okay.” Dev willingly trailed along after her, fastening her jacket as the door slid open, bringing a gust of wet, cold air against them. They were let out into a small alleyway, which was lined with beautifully carved stone walls, stained with old green patches. “Did you want to say goodbye to your friend?”

Jess glanced at her. “Who? Oh Charles you mean.” She lifted a hand and let it drop. “He's not a friend. All he was doing was making sure I was out of the way for a while so the market didn't get messed up.”

“I see.”

Jess led the way to a small metal gate and paused, cocking her head and listening. Then she turned and lifted her hand to Dev's collar only to stop in mid motion.

“I took it off.” Dev pulled her hand out of her pocket and displayed her insignia, then put it back in its hiding spot.

Jess patted her on the cheek, then she gently sorted Dev's newly cut hair. “I like this.” She said. “What did you think of that place?”

Dev considered that briefly. “It was interesting.”

“In a good or bad way?” Jess went to the gate again, and cautiously examined the area. “Okay, now stick by me, Devvie. I've got a feeling we're not out of trouble yet.” She eased the metal open and stepped down the cut in stone stairwell to a lower alleyway that was equally empty and equally silent with Dev practically latched onto her coat.

“I liked parts of it.” Dev said, in a quiet voice. “Not the cold part so much.”

Jess chuckled. “Sorry.” She led the way down the aisle, her ears focused forward since the slot alleys were blind and she wasn't sure she wasn't going to be ambushed out here.

“The hot couch was nice, and the pool.”

Jess in general agreed with that. Though she'd been known to plunge into the cold sea water under the citadel and never complained about it. She reached up and touched the wall she was walking near, feeling the heat in it penetrate her skin.

Still empty. She felt more than a little conspicuous. A soft rumble of thunder sounded over head, and she tugged her jacket neck a touch closer, very aware of the lack of weapons on her as the maze of stone passageways stretched out in front of them.

The directions were easy. You headed down from the hill. She knew if she continued down the ripples of lava lined with coral she would eventually get back to the market but there was no easy way to run if a team came at them and it was easy to get lost in the maze.

She heard a buzz echo softly up to her, and slowed, coming to a crossroads and pausing before she went through it. She stood just shy of the opening, and went to tight focus, holding her hands out to stop Dev from passing her.

Dev had no intention of passing her, however. She tucked herself behind Jess's tall profile and waited, watching in fascination as her partner's ears twitched and moved, the edges cupping a little as her eyes closed in concentration.

What was she listening to? Dev could hear the soft sound of voices down the way a little, but it was just a formless noise, without any distinguishing characteristics.

“Okay.” Jess lead them forward, through the crossroads and down a slanted pathway, whose steps were cut with the slant. “Careful.” She indicated the path. “Gets slippery in the rain, and it's all downhill from here. You slide, you end up on your ass in the middle of the market.”

“I see.”

“Hope you don't.” Her partner responded. “Not looking to be the life of the party this time around.”

Dev followed her in silence briefly, as they neared the lower levels and the walls started to get wider. “Does that mean you experienced this ass thing?” She ventured, as they went around a slight curve and could see the market below.

Jess cleared her throat. “Let's just say I'm glad I was undercover.” She let her awareness sweep over the row they were exiting into, waiting to see if her senses picked up anything dangerous. Dangerous outside the obvious, obviously. But the row was clothing, not very exciting and the straggle of people browsing didn't make her twitch.

She fastened her new jacket up as the slight fog turned to a fine mist, blinking a little in reflex as the moisture impacted her eyeballs. The garment mostly covered her jumpsuit, and she attracted little attention as they moved through the stalls, surrounded by a sparse crowd of mostly lookers.

There was, she detected, a hint of desperation in the sellers. They watched her and Dev wander by with hungry eyes, and she tried not to linger anywhere suspecting the merchants would mob them if they slowed down. The stalls were covered with stone roofs, but the mist drove in a little sideways, dampening everything inside them.

Dev let her eyes drift from side to side, absorbing everything. Most of the merchants focused their attention on Jess, her taller, more striking profile drawing their eyes, and that left her free to watch them watch Jess, seeing the disappointment when her partner passed them by.

That made sense to her. She knew she would not be happy if Jess was ignoring her.

Dev paused, and reran that in her head. What? As a bio alt, what in the world was she doing going around thinking things like that? Jess had no obligation to pay attention to her. With a frown, she looked at a passing stall, finding herself facing a booth full of colorful jumpsuits that had a soft plush lining to them. She slowed down and studied the nearest, imagining how it would feel to have that warmth next to her skin. "Ah."

Jess had gotten a few steps ahead, but apparently heard her soft grunt and stopped, turning to see what she was looking at, then retracing her path back. "Like those?" She glanced at the merchant, who was watching them with wary hopefulness. The jumpers were cute, not her style, but she could readily picture Dev's adorableness tucked into one.

She reached out and felt the sleeve, which was tough but soft to the touch. "Whats this made of?" She asked the seller.

"Silk from topside." The man responded. "Inside's synth wool. Kelp mix."

Dev felt the garment, and gave the lining a wistful look. "It appears warm." She said. "Do you like this color?" She studied the fabric, which seemed to shimmer from red to purple as the light hit it.

"On you, absolutely." Jess removed a small, square piece of metal from her pocket and handed it to the vendor. "Wrap it up."

The man glanced at it, then at her. "Want to know the price?"

"No." Jess smiled faintly. "I don't."

"Wait." Dev held up her card. "What about this?"

"Put it away." Jess told her in a quiet voice. "I'll explain later."

Obediently, Dev did stick the card back in her pocket, vaguely aware of discomfort she didn't quite know the source of.

The merchant touched his forehead and took the square, turning to put it into a battered old comp next to the back shelf. Then after it made a small booping sound, he handed it back to her. "Agent." He said. "Pleasure."

"All mine." Jess watched him fold the garment up and make a bundle of it, which he then handed to Dev with a slight bow. Then she clapped her partner on the back. "Let's go."

They got to the end of the row and turned right, going down the cross aisle until they reached the last row, the outer ring of the market that would bring them back to the docking area. Jess walked a little more slowly now, letting her senses extend out as they passed the ratty stalls at the shoreline, smaller and ruder, full of scroungers who were just trying to sell anything they found.

Hard life. Jess didn't pause at any of them. But not any harder than the seaweed harvesting that her family members did. She was just distracting Dev from seeing the seal skulls on sale when her warning senses tingled and she reacted instinctively, pulling her partner to one side and going flat against the wall between two stalls, half turning and putting her arms around her.

Dev found her view blocked but didn't mind. Jess's body blocked the misty rain, and it was nice to be pressed against her. "What's wrong?"

"Just hold still." Jess said, in a low mutter "Some guys coming past us I don't want to see." She kept her back turned to the passing crowd, resting her head against Dev's as they regarded each other at close quarters. After a moment's pause, Jess ducked her head a little and they kissed.

It was like the whole damn island faded out for a minute. Jess felt her situational awareness slip, as her body reacted and Dev's hand slid up to gently touch her face. She literally forgot where she was, focusing intently on the tingle in her guts and how intoxicating it felt to hear the soft sound of passion that escaped her partner.

Then the wind picked up, and the surroundings faded back in and she lifted her head a little, rubbing noses with Dev as she gazed half lidded into her eyes. "Look behind me."

Dev shifted a little, and straightened enough to be able to see over Jess's shoulder.

"Anyone standing at those stalls, just browsing?"

Dev blinked a few times. "No." She answered after a pause. "It's raining harder. People are going under shelter."

"No one sitting on a crate, just loitering?"

"No."

“Good.” Jess leaned in and kissed her again, this time at least listening behind her. She heard only the faint scuff of boots and the low voices of the merchants, no hint of a government issued heel among them. “Okay.” She finally paused and exhaled. “Let's move on.”

“Do we have to?” Dev asked, in a straightforward way. “We have a covering over us.”

Jess glanced up and smiled. “Much as I'd love to just stand here and kiss you until dark, we need to get outta here.” She said, regretfully. She casually put her arm over Dev's shoulders and made a natural turn to the left, her eyes flickering quickly over their surroundings but finding them as innocuous as Dev described them to be. With a faint sigh of relief, she started slowly down the path, keeping her arm around her partner.

She'd been damn sure she'd seen a pair of spooks. They'd popped into her peripheral vision a little behind them on the path, but now there was no sign of the bastards either before or behind them. Had she been mistaken?

Might have. Jess exhaled, resisting the urge to reach up and rub her neck to ease the headache that had started to throb in her skull. She was looking forward to getting back on the boat, and back on the water, away from the island, and the other side.

Just her and Dev for a while again.

