

Partners

Part 16

Jess finished tying up the boat, her ears cocked to pick up anyone approaching. So far, the cavern had been silent and was apparently empty, but she was old timer enough not to trust that.

Dev was standing on the dock, scanning the interior of the cavern with her handheld comp. She had her tech jumpsuit on, and her jacket over it, the gusty wind puffing the pale hair on her head in various directions. Jess watched her for a moment, and then she went over to join her, peering over her shoulder. "Anything?"

Dev studied the screen. "Nothing alive." She said. "Just the carrier and some frozen dead animals." She shifted the pack on her back, twin to the one Jess was wearing that contained all their gear.

They had left all the stuff they'd bought for the scientists on the boat, and also, a few of the black diamonds. The rest were tucked into Jess's pack along with the few things they'd picked up for themselves.

Jess relaxed a little. "Let's scope the place out. See what we can find before we steal that carrier." She started across the ice, pausing for a moment to lean a gloved hand against the ice, lifting her boots up one after the other and slapping her steel spikes into place. "Slippery."

Her partner nodded, having already extended her own boot appliances. She dug her feet into the surface a little as she followed Jess, conscious of the steady stream of vapor coming from her lips in the cold.

The carrier crouching balefully in the end of the cavern stirred in her a very mixed emotion. Certainly that would get them home faster, but Dev felt a sense of profound disappointment that they weren't going to have just a little while to be still and enjoy some time to relax together.

And practice that sex thing. Dev sighed and squared her shoulders, putting thoughts of that aside as she climbed up the slanted ice path that led away from the water.

The cavern didn't look lived in. Aside from the few old crates, and some rusted ladders half buried in the ice there was no sign of human habitation, and as they moved up the slope her scanner confirmed that. There were no residual bio markers, save a few traces she tracked to the carrier itself.

That, she reasoned, was likely the one that had attacked them. It had the same silhouette, and the markings on it matched the pictures she'd taken during the battle. She slowed as Jess did, the agent pulling her blaster from it's holster and holding it ready in her hand.

A motion of her thumb, and the safety was off. Dev could hear the faint sound of the internal power pack spooling up and she glanced down again at the comp, sweeping the area past the carrier to see if anyone was going to try and stop them. "No bio returns." She commented, in a low utterance.

"Good." Jess said, as she swept the pad the craft was parked on incessantly, her peripheral vision hunting for any motion past the edges of the iced shelf. Even if Dev's comp didn't pick up anything, she was never really sure until her own senses confirmed it.

Quirk of the brain. She knew the tech could be trusted, and she knew in fact this particular tech's tech could be trusted, but still. There was a place for human instinct in their business and few knew that better than she did. So she cautiously moved forward onto the platform, feeling the bite of her crampons against the ice. "Carrier giving off heat?"

"No." Dev said. "Exterior temperature is ambient."

"Good news." Jess approached the craft and paused, then knelt to pick up a small piece of ice. She stood and considered, then she tossed the ice at the carrier, both of them twitching a little when it hit the hull and dropped with a faint thumping clang.

Dev studied the comp readout, seeing no reaction in any of the electrical spectrums to the intrusion. "No scans" She said, as Jess moved very carefully over to where the entrance door was. "I'm not getting any indication systems are active onboard."

She slid the comp into it's holder and walked closer to the vehicle, studying the external engine housings that seemed very old and misshapen to her eyes. She ran a cautious hand over the edge of the surface, feeling it flex under her touch. Her eyes lifted to watch Jess, who was studying the entry pad. "Do you think you can open it?"

"I'm sure I can open it. Question is, can I open it and still have it be operational or anything more than a scattering of burned metal bits coated with my blood?" Jess mused "Ah, hell. Life's short." She pulled her glove off and reached up to put her hand on the pad.

Dev blinked in surprise, her breath catching as she waited for a response from the carrier, knowing what the systems were programmed to do when unauthorized persons tried to enter them. For a second, she thought she sensed a power surge, then the hatch opened with an anticlimactic click and swung outward.

It smelled old inside. Musty air and the scent of burned electronics wafted out, and Dev's nose wrinkled. "Reminds me of some of the old storage chambers in the creche." She said.