Jess felt the slight jar through her boots and she paused, pulling Dev to a halt as well. She made a complete turn, then she started forward again, moving faster. “C'mon Devvie. Didn'tl ike that noise.”

“Was it a big boom?” Dev hazarded a guess.

“Something like that.” Jess muttered as they reached the dock road and headed for their berth. The rain started coming down harder, almost seeming like it was chasing them as they moved quickly across the lava rock path.

Halfway across the dock, Jess felt the vibration under her feet again and she saw the chop in the harbor pick up. “Uh oh.” She grabbed Dev's arm and sped up into a lope. “Move move move.”

Dev wasn't sure what was going on, but she heard the urgency in Jess's voice and she picked up her pace and ended up running next to Jess down the dock towards their boat just as the boom of footsteps behind the and a deep, rolling vibration rattled them both.

Jess risked a glance behind them as they reached the boat and she vaulted onboard, snaking one foot out to kick the retaining clasp. The dock behind them was full of running figures, all heading for different boats as a long, low howl started to rise from the market.

“What is that?” Dev asked as she scrambled up the ladder to the control space.

“Warning.” Jess ignored the stairs and jumped upward, grabbing the railing and pulling herself up and over it to trigger the hatch a hair before Dev got up to the top steps. She hauled ass inside and went to the comms unit, as Dev tossed her package onto the shelf near the door and slid into the captain's seat.

“Dock dock.” Jess barked into the comms.

Dev flipped the caps off the engine controls and started them, studying the readouts as she felt the rumble start underfoot. She scanned comp, reading the logs since they'd left. “The things arrived, Jess.”

“Doesn't matter right now.” Jess clicked the comms. “Dock!”

“Standby' The comms answered harshly. “All undock, standby for underway, release release.”

Dev felt the boat start to drift and she confirmed they were loose from the pier, as were lots of other boats around them. She could hear the alert going off louder now, and she sensed a vibration in the air, that tickled her ears uncomfortably.

“Get us outta here, Dev. Get clear of the island north and go as far as you can without losing visual.” Jess got away from the comms and headed for the door. “I'll secure the goodies. Try not to tilt up too much I don't want to slide my ass into the water.”

“Okay.” Dev said, leaning forward a little as she started to take the engines online. “I would hate to be responsible for your ass getting wet.” She added, as her partner left the room and headed down to the deck. “Except then you would probably take your clothes off, and that's always interesting.”

She pointed the boat towards the entrance to the docks, trying hard to steer clear of the other boats doing likewise. It appeared everyone was trying hard to get away from the island but she had the advantage of bigger engines and she scooted the boat up to the front and headed for the gap.

A brief glance at the console showed her views of the back deck, and she spotted Jess working amongst the stacks of boxes that had appeared in the cleared area. She reassured herself that her partner was safe, then she focused on the route, giving the engines more power as she cleared the entrance and was heading out towards the two big gates.

The waves had come up and she felt the boat being shoved back and forth as she fought the steering, trying to keep the bow on course as she felt the surge of the water. The rain was coming down even harder now, and she heard a series of booms behind her that she wondered were thunder.

It sounded too regular though, so she looked up at comp, searching for Jess and stopping in motion as she spotted a deep, black cloud rolling down from the island towards the water.

Towards them. Dev's eyebrows shot up, and she reacted instinctively – shoving the throttles to full forward and triggering the alarm for the deck. The boat dug through the water and picked up speed, coming up to plane just as they approached the gatehouse.

It was open, and the guards were no where in sight as she powered through, hearing the roar of engines behind her and then something else. It was a deep, uneven rumble, reminding her just a bit of the sound of the space shuttle's engines when it had landed her downside.

She didn't think it was a shuttle though. The gates flashed by her and she took the course Jess had told her to, north and as she curved that way, she saw other boats flashing by, and going the other direction.

A moment later the hatch burst open and Jess bounded inside, slamming the metal door behind her. “Son of a bitch!”

Dev evaluated the statement, and decided based on what she knew about the words, that it wasn't addressed to her. “Did you see that cloud?”

“Did I see it?” Jess came into her field of vision, her skin smudged with black. “You got me out from under it just in time. Get to the outer buoy and slow down, then bring her around so we can see the show.”

Dev had no idea what that meant. But she aimed for the buoy, the outer marker of the carefully drawn lanes and once they'd passed it she brought the nose around in a turn, facing back the way they'd come.

And then her jaw dropped in astonishment. The island was covered in a deep black cloud, and as she watched, it was bisected with a loud, sudden blast that shot debris far up into the air. “Oh!”

Jess came to stand next to her. “Look at that sucker go.”

“What is that?” Dev asked, almost breathless. “It's amazing!”

“It's the volcano.” Her partner responded promptly. “Goes off sometimes. They never know when.” She shook her head. “Hope they got everyone under cover.... ah, let's get moving before that ejecta gets here.” Jess pointed at the roiling cloud heading their way.

Dev gunned the engines and moved them into a turn, checking comp as she did so. “Jess? Should be move away from those too?”

Jess leaned over and saw what she was looking at. Three big boats were heading their way, making a beeline for them, and looking like the bad end of a piece of business. “Oh yea.” She said. “Finally figured out who I was, huh boys?”

“Are they bad?” Dev got them back up into plane and moving.

“Oh yeah.”

The cloud caught them, and Dev winced at the thunder of rattling crashes she heard all around her. “Wow.”

“Faster.”

“I don't think it goes any faster, Jess.” Dev said, apologetically.

“Make it.”

“Um.”

“Or find someplace to hide us.”

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“They still there?” Jess stuck her head out of the hatch and felt the wind from their passage buffet her with startling impact. “Damn it.” The three chasers were plowing through the mixed waves behind them, inching up closer from when she'd looked a minute or two before. “Dev, they're catching up to us.”

Dev studied her console. The throttles for the engines were pushed as forward as they went. “The wind is too strong.” She told her partner. “It's making us slow.”

“Yeah but they have the same problem.”

“Not exactly.” The bio alt commented. “This vessel is higher then those are above the water.”

“And?” Jess came to her side.

"It's a higher profile against the wind. More for it to push against."

Jess considered that, then made a face. "I don't see that changing anytime soon."

"No." Dev agreed.

Her partner sighed. "Okay, let me get the guns out." She said. "Be right back."

Dev nodded, then she turned back to the controls, settling herself into the chair and searching the scan intently. There wasn't anything on the horizon for them to hide behind, and her portable comp showed very deep and very cold water beneath them.

The boat was performing as well as it could. It was a fishing boat after all, she reasoned, and not something designed for running away from things. A glance at comp showed the three boats starting to split apart a little, two of them moving out and starting to aim on either side of them.

They would try to get around them, Dev thought, and maybe make them stop. She wished again that they were in the carrier, with its much greater abilities and she suspected probably Jess did as well. But the carrier was far behind them, so she had to find a way to make this thing work better.

Difficult, since she wasn't entirely sure of how it worked at all. The programming only went so far.

She went back to her scanner, setting it to search for obstructions. Then she curled her hands around the rudder controls and hunched forward a little, as though her posture could make the boat go faster. The waves were getting rougher, and she winced as the bow slammed into one, jarring her entire body.

Even her ears hurt. "Wow." Dev hoped Jess had been somewhere safe when that had happened. She glanced in reflex at scan, but the back deck was empty. Frowning, she reset her scanner for internal and bio and relaxed a little once it showed her partner's wiremap in the common space.

Then she spotted a second wiremap, in the hallway heading for her and her heart jumped into her throat as she scrambled for comms. "Jess!" She got the comms open. "Someone is approaching you."

"Tac." Jess uttered back. "Secure."

Dev got up and went to the hatch, hesitating before she locked the wheel on it, shoving the metal bar Jess had left next to it into the mechanism. Then she bolted back to the controls and put her hands on them, giving a cursory glance at the waves as she focused on the scanner instead.

She could see Jess now in outline, the attitude on her body completely changed as she moved across the chamber and approached the inner door, the scanner picking up the weapons on her body and the big blaster she had in her hands. The other wiremap was approaching with equal caution, and...

"Tac." Dev triggered the comms. "Armed."

"Ack." Jess responded immediately. "Secure?"

"Ack." Dev confirmed. She wrenched her attention from scan and looked out at the water, noting a line of darker clouds on the horizon. It was already raining hard, but she reasoned maybe the storm front might afford some kind of distraction and she angled the bow slightly to the right and headed for it.

A quick look told her the other boats were now really gaining, though, and she felt like she was being torn in pieces, one part of her demanding a tight focus on Jess, and another part searching through the boat's controls to see if there was something she could do to speed it up.