Jess regarded the inside and shrugged. "G"wan in there and see if we can get airborne in this thing. I'm going to hunt around, see if the pirates left anything." She watched Dev climb cautiously inside and then she picked up a big chunk of dirty ice and put it in the entryway, so the hatch couldn't close all the way if it developed a mind to. "Be back."

Dev eased inside the carrier and wrinkled her nose. The inside was dirty, the floor caked with mud and bootprints and all of the surfaces scuffed and worn. There was even adhesive tape holding things together, and Dev spent a moment just looking at everything and wondering if it wasn't safer for them to just stay with the boat.

With a sigh, she edged her way up to the pilot's chair and brushed some caked mud off it, then sat down and put her pack down by her boots. She reviewed the controls for a minute or so, then she nodded to herself as programming kicked in and she touched the comp and systems boards, mildly surprised when they responded.

On batts, of course, and they were nearly drained. Dev damped the comp and focused on bringing the engines online, hoping the dirty looking pods outside didn't just either blow up or fall off.

She triggered the startup sequence, drawing enough power to bring the propulsion systems online with a slow, tired whining sound that set her teeth on edge. She watched the readouts anxiously, trimming the power leads when they spiked erratically.

For a moment everything went out, then came back up and engines started generating power, sending a light shudder through the frame of the carrier.

Not normal or good. Dev frowned unhappily at the console and scooted up a little closer, concentrating on coaxing the old components into service. It was all mostly off-balance at the leads, and it was obvious to her that no one had done maintenance on the carrier for a very long time.

Senseless, if they had to fly on it. She clucked her tongue a little and started making adjustments, tweaking the batteries as they started to take on charge. Every few seconds she glanced up through the mud and ice encrusted windows, seeing nothing but crashing waves at the entrance and a solid wall of rain outside.

The boat was rocking at it's dock, and very briefly, she wondered if the bear and her little cubs had gotten under cover before the storm hit.

She hoped so. She was glad she'd gotten to see them, in any case.

At last the consoles started to come online and graphs were settling, as she balanced the incoming power from the engines and gave the batteries enough juice to power up everything else. She regarded the comp as it flickered into focus, unsure of whether to even trust anything it was telling her.

The carrier was totally compromised. She could see tape and cables with ports snaking out of places they didn't belong, and she assumed the systems had been hacked to allow anyone to drive it. In their carrier, the controls were keyed to the chips and the bio scans of herself and Jess – even the techs who serviced it couldn't actually start it up and fly it.

Hence, why she had to perform the commissioning flight when the carrier had been put back together. This craft, on the other hand, didn't even check her identity – she hadn't felt the twitch in the chips at all, and the hatch had opened at just a touch, there was nothing in comp that indicated it knew who had opened the door.

Dev glanced outside, then peered around to the side, where Jess had disappeared. There was no sign of her partner and she found that was making her very unhappy. It took a lot of effort to drag her attention away from that thought, and back to the carrier.

With another sigh, she started a pre flight routine, her hands a little hesitant on the much older controls. Once that had begun, she got up and started examining the interior, checking to see what was inside it that might be useful to them. There was no expendable storage anywhere, everything seemed to have been stripped out to make room for people to ride inside it and it was mostly bare frame and strapping.

The weapons console was so battered, there was no legends on anything anymore. Just a couple of knobs and the grips that would fire the guns. The chair was a bare frame too, and Dev wrinkled her nose as she thought about the contrast between this, and the new chair Jess had been so happy with.

She hadn't regarded their craft as either luxurious or comfortable, but compared to this one, it certainly was. Dev checked the water supply and found it empty, then peered into the extremely basic sanitary facility and wished she hadn't. "Hm." She hoped they wouldn't be in this thing long, just long enough to fly it to the other cavern and pick up their own.

Unless Jess would want to bring it back to the citadel for them to study, of course, or... Dev paused, wondering if her partner might not just want to destroy it, so that no one could use it again.

That seemed likely. Her peripheral vision caught motion, and she turned and peered out of the hatch, hoping to see Jess's familiar form heading her way. Instead, she saw a sleek looking animal jump out of the water onto the ice, making a loud noise that startled the life out of her.

It was far away, on the pier next to the boat, and she watched it in fascination as it galumphed along the ice. It had a small head and it was gray, and as it got closer and she could see it's face, she wondered suddenly if it was a seal.

Wow. She bounded back and got her comp, and brought it back over to scan the animal, hoping it was, since she really wanted to see the creature that had so appealed to Jess.

Dev smiled as it came closer.

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The cavern was crude and basic, and always had been. Jess made her way along a hand chopped passageway, listening carefully for either cracking ice or pirates. She had her blaster in one hand and her knife in the other, and she was moving with as much grace as she could on ice with crampons on.

She was really glad they'd found the old carrier. It meant she could get back to the citadel a lot faster, find out what the recall was about, and, as a bonus, get props for finding the old thing and a pirate hideout.

Pure dumb luck, of course, but she'd take it.

Now she just had to check the back cavern to make sure she wasn't leaving any of the bastards at her back and she could take off with Dev, go pick up their carrier, and get back home.

As she neared the end of the passageway she slowed, cocking her head forward and listening hard ahead of her. There was nothing but the crackling of ice, but she stopped anyway, opening her mouth and drawing in the air, trying to taste any hint of anything out of place on it.

A puff of air hit her, and she twitched as the smell of death got into her nose. She started forward with more caution, her breathing starting to slow as her focus tightened. After a few moments, she stopped and triggered her comms on shortwave. "Dev, Dev."

After a pause, the earpiece rustled. "Here."

"Secure." Jess uttered. "Tac."

"Ack." Her partner responded at once.

With a nod, Jess released the comms and continued forward. As she came around a bend in the passage, she got a lungful of stench, and grimaced. "Ah, this ain't gonna be pretty." Another bend, and she could see the back cavern ahead of her, a large space she remembered them using for tactical storage and the ice class.

Now as she entered, she stopped and quickly scanned the space, finding both death, and the source of the stench which wasn't it. Sprawled over the ice were large, heavy looking animals she recognized, and that was what smelled, but scattered among them were black forms frozen in the ice splayed out in patches of red stain.

One of the animals spotted her, and barked.

Jess held her ground, hoping the sea lions weren't in the mood to rush her and edged closer to the first of the bodies.

Frozen solid, it's face was stretched into a rictus of pain, one arm and part of it's shoulder blown away by what looked like a blaster. It might have been one of the attackers from the other night – the body was encased in a jumpsuit just like hers, but the face wasn't familiar to her.

It made sense if they were the same. Jess walked over to the second body, which had been cut completely in half. She studied it, then pointed her own blaster at the ice and set it to heat, directing the beam at the frozen form until it separated from the ground.

She turned it over and found herself looking at someone she did know. "Damn."

A strong prickling tweaked her shoulder blades, and she looked quickly around, seeing the sea lions start to shift around and move. She took a step back and turned slowly in a circle, searching for the source of their disturbance. Across the cavern she spotted a half buried box, and she moved around the open water in the center to examine it.

The sea lions shifted, and one dove in the water, disappearing underneath the surface. Jess remembered there was an undersea entrance to the place, and she was careful where she put her boots as she felt the ice under her shifting. A brief grin touched her lips, remembering the dare she'd won over that narrow, icy cold gap.

Counting the bodies, she nodded as the tally seemed to match the party that attacked them. She got over to the box and kicked it open, surprised when she recognized the contents as Interforce tactical gear.

New. She picked up a kit and looked at it. Brand new, with the current quarter's dates on it.

"Huh." She could see another passage behind the box, that she didn't remember. She triggered comms. "Dev Dev." She was reasonably sure the most dangerous thing around her was that bull sea lion who'd been eyeing her, but something inside her tickled her to contact her partner anyway. "You there?"

"Here. Is everything all right?" Dev responded.

"Yeah. The bus up?"

"Yes." The bio alt answered. "There is a .. I think there is a seal near me."

Jess grinned briefly. "Sea lion. Found a lot of em back here. Going to check out a hall. Be back over there in two minutes."

"Excellent."

Jess clicked off and stepped around the box, ducking past the embedded glow lamp in the ceiling and moving down the passage. As she half suspected, it revealed a crude living space, full of sleeping bags and furs, and the remnants of human garbage.

If nothing else, it confirmed these pirates had stolen the Interforce name, nothing else. She'd expected to find at least one chamber kept in their style, but even the least grungy was still unbearably messy. She walked inside it though, and studied the interior.