It was uncomfortable. Dev watched anxiously as she saw Jess on scan take up a position behind the common room's table, then she saw the hatch opening and the intruder emerge. The scan picked up an energy flare then, and there was more motion than it could resolve.

Dev felt like bolting for the door. Only the programming hammered into her kept her at the controls, and the knowledge that Jess knew far better how to handle the threat below than she had any hope to. She swept the console again, then focused on the small section that showed the condition of the big tanks as their readings were flashing.

Hm.

A shudder caught her attention, and she looked quickly outside to find the enemy boats even with them, and one of them shooting projectiles.

Oh, that was not good. She angled the rudders, sending the boat carreening towards the boat shooting at them, feeling the stresses on her body as it listed over, blaster fire boiling the water just past her bow. She cut back in the other direction as the other boat moved to avoid them, wishing she had more speed to work with.

If only the boat were more agile. She paused, then her eyes tracked up to the console again. Without overthinking it too

much she reached up and uncapped two switches, putting her fingers on them and then depressing them firmly.

At once, the boat nearly ripped itself out of her hands as she heard a rumbling sound that vibrated through the hull and nearly sent her vision blurry. The engines churned and she felt the boat buck under her, as she tried to get it back under control.

On the bright side, the crazed motion made both sets of blasters misfire and the two chase boats closest to her peeled off, arcing around to try and come at them again. Dev didn't dare look at the scanner as she turned the boat in a tight circle, then powered the engines back up and put them into plane heading for the storm.

But this time, the boat surged forward with a good deal more speed, and rode higher on the waves, unburdened by the water in the fishtanks at the aft. The gauges showed them going faster, and after a few minutes, the other boats started to fall behind.

Dev made sure they were going to hold course, then she turned her attention to the scanner.

Both wiremaps were gone. Her heart started pounding hard and she reset the scan, widening it out.

Nothing. She felt panic start to take her, and she got up from the chair, about to shut the engines down when she heard a knock at the hatch.

A knock. At the hatch.

For a moment, she froze. Then she responded to the drive of her programming and grabbed the scanner, tight focusing it and pointing it at the entrance, waiting for it to resolve. "Hurry." She instructed the device.

"Hey. It's cold out here!" A voice penetrated the steel. "Open up!"

Dev put the scanner down and scooted over, pulling the bar out and working the latch. It popped open and Jess ducked inside, dripping wet and breathing hard.

She took a step back and cleared space, as her partner shut the door and leaned back against it, her face a little pale.

"Are you okay?" They both asked at the same time.

Jess smiled briefly, and exhaled. "Drive." She indicated the console.

Dev got back in the chair and put her hands back on the controls. "I let the water out of the animal tank." She said. "It seems to have made us faster."

"Oh." Jess trudged over and sat down on the stool next to her. "Is that what that was?"

"Those other boats are behind us now." Dev confirmed. "They were shooting at us. Trying to stop us I think."

"Yeah, they were." Jess agreed. "Not for the reason you'd think though." She flexed one hand which now in the light showed dark bruises. "So you want the good news or the bad news?"

Dev eyed her doubtfully. "I don't know. The bad thing I guess, if we have to do something about it."

"Ah." Jess pushed her hood down and ruffled her hair. "Bad news is, I just offed one of the other side in a pretty ugly way."

"Oh."

"That's why those boats were chasing us." Jess said. "They were his buddies. Pain in the ass part is, I did it by accident. Boat tipped and I went flying into him and he went flying into the water outflow. Ripped him to pieces."

"Oh."

"Yeah. So that was a cock up. Didn't even get to ask him what he was looking for." Jess sighed. "On the other hand he was about to blow my head off so I guess it worked out."

"You guess?"

Jess gave her a wry smile. "He was good." She admitted. "He was kicking my ass. I was flat on my back for too damn long after that last botched cluster." She rested her elbows on her thighs and rocked her head from side to side to loosen tense muscles there.

Dev glanced at scan, and sure enough the other boats were nothing more than a spot on the horizon, though they were still being chased.. "I see." She said. "So what is the good part?"

Jess extended her hand and opened it. "Deck's full of black diamonds." She said.

Dev took the item and inspected it. A crystal the size of half her hand rested in her palm, glittering and reflecting the light in the control room inside it. She blinked. "Wow. That is interesting." She admitted. "But why is it good?"

"It's good because I'm gonna have them cut something pretty from this one." Jess said. "And because we can use the rest to

buy anything we want from those scientists. We're home free." She got up and stripped out of her drenched jacket, grimacing a little as it shed water everywhere. "So to speak."

Dev looked at the floor, then back at her. "I see."

"So that's the good thing." Jess came up next to her and leaned against the console, studying the view out the window. "Good idea to head for the storm line. Once we're up there, we'll see if we can find an ice field we can dodge around and maybe we'll lose em."

Dev put the pretty rock down and reached over to close her fingers around Jess's hand, feeling the chill in it. "Should you get dry?" She said. "It will be a while to get to the storm."

Jess straightened up and nodded. "Yeah and I need some kack. Want some?" She waited for Dev to nod, then she stood up and patted her on the shoulder. "Good job, Dev. I wouldn't have thought to dump the water."

"Thank you."

Jess went to the back of the control area, where she'd stored their gear. She unsnapped the catches on her jumpsuit and stripped it down to her waist, picking up a piece of cloth from her pack and drying her skin with it. The rain hadn't penetrated the fabric, but the thunderous wash of tank water had, and she felt rubbed raw from the power of it.

Too damn close. She examined her shoulder, but it seemed to be healing and by some odd luck she hadn't taken any more serious damage to anything but her ego when by rights she should have been fish bait herself halfway down to the bottom by now.

She peeled off her jumpsuit and traded it for a dry one, very glad to get out of the half water filled boots she was squishing around in. It felt good to be dry, and the warmth of the control room was slowly seeping into her, their sojourn in the spa already just a half misty memory in her mind.

She went to the portable kack dispenser she'd brought up to the control room and started it brewing, resting her hands on the counter and listening to the drone of the engines. "They gaining on us?"

"No, it doesn't appear so." Dev responded.

"Good." Jess considered their options. They would have to lose the chase boats before she could even think about turning east, maybe in the ice pack. She'd make them think she was on a run home, and then maybe..

"Jess?" Dev called softly. "We're being hailed."

Jess rolled her eyes and walked over. "Assholes think we're going ot answer?" She said. "Give me a break."

"It's not them." Dev handed her the ear cup. "It's Base 10." She said. "It's being relayed through the carrier."

Jess felt a shock jerk through her. She fumbled with the cup and got it set in her ear, then touched the receive node. "Copy. Copy Tac Base 10?"

"Ops." The voice answered. "Recall. Urgent. Ack."

Jess blinked. "Repeat?"

"Ack. Recall urgent. Copy acknowledge." The voice returned, with an edge. "Code 12."

"Acknowledge, in work." Jess responded, then she released the trigger. "Shit." She looked at Dev. "Something bad must happened. They're recalling us." She removed the ear cup and handed it back. "Plot a course back to that iceberg, Dev. Looks like this mission's scrubbed."

That, at least was easy. Dev pulled the coordinates off her comp and plugged them in, not sure whether she should be disappointed or relieved.

Disappointed, she supposed, for not being able to finish the mission, but also relieved that with the enemy already chasing them that they would not get into more trouble trying to get into the enemy lab. There seemed to be a lot of opportunity for discomfort in that, and she didn't want to see Jess getting hurt.

Jess set a cup down for her and took her seat on the stool again. "So."

"What do you think happened?" Dev asked.

"No idea." Her partner said. "Never been recalled like that before. I just know the codes." She cradled her cup between her hands and took a sip from it. "Now I wish we weren't so far. Bain wouldn't have pulled us for something trivial. When we get back to the carrier, you can do an encrypted session and maybe we'll find out what's going on."

The light was fading outside, and the rain was falling harder. Dev propped her scanner up and set it to probe their path, the she took a moment to take a drink from the cup, wishing they'd stopped for a daymeal while they were on the island.

"Okay, I'll remember to do that." She said. "But it's going to take a long time to get there."

Jess sighed. "I know." She put her cup down and got up. "Nothing we can do about that unless we pass those pirates again and steal their carrier." She rooted in the carrysack and pulled out some fish packets, bringing them back to the console and plopping them down. "Damn it."

Dev reviewed the rear scanner, noting the ships were still chasing them. But their speed now was enough to keep them ahead, and as they plowed into the increasing swells, she hoped it would stay that way.

**

The ice pack loomed in the darkness, its incessant crackling and popping sounding over the waves. Jess pulled herself back inside and came back to study the comp, peering at the rearward facing scan intently. "Did we lose them?"