Very basic. Just a hole chopped out of the ice, with a single lamp giving a very dim light inside. There was a hammock with both ends pinned into the walls, a plastic box for storage, and in the corner, a round metal pipe with a cover, that was sunk down into the ice.

Jess grimaced in pure human reflex, at the thought of using that very primitive sanitary facility. She shook her head and went to the box, opening the top and looking inside. Her jaw tightened and she reached inside, picking up a set of creds, and a small plastic case she could see the glitter of chips through the top of. She tucked them into a pocket and sorted through the rest, mostly cans of stale looking biscuits and tea.

"And you gave us up for this?" She muttered. "Shithead." She left the detritus where it was and moved on, going to the end of the chopped corridor and poking her head into what was apparently their main living chamber.

It contained nothing but a mixture of hacked together chairs and a surface frozen into the ice that was probably a table. Everything was strewn everywhere, and it occurred to her that whoever had killed the pirates had probably also taken whatever valuable items they found.

She pulled the case from her pocket and regarded it. Then she put it back and stood still, letting her head swing from left to right, committing the scene to memory. She turned and walked slowly back up the corridor, stopping to look inside all the chambers and duplicating the scan.

Techs had comp. Agents had eidetic memory that was inbred but also trained, to make record of things when comp wasn't available or practical. Jess knew she could have asked Dev to come back here with her scanner, but this would work as well, once she let them put the leads on and replayed her memories.

Not exactly as reliable, when you were up against discipline since there was always a chance you could forcefully misremember something, but in this case, it would do.

Jess left the chambers and went to a small rise of ice, jumping up onto it and repeating her slow review of the bigger cavern. The sea lions watched her curiously, but didn't seem inclined to do anything else and she hopped down after a minute and started towards the back tunnel.

So. Someone had found the pirates, and obliterated them. If that was the case, why not also destroy the carrier? That was a valuable transport despite its age, and leaving it seemed off kilter to her. On the other hand, the carrier had been left intact, and so had the Interforce credentials – maybe it was a message to them?

To her? But how in the hell would they expect her to happen by here?

The precise blaster fire pretty much fingerprinted the other side. The question foremost in her mind though was, why? The pirates were doing their best to trash Interforce's reputation – so why would the other side object? Why weren't they, in fact, behind the whole scheme?

Wasn't really adding up. Jess picked her way among the bodies and edged around the sea lions, most of whom were sprawled asleep, strangely uncaring of her human presence among them. Motion caught her eye and she turned her head, to see one of the big animals ripping at one of the dead pirates, chewing a chunk of frozen flesh and blinking amiably at her.

Jess shrugged wryly. "Bon appetite." She got up onto the ledge that led to the boat dock cavern, glad to leave the stench behind her as she entered the narrow passageway and thought about how to phrase her report to base.

Training camp compromised. Jess wondered when the last class had been held there? Probably not anytime in the recent pass, based on what she'd found. It had been a while since the last class graduated, after all. Jess emerged into the cavern and paused, spotting the carrier, now obviously powered, the engine cowling emitting steam into the air. Seated across from it was a big sea lion, watching with intelligent interest as the various control planes moved as Dev tested them. "Hey bubba." She waved at the sea lion.

It barked at her.

Jess saw Dev's head turn in the window and spot her, and a moment later the hatch creaked open. With a sense of surreal normality she boarded the carrier, glancing around at the decrepit interior with a grimace. "Hey Devvie."

"I'm glad you returned." Dev said. "There are others approaching this area."

"Uh oh." Jess stripped out of her coat as she sealed the hatch, moving forward to look at the scan. "Maybe they're just looking for shelter. Storms about to come over the top of us." She studied the readout. "Ident?"

"Not Interforce." Dev said. "Preliminary comp indicates two RS25007 medium long range transports."

"Bad guys." Jess sighed. "Well let's stay put and quiet. See if they pass us by. There are a ton of caves in the area." She leaned on the back of the chair Dev was sitting in. "They're heavy armed. We could take them out in our rig, but from the looks of this one it'll be enough for us just to fly."

Dev nodded emphatic agreement. "The power packs are at only 10 percent effective. I don't know how much we can send to the weapons systems."

"Definitely stay put." Her partner gently blew in her ear. "Maybe we can find out what they're doing and earn us a bonus."

Dev regarded the comp, then she turned her head slightly and looked up at Jess's profile. "Right now?"

Jess kissed her. "Not exactly right this minute."

"Excellent."

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The storm finally subsided, and as far as Jess was concerned, that kinda sucked. Her body was all warm and sensually stimulated and she really wanted nothing more than to keep sharing that big, and rickety bare shelf she and Dev were perched on and to hell with the bastards outside.

Jess sighed, convinced she was likely losing her mind.

"Comp shows them moving." Dev commented.

"Yeah, I know." Her partner agreed. "Guess we better get our asses going, huh?"

Dev considered that. "Well, do you want to chase after them, or let them get away without seeing us?"

Jess made a deeply thoughtful noise in her throat. Then she surrendered to duty and got up, running her hands through her hair as she pondered the idea that coincidentally it seemed her bio alt companion was also losing her mind in the same kind of way.

Weird and odd and exciting and completely absorbing to the point she had to wonder if they weren't going to fly themselves right into an iceberg because of it and not even care.

Dev had gotten up and gone to the pilot's seat, perching on it as her hands started their disciplined dance over the controls, pausing only to hitch her jumpsuit back up onto her shoulders and fasten the catches Jess had so recently undone for her. She ignored the comms from the carrier, settling the buds connected to her own portable comp instead.

"This thing going to lift?" Jess went over and sat down on the raw rack provided for the weapons station. It poked her in the back with extreme discomfort and she seriously hoped Dev would not be doing any of her more extreme aerobatics before they could get back to their own carrier and her comfortable new bucket.

"I think so." Dev looked back over her shoulder. "Should we try?"

Jess sighed and waved her hand. "Go for it. Might as well find out inside the damn cave. If we crash land at least I can swim."

"I can sort of swim." Dev settled her hands and feet on the controls and triggered the lifting jets. With a drunken stagger, the craft lifted up off the ice, skewing sideways before she got enough thruster control to steady their flight. "Hm." She made some adjustments. "I don't remember this device looking so unstable when it attacked us."

Jess was holding on tight to her seat, peering up at her partner. "That didn't sound good." She ventured. 'I was only halfway

joking about the whole swimming thing. If this is going to take a dive, put it back down.”

“I find it very hard to understand how someone would keep a carrier in this type of condition when they expect it to fly.” Dev's voice took on as much of a disapproving tone as she was capable of. “It's just not correct.” She made another adjustment and the carrier leveled out, the engines producing a more normal rumble. “Hmph.”

“Wrencher.” Jess chuckled softly. “Bet you cant wait to get back to our bus.”

“Absolutely.” Dev said, working hard to keep the carrier going in a correct direction. “Very much looking forward to it.” She aimed the vehicle at the entrance to the docking cavern, watching the scan closely as they emerged into the free air, the rain still coming down and coating the bay in a deep gray mist.

The gray masked them, and against the rough water, the carrier was almost invisible. Dev hovered a moment, getting a feel for the directional jets before she moved cautiously out over the ruffled surface, glancing in the rear scan to find nothing but ice behind them half obscured with rain.

She took a deep breath and settled into her seat, keeping low to the water as the scan picked up the two transports rising on the far side of the bay.

“Jess.” A touch on her back made her twitch a little, but then Jess was leaning on the console next to her. “There they are.”

“There they are.” Jess repeated. “And what they are, is the bad guy's stock transports. What in the hell are they doing up here?” She studied the profiles. Both were about as wide as the old carrier they were in, and twice as long, designed to hold cargo or people on long haul voyages.

Lightly armed. Jess searched the sides of them for mods, and found only the standard guns forward, no unusual profile that might hide the kind of heavy weaponry they had on their own rig.

She checked the nav, pondering the possibility the damn things were just lost. They were in the no man's land, after all, just the wrong side of the continental shelf that marked the start of her side's territory.

Dev eased the carrier forward, using the craggy islands in the middle of the bay and the mist to hide their presence. She suspected the enemy had scan too, but why they hadn't reacted to it by now was a mystery to her. She could see them lifting up cautiously, and then she realized why they hadn't seen them as the side of the forward one cleared the edge of the island and they could fully see them.. “Jess, look.”

Jess was busy looking. “Took a hit.” She studied the hole in the side of the transport. “From one of ours. That's a sigma twelve land based.” She tapped something into the portable comp, and then leaned on the console again. “Wonder which base they came close enough to for that.” She drummed her fingers on the console. “They stray too close to Sidney?”