Dev was finishing up some data. Then she turned and studied the scanner, her shoulder coming to rest against Jess's. "We haven't gotten pingbacks on anything in about two hours." She commented. "Since we saw that cone."

"Sometimes I hate weather, sometimes I love it." Jess agreed. "Okay let's run along the ice. At least we've got some cover if something comes at us." She let her eyes slide to Dev's outline. "I like that suit."

Dev glanced down at herself, her body encased in her new lined jumper. It was very warm, and very comfortable, and she was really happy with it herself. "Me too." She said. "Maybe we can go back and get you one sometime?"

Jess sighed. "Not for a good long while Devvie." She sat down on the stool next to the captain's chair and leaned her elbow on the arm of it. "I have no idea if they popped lava on that one. Might have taken out the whole place, since the place where we were? Inside? Those are tubes."

"Tubes." Dev repeated slowly.

"Lava tubes." Her partner responded. "Charles could be flash fried by now if he didn't get out in time. Happens." She shrugged. "They know the risk."

Dev didn't speak for a moment, then she turned and looked at Jess. "Do you mean all those people might be dead?"

"Might be."

Wow. The bio alt felt a chill down her back. All those people, even the girl who'd cut their hair. She watched Jess's face, seeing nothing other than vague interest there. "You knew what was going on."

"Sure." Jess said. "I've been near one of em a couple times. I caught the bumps. They did too, set the alarms off. So some people would have gotten off. Rushed the boats, that's why I wanted to get ours off first."

"Should we have helped the others?" Dev asked, hesitantly.

"No. That's not our gig."

"I see." The bio alt said. "Interesting."

"Anyway." Jess gently blew in her ear. "Enjoy your duds. They've got a backdoor to grab creds from us, and from the other guys for stuff. Long as you don't get contraband no one cares. This isn't." She touched the sleeve. "Some of us don't care. I do. I always use my own cred for them."

"So I could have done that too? I have my card."

"You could have." Jess agreed. "But I.. " She paused, and made a small face. "I didn't mind doing it. I know you get cold. Better to keep you warm so you don't drive us into a berg."

"I see." Dev considered that. "Thank you, Jess. It's very comfortable. I feel a lot better now wearing it."

A relaxed and happy smile appeared on Jess's face. "You're welcome." She responded. "I never had a tech I wanted to buy stuff for before. It's a kick." She admitted. "Besides, I can't wait to see you wear that thing in the citadel. There are a ton of us who never made it out to the market much less on their first month."

"And now they might not get a chance." Dev commented mildly. "Isn't that what you said before?"

"Oh, Charles'll survive. He's an old salt." Jess got up and stretched. "He'll just dig out and start over. I don't think for a minute he didn't get out probably has a tunnel dug down to water and a boat waiting." She turned and studied the hammock. "Mind if I sack out for a while?"

"Absolutely not." Dev said. "If anything unusual happens, I will wake you up."

Jess rolled into the swinging bed and exhaled, allowing her body to relax for the first time in a day. She was disappointed that the mission had been cut short – and yet – based on her near ass kicking she now had to wonder if she really had been ready for it.

Was this just fate's way of covering her ass? Maybe she could figure out another plan and after they got back to the citadel, talk Bain into letting her take another team with her. It wouldn't be as status as if she'd done it herself, but she had a legit

med marker after all.

Wasn't her fault the mission got called, was it? She wondered what the emergency was, and then, she wondered if it wasn't a status call on her part for Bain to recall her specifically for it. Could even be a better chance with less risk for advancement, that Code 12.

Good opportunity maybe, for her. For them, she corrected herself in her mind, glancing over to where Dev was seated, busy checking controls. The pale light from the console outlined her body and Jess wished briefly that they could tuck into a safe spot in the ice and she could take the time to peel her partner out of that sexy number.

Jess sighed, and closed her eyes, folding her hands over her stomach and letting her body accept the rhythm of the waves. She was almost asleep when she sensed motion close by, and then the added warmth of a blanket being tucked around her, then the gentle touch of Dev's fingers closing on hers.

It made her feel happy. She returned the squeeze and opened one eye, to find the bio alt gazing down at her with what could only be a look of affection, something Jess only barely remembered from her childhood.

Then Dev tucked the blanket in a bit more and smiled, moving past her to refill her cup from the dispenser.

Jess smiled back, letting her eyes close and her mind release itself into sleep. Fate. Her last conscious thoughts mused. It had to be fate.

**

Dev was glad to see dawn light appearing in the sky, giving outline to the ice pack to her right, and the choppy ruffled waters beneath them. It had been a long dark night, and she was tired, both from struggling to keep the boat on course and the strain of picking her way through the stormy weather and not crash into anything.

Jess had remained peacefully asleep this time, and Dev was going to give it a little while before she woke her partner up. She was looking forward to it, imagining how good it would feel to curl up in the hammock herself and close her eyes and she took a deep breath and released it as she peered along the ice outside.

It was white in all the grayness, the clouds overhead roiling and moving though the rain had stopped for now. White, with glimpses of beautiful blue in the cracks, the edge of the flow here high above the boat's level.

It was interesting, and it gave her tired eyes something to look at while they rolled along. She'd gotten used to the motion now, and it was starting to feel natural to her – she was standing at the controls and swaying with the waves and had been for some time.

Suddenly, motion caught her eye and she looked to the left, seeing something in the water. Surprised, she blinked and stood a little taller, reaching over to code the scanner and direct it forward. As the boat got closer, she could resolve the movement and realized it was an animal swimming.

The animal turned its head towards her and she let out a tiny gasp of surprise. "Oh!" She hopped a time or two. "I think that's a bear!" Its fur was white, though plastered from the water, and it had dark eyes and a big dark nose. Dev cut the engines and felt the boat slow, not wanting to risk hitting the animal.

The motion change woke Jess. "Whoa." The agent said, groggily. "Don't tell me I slept all the way back. Devvie you didn't let me do that didja?"

"No. no.. " Dev raptly watched as the animal got to the wall of ice, then stopped swimming and stuck a paw out of the water, scraping at the surface. "Oh, Jess. Look. It's a bear, isn't it?"

Her partner obligingly rolled out of the hammock and joined her, leaning on the console. After a minute of study, she grunted. "Yeah it is." She patted Dev on the back. "Congrats! Ya found one."

"What's it doing?" Dev put the engines in idle, watching the animal.

Jess studied the bear. It was clawing at the ice, its head tipped up looking at the ridge high above its head. "I think it's screwed." She said. "Musta fallen off the top there, and can't get back out of the water." She pointed at the high edge of the flow, where there was a visible chunk taken out.

"Oh." Dev felt her elation fade. "What will happen to it?" She looked up at Jess.

The agent shrugged. "Eventually it'll get tired and then drown." She said. "Nowhere for it to go."

"Oh." Dev repeated, softly. "Wow. That's terrible."

"It's just a bear."

The bio alt turned to regard her seriously. "Wasn't it just a seal, that time?"

Jess remained quiet for a long minute, her eyes blinking gently as she watched the bear. Then she turned her head and

looked at her partner. "Why do you always want to go around helping people and things?" She asked. "People and things you don't even know?"

Dev accepted the question at face value. "Because that's how I made." She responded. "I'm supposed to help people if I can. Take care of people. Like people. You're supposed to expect that of me."

Jess nodded slowly. "Techs aren't like that." She said. "Agents aren't. We all sort of hate each other most of the time." She straightened. "But you are different, huh?"

"Yes." Dev seemed sad about that.

"Maybe I am too sometimes." Jess scrubbed her hands through her hair. "Let me throw my jacket on and see what the hell I can do for that damned bear. Keep the boat steady." She went to the door, grabbing her coat on the way as she shook her head. "Please come save me if the damn thing starts to eat my head."

Dev put her hands back on the controls and trimmed the engines, waiting for Jess to appear on the bow. She kept her partner in view, watching her go to the front of the ship and peer over the side as the boat edged towards the animal.

She was glad Jess was going to try and help it, even though it had seemed that the idea put her into some discomfort and the thought of that sent a surge of energy through her that pushed back the exhaustion.

If for no other reason than she had to figure out what to do about the bear if it started eating Jess's head.

**

Jess put her hands on the rail and peered at the bear, who was paddling in circles next to the ice flow. The animal was beginning to tire, and it only eyed her warily as it tried to pull itself up onto the wall.

"Why am I doing this?" She wondered aloud. "Hey bear! C'mere."

The bear continued paddling.

She watched it try to climb up again, and then an idea occurred. The bear would be trying to pull itself up onto a berg, whose edge was much closer to the water. Problem was, there were no bergs around, nothing low enough for the animal to scramble onto.