Dev slid closer, as the two transports hovered, the one that was damaged moving around as though testing stabilizers. Given the gaping hole in the side, she understood that, and now that she was looking for it, the other transport was missing a directional tail fin. “They are both damaged.”

“Sure are.” Jess said. “Now I know why they didn't look for us. They were hiding to save their skins.”

They were both looking at the hole when a flutter of motion turned the gap from black to white to black again, and then they could see bodies struggling.

“What in the hell?” Jess leaned further. “Get that on comp.”

Dev held the carrier steady and directed the portable scanner at the action, as the fight continued for a brief moment, before the transport abruptly heeled over and then pitched skyward, it's engines revving as it sped off. The second craft bolted after it, leaving them in their old, stolen rig behind.

“W..” Jess bit down the urge to chase them. “Let's get our bus.” She said. “Something's going on.” She pushed off the boards and headed back to her seat.

Dev nodded. “Yes.” She agreed. “Let me recalibrate this for nav and..” She paused, blinking at the screen. Then she made an adjustment and peered at the readout. “Jess.”

Hearing the tension, Jess swerved back towards her and peered over her shoulder, as Dev manipulated the image on the screen and set it to maximum zoom.

The hole in the transport abruptly resolved, and the faint, far off struggling figures sharpened into recognizable forms. Two of the bad guys, one that she knew, and a third that made Dev suck in her breath in shock. “Doctor Dan!”

Then all three disappeared and the transport started moving, the image ending in the comp.

Jess straightened up, for a long moment completely still and silent. Then she exhaled. “Bet I know what that recalls' about.” She said, grimly. “They must have gotten to Base 10.”

Dev felt stunned. “They've got Doctor Dan!” She said. “They were hitting him!”

Jess picked up the scan and replayed it. "He was hitting them back." She remarked dryly "C'mon, Dev. Let's get our rig and get back to base. See what they want to do about it."

Dev put her hands on the controls again, but slowly. "We're not going to go help him?" She asked, in a soft, distressed voice. "Jess!"

"Not in this thing." Jess nudged her. "Get moving. We need to get an encrypt and decent guns." She went back and took her seat as she felt the carrier lift and start to speed up. "Son of a bitch. Did they grab him from Base 10 or was it an inside job?"

Incredible. The first attempt had seemed audacious, but they'd turned it back and she figured they put a bigger guard on.

Or did they? Could it be part of the leak? Jess glanced up at the window and saw Dev's expression, a mixture of anxiety and fear that surprised her a little. "They took him for a reason, Dev. They won't hurt him at least until they get him back." She offered.

"We should help him." Dev said, quietly. "He's a good person."

"We might end up doing that when we get back to base. Bain will tell us what he wants us to do." Jess said. "We might have been recalled specifically for that."

Dev's eyes met hers in the reflection of the curved window. "Why do we have to wait, though, if they want us to do that? Won't that take a lot of time, going back there?" She asked. "Won't they get away? What if they hurt him?"

"What if... Dev, we have to go back because they recalled us." Jess said. "It's a rule. We don't obey it they'll send someone out to take us down. That won't help him either."

Her partner was silent for a long moment. "I see." She nodded faintly. "I understand what that means. I just wish we could talk to them and see if they would let us go." She paused, then cleared her throat. "Or not ask them and go anyway."

Jess felt a little dumbfounded. The last thing she expected her biological alternative, born and live by the law partner to be suggesting was a deliberate breaking of the rules. "Um." She sorted through her options. "I said maybe we could get an encrypt session back on our bus, and maybe.. hey maybe when we call in they'll send us back for him."

That seemed to cheer Dev up a little. "You think they would do that?" She pushed the throttles forward a little, getting the lumbering craft to speed up. "I'm sure they'd want us to go help Doctor Dan."

Would they? Jess fastened the bare straps of the seat around her. She'd gotten a sense that Bain and he were friends, but in the corps friends were negotiable currency. Would Bain use him if he had to? Jess guessed that yes, he would. That was one of their skills, after all.

No sentimentality. You just achieved your goals, and there was nothing personal involved. Jess glanced up to find Dev still watching her in the reflection, a look of worried trust on her face.

Yeah. Nothing personal. Jess sighed and rubbed her temples.