With a grunt, she went around the side of the boat, down the channels on either side of the control chamber and through the tunnel to the rear deck.

Emerging onto it, she went to the very back of the fishing area, to the rear where the big wheel was that pulled the nets onboard. Behind it was a hatch, and she remembered the hatch being open when the nets were being reeled and the water pouring onto the deck.

"Hm." Jess went to the elevated section where the controls were and climbed up, still a bit foggy from sleep. She sat down on the seat and studied the knobs and switches. She pressed the one for comms and leaned closer. "Hey Dev?"

Silence for a moment, then the comms crackled back at her. "Yes, I'm here."

"Turn the boat around so the back's facing the ice." Jess said. "I'm gonna try something."

She felt the shift under her immediately, and as she explored the knobs, the view around her changed from gray mist and open sea to the white of the ice flow. She could hear the bear splashing and as the boat stopped moving, she found the controls for the back hatch and triggered them.

A large section of the back deck folded down, and the water flowed across the deck towards her. "Dev." She triggered comms. "Back up." But as she did, she could feel the engines shift into reverse as her partner realized what she'd done. A faint smile appeared, as they started to move slowly in reverse, heading forward the paddling animal.

Jess leaned on the console and waited, as the engines cut out and they were drifting towards the ice. After a moment she could see the bear through the gap, and as she watched, she saw the animal's head turn towards her and then its body changed direction and headed towards the half-sunken deck.

Instinct? Jess observed in fascination as the bear reached the boat, and half-climbed, half-sprawled onto the open deck, panting hard. "Hey bear." She waved at it, hoping like hell it wouldn't decide to attack her.

But the animal just lay there breathing hard, staring at her.

Triggering the hatch, Jess closed the back of the boat up and leaned on the comms key. "Get moving, Devvie. Let's find someplace to let this thing off before it recovers and decides to have us for lunch." She tapped her fingers on the console as the engines re-engaged, noting the movement was not really much to the bear's liking. "Take it easy, buddy."

The bear pushed itself up into a sitting position, its tongue hanging out. It was a startling pink color, vivid against the yellowish-white fur, and the black nose. As the speed picked up, it looked around in some alarm, shaking itself and sending

a shower of water over the deck.

It was bigger than she'd imagined. It's body was twice the length of hers, and it's feet were gigantic, and as it turned its head towards her and opened it's mouth, she spotted fangs as wide as her hand.

"And I brought your fuzzy white ass up on the boat with us." Jess mused. "Damn I'm an idiot."

Despite that, it seemed sort of cute to her, and she noted it's small, cupped ears and appealing expression. "You got lucky, buddy." She informed the bear. "If the owner of this thing were here you'd be a rug already."

The bear regarded her, then it lay back down on the deck, apparently not quite recovered from it's swim. It seemed content to accept it's ride at least for the moment, so Jess decided she'd leave it there and go back upstairs and get herself properly woken up.

She suspected Dev was hopping up and down waiting for her turn to look at the bear anyway. Jess smiled, as she climbed down from the control stand and ducked into the tunnel, heading back to the control center.

**

"Oh my goodness." Dev felt her eyes widen, the chill hitting the sides of her eyeballs as she climbed up onto the control platform and peeked over the console. There, sitting in the middle of the deck was the bear, looking huge and furry and more amazing than anything she'd ever seen.

"Don't go near it." Jess's voice warned in her ear cup. "You'd make one mouthful for it."

"I won't." Dev promised, leaning her arms on the surface and avidly watching the animal. It was looking around, blinking it's eyes as the wind blew over the deck and ruffled it's now drying fur.

It was gigantic. Dev thought it hadn't looked so big when it was in the water, but now on the deck it sure did. "Hey there." She called out to the bear, holding her breath as it's head swung around and it looked at her. Hesitantly, she waved at it. "Don't worry. Jess is going to find a nice iceberg for you to climb up on. Okay?"

She wasn't sure if the bear understood language. Doctor Dan had once told her about something called a dog, which understood some words, and another called a monkey that could use symbols to communicate but she wasn't sure where the bear fell on that bell curve.

It's head was roundish, and she wished she could get closer to see it better – and just as she thought that it did.

It got up, and walked around in a circle. It's front legs were a little shorter than it's back ones, so it looked sort of funny when it walked, but then Dev got back behind the console when it reached the wall and stood up, stretching it's front feet up over it's head.

"Wow! You're tall!" She peeked cautiously out at it. It's feet had big black nails on the ends of it's toes, and as she watched, it scratched long, deep grooves into the metal of the ship. "Oh no! Don't do that! The fisherman won't like it!"

The bear looked at her, and now, closer she could see that it's eyes were a deep brown, not black as she'd first thought. They were deep set, and they watched her with what she thought surely was some intelligence. After a moment, it dropped back down to all four legs and sauntered over to where she was, sitting down on the deck and opening it's mouth.

The teeth were equally gigantic. Dev wondered what the bear ate. "Hey Jess?"

"Yes? He's not doing anything is he? I can't see him." Jess's voice answered, sharp and intense.

"No, just sitting here." Dev said. "Should we give him some food?"

"Like what, your leg?"

"I was thinking more like the bait, like what we gave the dolphins." Dev responded, grinning a little as Jess's dark humor. "Can we give it a name?"

"No." Jess's tone lightened. "Please don't give it a name."

Well, that wasn't a no to the fish. Dev climbed down from the control room and went to the locker, opening it and peering inside. There were buckets of half frozen fish bait inside, and she picked one up, taking it with her and bringing it back to the control console.

She climbed back up and peered out, finding the bear now rolling on it's back on the deck, waving it's legs in the air. This exposed the animal's belly and she got a better look at it's underneath parts. "Hey Jess? I think it's a girl."

"Really?"

"I think so." Dev removed a chunk of frozen fish from the pail and tossed it onto the deck, waiting to see what the bear was going to do about it.

Hearing the thunk, the bear turned it's head and then turned over, sliding across the wet surface and sniffing at the chunk. It

opened its mouth and sank its teeth into it, then shook its head and ripped off a piece, chewing it with evident enthusiasm. "I guess it eats fish." Dev commented, tossing the animal another chunk from the pail. "Cool." She pronounced the word carefully. "That's cool, right?"

The bear sat down on the deck and grasped the second fish between its feet, holding it so that it could chew at it. The act was so people like, it made Dev grin. "Can you see it, Jess?" She called into the comms. "It's sitting here eating fish."

"Stop making me hungry." Jess responded "Aren't you for that matter?"

"Yes." Dev tossed another fish out to the bear. "Sorry about that. Would you like some of this frozen fish?"

A low snicker sounded in the comms. "Not unless you're changing your name to frozen fish."

Dev cocked her head in a puzzlement, as she threw more chunks out. "Why would I do that?" She finally asked. "Do you not like my name?" She watched the bear get up and fetch the last piece, then without warning, it came over and stood up, putting its feet against the outside of the control platform and peering in at her. "Oh!"

"What?" Jess answered instantly. "Dev?"

Dev stared at the bear, now only an arms length from her. She could smell the fish on its fur, and the musky pungency of the fur itself, and see the nostrils on the big black nose flaring. Without really thinking about it, she held out a last piece of fish to the bear.

It sniffed it then opened its mouth and very gently took it from her, before it sat down again to finish its meal

"DEV!"

Dev nearly jumped out of her skin "Yes!" She blurted. "Yes, I'm fine! Sorry!" She leaned against the console and stared the bear, her heart beating fast. "I was just giving her the last part of the fish." She watched the bear lick her lips with satisfaction and yawn, exposing those huge teeth.

It was so amazing.

The animal got up and walked back over, jumping up to put her paws against the metal of the console. She poked her head inside and snuffled at Dev and before she could think better of it, the bio alt extended her palm out to the moist looking nostrils.

The bear sniffed her fingers, then the pink tongue appeared and licked them, feeling warm and rough in an explosion of sensation that made Dev's eyes open up wide. "Oh. Wow" She whispered, extending her hand just a little and touching the fur under the bear's jaw.

It was soft, and oily feeling. For a moment, the bear regarded her, then she pushed off the console and went back to the middle of the deck, sitting down and yawning.

Dev bounced silently in place, then she scrambled down from the platform and bolted for the steps to the control center, eager to tell Jess about the bear, and its cold, wiggly nose, and its fur.

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Jess blinked. "You touched it?"

"Yes." Dev nodded. "Just a little. It licked my fingers." She held up her hand, displaying all five digits. "Then I touched it here." She reached over and touched Jess under her chin. "It was amazing!!!"

"It's amazing you still have your arm." Her partner told her wryly. "You're a nut, you know that?" She gazed at Dev with what actually seemed like a touch of envy though. "I've seen one of those things rip a man apart."

"I think she was glad I gave her the fish." Dev said. Then she grinned. "I'm glad I got a chance to do that."

"Crazy." Jess ruffled her hair.

Dev came over and threw her arms around Jess, hugging her fiercely. "Thank you for saving her, Jess. That was so awesome."

That had been so terribly pointless and stupid.. Jess enjoyed the hug anyway, and the enthusiasm that came along with it. "Anything for you, Devvie." She replied simply. "You make me want to be a complete idiot. Good thing for both of us for some reason I'm really liking that."

"Um. I don't mean to." Dev muttered. "At least, I don't think I don't mean to."

Jess took her hands off the controls of the ship and put her arms around Dev, savoring the tingle as their bodies pressed against each other. She took a deep breath, feeling an ache in her chest that shortened her breathing and nearly made her lightheaded.

“Wow.” Dev reluctantly released her. “So should I get some of the rations? And I'll make hot tea, okay?” She felt Jess's arms tighten, and the pressure of her lips against the top of her head, before she was released in return, to let the chill of the steel chamber once again brush her skin.

That was somewhat uncomfortable. Hugging Jess was definitely nicer. Evaluating the frown on Jess's face, Dev decided Jess maybe thought that also.

She lifted her eyes and met Jess's, as her partner took back hold of the controls, and exhaled. “It would be nice to find an ice cave at this time, wouldn't it?” Dev asked in a serious tone.

Jess smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. “If we weren't under recall, we'd already be in one.” She said. “I already broke the rules messing around with that bear, and if they find out at base I'll be under discipline, so do me a favor, huh? Don't tell anyone.”

Dev went over and started preparing the tea. “What does that mean?” She said, after a pause, glancing over her shoulder. “Helping the bear was incorrect?”

Jess settled herself in the command chair and pushed the hair off her forehead with one hand. “What does that mean.” She repeated, with a sigh. “When you get a recall like that, you're supposed to do an immediate return to base. No stopping, no side tracking, nothing.”

“It didn't take very long.” Dev commented.

“It's the idea of it.” Jess said. “I'd get about... probably six zaps for it.” She flexed her hands, her body twitching a little. “Most I ever had before now was four.”

Dev brought over some hot tea and honey, and set it down in the little swinging holder that kept it steady with the motion of the boat. She leaned on the chair arm. “I don't think I understand.” She admitted. “I don't have any programming for that.”

“No you wouldn't. Techs don't get zapped. They don't make the decisions.” Jess responded. “That's my job.”

“Ah.” Dev touched Jess's wrist, running her thumb over the prominent bone on the edge of it. “It's a bad thing, then.”

“It hurts. A lot.” Her partner agreed “Doesn't leave any marks, but it's like touching a power port. You ever do that? Makes your whole body go stiff, and then it hurts.” She picked up the tea and sipped it. “That's what being zapped is like. They do it up in the assembly hall, where we had the induction ceremony.”

“I see.” Dev said, though she really didn't.

“They don't want us to break the rules.” Jess flexed her hand again, with a small grimace. “You get zapped enough times, you stop wanting to.”

Dev considered that for a while. “But you helped the bear.”

“Yeah I did. Because you wanted me to.” Her partner sighed. “I don't know what's wrong with me. I know better.”

“Jess, I would feel a lot of discomfort if you got in trouble and got hurt because you did that.” Dev said. “Just for helping a bear.”

Jess leaned back and studied her, dark lashes fluttering a little over her pale eyes. “I didn't do it for the bear.” She smiled briefly. “Dont worry about it, Devvie. They won't know unless we tell em. No recorder on this thing.” She reached over and traced the fine, pale brow over the bio alt's right eye. “You got nice lines.”

Dev felt a slight sense of confusion, caught in that intense gaze. Then she nodded and smiled, reasoning that her partner must know what she was doing, after all. She squeezed Jess's wrist, and then she went back to the preparation area and investigated their supplies.

Now that the excitement was mostly over, she could feel tired again and she did. “Jess?”

“Hm?”

“Will you wake me up when you let the bear go?”

Jess chuckled softly. “Sure.” She looked up as Dev brought over two portions of fish, poached in some kind of spicy liquid. “Feel like sacking out? You look tanked.”

Sacks. Tanks. Dev put a piece of the fish in her mouth while puzzling this out and then her eyes popped open wide. “Wow!” She spit the fish out and stared at it. “Ouch!” She went over and got her tea, sucking down a mouthful. “What is that?”

“Fish.” Jess snickered. “Not used to those spices, huh?” She broke off a piece of her own and chewed it “I like it. Reminds me of mudbug boils we sometimes do back home.”

Dev stared doubtfully at the chunk of regurgitated fish in her hand, then sighed, and closing her eyes, popped it back in her mouth. She chewed it stolidly, then swallowed with an obvious effort, chasing it down with another long swallow of tea.

The fish burned her mouth, and the scent of it got back up into her nose and made her sneeze violently.

Very discomforting. Dev looked unhappily at her meal. "I don't think I can eat this." She admitted. "Would you like the rest?"

"Give it here. Go get something else." Jess held a hand out. "At least I found one thing I can do that you can't." She took possession of the offending food. "What a relief!"

Dev handed it over without delay. "I think I'll just get some rest." She said "I can have something later, after we let the bear go." She added. "And you know, Jess, there are lots and lots of things you can do that I can't." She added seriously. "All I can do is drive the carrier and make tea."

"And you're modest too." Her partner said. "I think that's what I love the most about you, Devvie." She shifted in her chair and studied their course, as the boat plowed stolidly through the waves. "You don't talk about how good you are, you just do it."

Dev climbed into the hammock, curling up with a soft ball of fabric for a pillow, and a piece of the same to cover her that still carried Jess's scent on it. She lay there quietly with her partner's words turning over and over in her head, feeling the impact of them as they thrummed deeper and deeper into her consciousness.

They touched something inside her, something she realized went deeper than programming. "Hey Jess?"

"You talking in your sleep?"

"No." Dev smiled, a little. "You know what I love the most about you?"

"Uh oh." Jess chuckled. "What?"

"You.

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Jess watched the wall of ice go by, her eyes blinking a little, her thoughts a million miles away.

Or more precisely, about arm's length away focused on the soundly sleeping figure in the hammock just behind her.

She didn't grudge her partner the rest. After all, Dev had piloted the boat through the night, letting Jess get a whole shift's worth of sleep herself. But she wished the bio alt was awake so she could talk to her and hear her voice.

There was something odd and weird about that. Jess swung sideways in the chair so she could study Dev's quiet breathing. She knew it was out of the ordinary for her to be so fixated on something other than her job. She knew it wasn't right that it was impossible for her to focus her attention on the mission, or even the operation of the boat when her thoughts kept drifting back to Dev's smile.

Jess lifted one hand and pinched the bridge of her nose, aware of how unsettled her body felt, and how her breathing was uneven. Was she sick, maybe? Maybe she'd picked up a case of coastal flu, she reasoned. There was a sense of dislocation in her head, that she remembered from the last time she'd gotten it.

Or she thought she remembered it. Certainly it hadn't been accompanied by the almost irresistible urge she had to get up and join Dev in the hammock, craving the feel of her body and the warmth of the skin on skin contact though, now had it?

With an unhappy sigh, she forced her attention back to the water, feeling a sense of intense aggravation at the never ending white ruffled surface, and the glacial slowness of their progress. Though even getting to the carrier wouldn't do much, because they'd have to go right back to the citadel.

Right back to the citadel, to whatever problem it was waiting for them. No time probably to relax, and tumble into that nice, soft bed together, able to focus on the pleasure of being together and not having to worry about some damn wave turning them turtle.

Her breathing shortened, as she thought about what that moment would think about, finding her eyes closing, and her heart starting to pound.

"Shit." Jess shifted and stood up, picking up her now cold tea and taking a swallow. "Drive the fucking boat." She muttered, glancing at the vid and knowing a moment of deep envy as she spotted the bear curled up fast asleep on the deck of the damn thing, the wind coming over the railing ruffling its fur.

But a moment later, she half turned again, leaning against the console as she watched Dev sleep, curled up on her side, the faintest of smiles visible on her face.

"So, what is it about you, huh, Devvie?" Jess whispered. "Are you making me crazy?"

She thought about that for a few minutes, and grinned wryly. "More crazy?" She sighed and sat back down, resting her head on her fist as she adjusted the throttles, her eyes tracking out over the water searching for the slightest sign of a berg. The first one, she decided, she'd head for so she could get rid of the bear.