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Hard to say which one of them was more relieved when they came around the last bend of ice in the middle of a sleet storm and saw the iceberg that housed the fisherman's main docking facility. The place was deserted, according to the scanner which picked up only the residual markers of their carrier itself.

Dev set the old carrier down outside on the top of the ice sheet, and shut it down as quickly as she could. The engine pods had almost stopped generating power, and though she hadn't wanted to bother Jess with it, since her partner seemed to be thinking hard, their environmental systems had shut down a short time before.

She released her restraints and put on her jacket, fastening the catches as Jess opened the hatch and ducked a face-full of stinging sleet.

"Put your hood up." Jess seated her blaster and extended her crampons, turning her back to the wind as she got out of the decrepit vessel and fastened the chest straps on her pack. "Hurry up Dev. Storm's getting worse."

Freaking storms. Dev was developing a true dislike for them, since they seemed to always be preventing them from getting somewhere they needed to be. She got her pack on and followed Jess, sucking in a shocked breath as the icy wind blasted her.

She grabbed the hatchway and held on, as she was buffeted hard, then felt a grip on her arm and then Jess was pressed up against her. "Wow."

"Yeah." Jess locked arms with her and they moved cautiously along the ice, bending over to keep a lower profile against the wind. "Stay down. If it shifts and blows us into the water, we're screwed."

Dev didn't even bother wondering what that meant. "Okay." She agreed, as she took a firm hold on her partner and

concentrated on keeping on her feet as they inched their way down the ice wall towards the water.

She was disturbed and upset. But she knew concentrating on that and not on climbing would likely end up with her being in extreme discomfort and so somehow she put her upset aside for a while and trusted in Jess to know what was best for them.

She was a natural born, after all.

“Easy.” Jess ducked, as a wave crashed against the wall and doused them both. “Oh crap.”

Brr. Dev found words driven right out of her by the chill. She blinked hard to remove the seawater from her eyes and then grabbed for Jess as another wave caught her and almost pulled her off the wall. She gripped a crack in the ice with one hand, and hauled her partner back with the other, feeling the sting of the sleet against her skin.

Highly discomfoting.

“Thanks.” Jess got her grip on the ice back and glanced at her. “Let's get our asses down from here.” She moved faster, hopping over some icicles and starting downward with Dev right behind her. They reached the base of the iceberg just as rumbling peal of thunder vibrated through them and shivered loose a chunk of the ice wall.

“Jess!” Dev caught it out of the corner of her eye and bolted forward, thumping into the taller woman and sending her hopping forward as the ice crashed down behind them and dusted the with sharp, cold particles. “Oh!”

Jess went with the motion, hurdling the last chunks of ice and bolting into the ice cavern hidden by the curve of the burg. “Dev!” She twisted around, trying to catch sight of her tech. “Hey!”

“Right here.” The bio alt skidded in after her, crashing into the wall as they were abruptly protected from the vicious weather. “Wow.”

“Wow.” Jess repeated, shaking herself. She pressed back against the wall and cautiously peered past the curve of it, wary even though the scan had marked it empty. You never could tell, after all. Sometimes the ice made comp crazy, and you could find yourself on the wrong end of a blaster that way.

But there were no boats in the dock, and the inside of the big cavern was, in fact, empty. Jess relaxed a little and moved in further, running her eyes over the carrier parked on the rear deck. “Glad to see that thing.”

“Me too.” Dev said, quietly.

They walked quickly across the frozen floor and up the ramp to the back area, Jess striding ahead quickly and touching the hatch pad on the side of their rig.

The hatch opened and the ramp extended, welcoming them with a scent of fresh new components and silicone. Jess waited for Dev to slip past her and then she closed the hatch, sealing them into a small bit of peace and quiet and safety. She went over and stowed her pack, then went to her seat and dropped into it. “Ugh.”

Dev got her own pack into it's holding position and stripped out of her heavy outside jacket. She hung it on the back of her pilots chair then sat down herself, very glad to feel the seat conform to her and swivel into position. It felt very good to be back in this space, and she took a moment to savor it before she faced the consoles and contemplated starting every thing up. “Should we call the base?”

She looked in the mirror when Jess didn't answer, finding her partner peering up at the ceiling with her hands clasped over her stomach. “Jess? Maybe they'll tell us to go help Doctor Dan.”