The fact that Dev had asked her to wake her up when she did really didn't factor into it at all. She was content to let her partner get what rest she could before that, wasn't she?

Sure.

Her thoughts circled back around, and she carefully let those last words Dev had spoken sound in her head again. "So." She muttered. "The thing she loves most about me is me." She gazed soberly through the big glass windows "What in the hell does that mean?"

A low rumble of thunder attracted her attention, and she immediately turned to the scan, checking the radar and peering past it out the window. Along the horizon, she spotted a dark, almost black cloud and knew the exactly opposing emotions of exasperation at the weather and elation at the knowledge she'd need to find shelter from it. "Hot damn!"

"What?" Dev was half out of the hammock before she was properly awake, blinking her eyes. "Is something wrong? Are you all right?" She put her hands on the back of the chair as Jess muffled a laugh. "Is the bear okay?"

Jess resisted the urge to turn around and hug her. "Yeah, sorry about that." She said. "Storm's up ahead. I'll need to find some shelter in a while. Didn't mean to wake you up – gwan back to sleep."

Dev was peeking past her at scan, watching the bear stretch out on the deck, flexing it's feet in contentment. "Okay." She agreed, rubbing her eyes. "Does that mean we'll have to stop?" She asked, after a pause

"Yep"

"I see." Dev pondered. "Won't that break the rule?" She countered. "I don't want you to get in trouble, Jess."

"Can't control the weather and they know it." Jess said. "Don't worry about it. Just get some rest. It might even bypass us." She told her partner. "I'll try to keep my yap shut now."

Dev gently put her hands on Jess's shoulders and briefly leaned against her. Then she climbed back into the hammock and curled back up, closing her eyes as she waited for her heart to settle back down. Waking that suddenly was uncomfortable, and she relaxed her muscles, her ears pricking a little as she caught the sound of Jess shifting.

She really didn't want Jess to get into trouble. The whole zapping thing sounded profoundly discomfoting and yet.. Dev exhaled slowly. And yet, she wanted nothing more than for them to stop and find shelter, and be able to lay down in the hammock and practice that sex thing together.

After they made sure the bear was safe, of course.

Dev rubbed her fingertips together, where they'd touched the animal, remembering the softness of it's fur. Maybe she'd get a chance to touch it one more time before Jess got it to safety.

She hoped so. There was something about the bear, about those deep, interesting eyes that made her care about what happened to it.

To her. Just like there was something about Jess that made her care, almost to the point of it getting her crazy. Dev squirmed around a little in the hammock so she could keep Jess in her line of vision, watching her partner's shoulders shift as she moved in her chair.

It was hard to keep her eyes open but she wanted to. She saw Jess lean her elbows on the chair arms and rest her head against her fist and the motion almost made Dev climb back out of the hammock and go and hug her again. There was a visible discomfort about the posture and it made her breathing catch.

She didn't want anything to be wrong with Jess.

With a light sigh she closed her eyes and started the process of putting herself down for a while, making a picture in her head about setting the bear free and letting that play behind her closed eyelids as she let the motion of the boat rock her to sleep.

Jess exhaled, slumping to one side and leaning on her elbow as she rested her head against her fist. The chair moved with the ships motion, for which she was grateful since other wise she'd have nailed herself in the temple twice already. She studied the horizon, noting the curve of the ice field and picking up the portable scanner.

She laborously pecked out a request, keying in the coordinates with one finger as she looked up to check the location finder before she submitted the order. The scanner percolated through it's routines in electronic silence and she set the device down, going back to watching the view through the windows, tired half to death of the neverending waves.

"How in the hell do they do this?" She muttered under her breath. Months at sea, only stopping now and then on a berg, or in a cave, or on the market island.

No rad, no relief from the motion... Jess realized she was developing a lot more respect for the fisher folk than she had in the past, remote relations or not. It would be hard, she thought, to be stuck on this ship with all those people, no matter

they were family, having to work the way they did, and risk what they risked out on the sea.

There was a self sufficiency about it that appealed to her, but as she sat here in the captain's chair, she knew she wouldn't trade her life for one like this. It was too raw, no matter how many jars of honey you ended up with.

The scanner beeped, and she picked it up and reviewed the results, her eyebrows edging up a little. She traced a path with one finger on the screen, then she set it down and turned to the nav console, looking back and forth from it to the screen as she carefully entered the settings. The boat's nav system was rudimentary, but once she'd finished and keyed in the complete, she reviewed the plotted course with satisfaction, as she shoved the throttles forward a little more and hoped for a cup more speed from the old tug.

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As shelters went it wasn't going to be much. Jess leaned forward and peered through the worsening weather, the gale force wind shoving the bow of the boat to one side as she searched for the inlet.

Hours had passed, long ones in which she'd crouched in the command chair and worked to keep the boat from turning turtle in the waves. A glance at the monitor screens showed her the back deck, where her somewhat unwelcome passenger was now huddled against the inner wall to escape the wash of surf rolling across.

Trip from hell. Jess sighed, then nearly catapulted out of the chair when she felt a touch against her back. "Yeooop!" She jerked her head around to find Dev standing behind her, a bemused expression on her face. "Oh it's you."

Dev looked around her then back at her partner. "Were you expecting someone else?" She asked, in a serious tone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to alarm you." She peered out the window. "Wow."

Jess felt her heart start to settle, and she unlocked her muscles, returning her attention to the storm. "Yeah, piece of shit weather." She said. "I'm trying to make for an archipelago we can hide in – see?" She squinted and pointed through a break in the squall at a smudge of slightly darker gray against the gray of the sky and the gray of the water. "We get in there, we can let our friend out back off and tie up."

Dev studied the nav comp. "Oh. This is not so far from where we got on this boat." She pointed out. "Wouldn't it be better to try to get there? It seemed like good shelter."

"Sure, if you want them to shoot your buddy on the back." Jess said. "Not to mention, shoot us. We made better time back then I thought we would figured we had another day of this to get back that far."

"Oh." Dev frowned "So then how are we going to get back to the carrier?"

"Let me get back to you on that. One potential life threatening disaster at a time." Jess fought the controls, as the seas rose suddenly and rocked the boat.

"Want me to take this now?" Dev asked, diffidently. "You look cold."

Jess wasn't going to argue. She slipped out of the chair and let Dev take her place, noting the bio alt seemed freshly scrubbed and had a fresh jumpsuit on, with her lined one over it with the top part draped down behind her unfastened "Wait a minute. How long have you been awake?"

"About a half hour." Dev got herself settled and adjusted the throttles. "I didn't want to bother you when you were concentrating."

Holy crap. Jess stared at her partner's slim back in shock. Had she really been that oblivious? "Well." She grunted. "Least you got some rest."

"I did." Dev agreed in a cheerful tone. "It was nice. I liked how the motion felt. It reminded me of sleep back on station."

Holy crap. Jess went to the back of the control center where they'd brought their things and got herself sorted out. She could see where Dev had changed and repacked her carrysack neatly, and the carefully folded packet that had contained some fish she'd apparently consumed.

The blanket on the hammock was also neatly folded, and, as Jess regarded the station, she saw her own meal had been set out for her, with a covered cup of tea next to it. She touched the cup with her fingertips and smiled. "Thanks." She called up to the front.

"You're welcome." Dev answered, as she turned the bow a little and headed closer in to the ice.

Jess undid the catches on her suit and stripped out of it, ignoring the chill of the air as it hit her now bare body though it made her start shivering. She took a sanitary kit out and wiped her skin down, giving her shoulder a cursory glance before she changed. The injury was almost healed as she'd expected, and she pulled the sleeves up over her arms and fastened the suit over her.

It brought immediate warmth and she exhaled in relief as the mild shivers abated. Braced where she was between the

console and the wall, the motion of the ship was no more than annoying, and it felt good to be standing after all the hours crouched over in the chair.

She felt stiff, and a little achy though.

Cautiously, she flexed her arms and twisted to either side, relieved to only feel mild discomfort from her back. Maybe that one, too, was finally healing. "About fucking time." She muttered under her breath.

Med had told her, matter of factly, that the toxins on the knife had almost killed her far more surely than the six inch cut it made but even knowing all that didn't ease the frustration of dealing with how long it was taking her usually robust body to recover from it.

Ah well. Jess uncapped the tea and sipped it while she opened the food packet with her other hand, bracing her body against the wall. "You're so nice to me, Devvie." She commented. "I notice you left me the spicy one though."

Dev smiled, visible in the reflection from the windows. "I'm sorry. I really just can't eat that." She admitted. "I've never encountered anything like that before."

Jess chewed the fish with a sense of melancholy appreciation. "My mother used to cook with these kind of spices." She said. "Reminds me of her fish gumbo. Most of the time the citadel doesn't use anything more exciting than sea salt. Wonder where these bastards got this from? I didn't see any at the market."

"I don't know." Dev said. "We didn't have anything like that in the creche. I am sure they would have tried that on us if there had been, they tried everything else."

"Don't feel bad. Same for us when we were in school. I ate seaweed so many ways I thought for sure I took on a green skin tone there for a while." Jess commiserated. "My favorite thing back then was pizza."

"Pizza?" Dev carefully piloted the boat through a pair of back to back waves. "I don't think I've ever heard of that."

"It's kind of a flatbread thing, with soy cheese and little sardines. They used to get rid of the crap from the nets that way but I liked it." Jess finished one packet, and started on a second, aware of being really hungry. "Wish I had one now. There's just so much of this cold crap I can handle at one time."

"That sounds interesting." Dev acknowledged. "They don't have that at the base?"

"No. They consider it junk. Don't want to give it to us. We're supposed to put stuff in our bodies that makes them work better. That's the theory anyway." She swallowed the last of the second packet and started rooting around for more. "That's why those parties are so damn popular. We get stuff we don't usually get."

"Like those brown things?"

"Exactly."

"Those were really good."

Jess chuckled. "I knew we were two of a kind when I saw you scarfing those." She drained her tea and put the cup in one of the holders, then she went over and joined Dev at the controls. She studied the cloud pattern, and put her hand on Dev's back. "Can we go any faster?"

The slightly darker lump on the horizon was now visible as a gray, craggy outline, rising from the surging sea. She could hear the surf roaring as it broke against the stone, and around the edges a thick roiling fog was drifting. "See if you can get between those shoals."

Obediently, Dev pushed the throttles forward, and aimed the boat for the looming rocks, as the storm rolled over them with increasing fury. She'd been through so many storms by now though, that the lack of sight and the wind didn't disturb her that much and she was able to concentrate on properly steering the boat.

The rocks looked dangerous. "I don't remember seeing before." Dev said. "We were further to the south going the other direction."

"We were." Jess agreed. "We're up into the Greenland Archipelago. Should be safe though, never had much population." She draped her arm over her partner's shoulders as they eased between two tall, jagged spires and as they did, the winds dropped, and the seas got calmer.

"Wow." Dev noted. "That's much better."

It was still raining almost sideways, but the boat now made better headway as they threaded their way through half hidden rocks outlined in white and green froth as the stone walls rose up on either side of them. Past the rocks there were further gray lumps and over all a mist was rising.

"Yeah, that is much better." Jess studied the landscape. "Haven't been here in years. There's just this small southern bit that's not under ice. See the glacier picks up there." She pointed. "Mostly seals live here."

Dev brightened. “Really?”

“Mm.” Jess pointed at a rock escarpment. “That’s where I killed my instructor. We use this as a training base.”

“Oh.” Dev watched the water calm as they moved further inside the waterway, where bare stone rose on either side of them. They were protected from the wind, and the waves, and as she throttled down the engines, they both heard a loud sound from behind them.

Jess responded instantly, bounding over and grabbing her blaster from its holster, getting to the door and through it before Dev could even open her mouth.

The hatch slammed.

“I think that was the bear.” She said, to the empty room.

A moment later, the hatch slammed open and Jess popped inside. “Bear.” She explained briefly. “I think it wants to go home.” She closed the hatch and rejoined Dev, dripping rainwater all over the deck. “See that inlet there?”

“Yes.” Dev turned the bow towards it. “Is this where the bear lives? How did you know that?” She peered at her partner in bewilderment

“Bears live here.” Jess said. “I don’t know if this one does, but we can let it off there.” She pointed at an outcropping of rock that overhung the water just barely. “It can figure out what to do after that.”

They heard the loud noise again, a rough, barking roaring sound that made the metal vibrate under Dev’s fingertips. “Is the bear mad?”

“Bored. Sounds like me when I’m stuck inside too long.” Jess replied.

Dev didn’t really think the bear was bored, but she merely nodded and continued to edge towards the sheltered area, seeing a rock overhang just past it where they could probably let the boat sit for a while while the storm passed. She watched through the window intently, looking for evidence of the seals Jess had mentioned, highly entertained with the idea of seeing both animals here on one trip.

“You know what it sounds like?” She said, after the bear made the noise again. “It sounds like she’s calling out to someone.”

Jess regarded her with a tolerant grin.

“Maybe there’s another bear here.” Dev didn’t catch the look. “Maybe she has a friend.” She put the engines into idle as they neared the rocks, and drew in a quick breath as she saw something moving “Oh! Look!”

Jess thumped lightly against the console and peered out the window, blinking a little as she saw two fast moving off white forms galloping towards the boat. “What in the hell?”

Dev’s eyes lit up. “They’re little bears!” She hopped up and down a few times. “Oh! Look at them!” She grabbed the scanner and flicked through its programming, selecting the record function and focusing it on the animals. Then she set the scanner down and swung the boat sideways a bit, putting the back of it up against the rocks. “Jess, look. She knows them!”

Jess sighed. “She does.” She admitted, watching the bear scramble up onto the side of the boat and then jump to the rocks, where the two smaller animals met her. “Gimme those controls. Go look at it. Chances are you’ll never get to see this again.”

Dev didn’t hesitate for an instant. She grabbed the scanner and went to the door, working the hatch and popping through it. She scrambled down the steps and forward onto the bow, going around to the side against the rocks where she could get a good look at the bears.

The big bear was greeting the the little ones with every evidence of happiness, licking them as they stood up on their back legs and patted her with their front ones, making small, cawing sounds.

Dev got it on the scanner, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. The little bears didn’t seem to mind either the rain or the noisy boat idling next to the rocks, and she got a good shot of them as they raced around the bigger bear in circles.

The bear sat down and let them climb over her, and then rolled on her back and patted them with her front feet.

It was amazing. How had Jess known to bring her exactly here? Dev felt a sense of awe at her partner’s intuition. She had known! Of all the places in the whole wide ocean, to bring the boat here, right where the two little bears were waiting for her?

Amazing! She turned and looked up into the control center, seeing her partner leaning on the console and watching the bears with a big grin on her face.

Even if she pretended not to care, she did. Dev nodded a little to herself. Sometimes the proctors were like that. Sometimes, even Doctor Dan was. But the truth of them would shine out at times, like it was with Jess right now. She

could see her face, and see the unguarded happiness in it and she knew.

She knew there was a good and big heart in her partner. No matter what she said about her conscience.

Then the rain started to come down harder, and Dev felt the boat move away from the rocks towards the overhang. She walked along the rail, keeping the bears in sight as long as she could, then waved at them as they pulled past.

The big bear looked up at the motion, and opened her mouth, letting out one of the roars.

Amazing. Dev grinned, shutting the scanner down as she shook the icy rain from her eyes and headed back for shelter. It didn't even matter that she was now wet through and cold, not if it meant she'd gotten to see that. She trotted back up the steps as the boat pulled under the overhang, then she paused as it became evident that the overhang was much more than that.

There was a cave there, and the engines sounded suddenly much louder as Jess steered into it, and then they were out of the storm entirely and in a big, dark space.

Jess turned the boat's lights on as Dev entered the control room, and she looked out in surprise as the cave became visible. There was a very rudimentary dock there, and weatherworn equipment lockers, and she recalled Jess saying they trained in this place. "That was amazing, wasn't it?"

Jess smiled. "That was pretty cool." She admitted. "You don't get to see cubs very often."

"Is that what they were? They were really beautiful." Dev observed the scanner, bringing up a shot of the two smaller animals and showing it to Jess. "See?" It was a closeup of the two, their appealing faces turned towards the scanner, small pink tongues showing along with the dark eyes, and the small curved ears.

"Mm." Jess idled the engines. "That one." She put a fingertip on the screen. "Is almost... almost as cute as you are." She watched Dev blush a little, then she looked up and her expression changed completely. "Now that on the other hand, isn't cute at all."

The lights had swept to the deeper part of the cave, and now outlined a large, hulking form that was all too familiar to both of their eyes.

"It's a carrier." Dev said, after a long shocked moment.

"Bet I know which one it is too." Jess replied grimly.

"The one that attacked this boat? The one with the pirates?" Dev shifted the scanner and started a routine. "Is this where they are?" She paused and looked up. "Are they here?"

Jess's eyes were flicking everywhere, her hands tense on the controls. "All very good questions Devvie." She muttered. "Let me park this thing and let's find out. At the very least.. we found us a faster ride."

"I see." Dev ran her fingers through her damp hair. "We're having a really interesting day, aren't we?"

"Could just be getting way too interesting."

**

[Continued in Part 16](#)