Jess got up and walked over, taking a seat on the ground next to Dev's chair. “They won't tell us that.” She said, quietly. “They would already have sent us.” She clasped her hands together, her long fingers twisting slightly. “Dev, we have to go back to base.”

Dev exhaled. “What if they hurt him?” She asked, in a soft voice. “You said he was a friend.. that he was part of Interforce, didn't you? Wouldn't they want you to help?” She leaned forward and put her hand on Jess's wrist. “Why wouldn't they tell us to go help him?”

Jess sighed. “It's not that simple, Dev.” She said. “They recalled us. That means they need us there. It might have something to do with them getting him out. They could have really damaged the citadel. People there could need help too.”

Dev fell silent. “I see.” She finally murmured.

“So soon as it stops sleeting and the winds drop, we'll get going.” Jess said. “Maybe... maybe when we get back there, I can talk to Bain. See if he'll let me take a squad out.” She watched Dev's face, seeing the sadness of understanding there. She knew she wasn't fooling her partner. “Or maybe he won't, but we need to go back.” She acknowledged the point.

Dev knew. If they waited even another little while, there would be no tracking the transports and she would never see Doctor Dan again. She knew it, and looking into Jess's pale eyes, she knew her partner knew it too. She also knew Jess didn't owe her any explanation and that her insistence was giving her a lot of discomfort.

It made her very unhappy.

Jess put a hand on her knee. Dev looked up to find an unexpected compassion in her partner's eyes, and that made her feel even more unhappy. "I'm sorry."

"Sokay." Jess rubbed her knee with the side of her thumb. "He's a friend. It's tough."

"Yes."

"I know." Jess said, looking away. "After my father retired, he kept low key as hell, but one day.. " She exhaled "They got him. They took him. My mother called me and I went to ops and.." She stopped talking. "I argued with them and that's what got me four zaps."

Dev covered Jess's hand with her own, feeling a lot of discomfort both at her own upset and now at her partners. "Oh Jess."

"They sent his body back in pieces." Jess concluded. "So it didn't help either of us."

Dev felt extreme discomfort, unsure of what to say.

"So I get it, Dev." Jess raised her eyes. "But if we break this rule, I'll get a lot more than four, and you'll end up going back topside."

Dev felt her heart give a double thump. "What?" She stammered.

"They'll wash you out." Jess said. "They won't deal with a tech who breaks ranks.. breaks rules." She saw Dev's eyes grow round and wide with horror. "They'll cancel your contract."

Back to the creche? Dev's mouth went dry and she knew a fear of a totally different kind. Back to the creche, and have to leave Jess?

Go back to being just one of the many?

Dev found out right at that moment just how human she actually was as she was flooded with an intense wash of utter self interest that nearly made her faint. "I see." She took a breath and released it. "Okay. I understand." Her eyes lifted to Jess's. "I don't want that to happen."

"No."

"I don't want to leave you." The bio alt added, in a very small voice.

"No." Jess repeated softly. "No I don't want that either."

They both looked at each other, and at the same time, sighed. Dev licked her lips and swallowed. "I don't like thinking about this."

Jess grimaced a little. "Me either." She got up and went to the dispenser, glancing outside. The sleet was still coming down and she could see huge rollers crashing against the iceberg's entrance. "Let's get something hot into us."

The blond woman swiveled around back to the controls, and started doing her preflight checks. The first thing she checked was the recorder, scanning it quickly to determine if anyone had approached the carrier.

They hadn't. She was glad. The systems were all as she'd left them, power levels were normal, everything seemed fine. Except for her. Dev spared a hand off the console to rub the bridge of her nose, hoping her stomach upset would go away before it overwhelmed her.

She checked comms, but other than the forwarded recall, there was nothing in storage. Still feeling a lot of discomfort, she started turning up systems, bringing the consoles online and spooling up the engines. Jess's words kept echoing in her head, though, and she felt her breathing tighten every time she thought about going topside.

It felt even worse than thinking about Doctor Dan.

Something in her knew that was selfish, but she was helpless against the chill in her guts even thinking about going back to her sterile little pod, and seeing the looks from everyone up there. Back to being a dev unit. Just another failed idea.

Oh. Ugh. And maybe... without Doctor Dan?

A shiver worked down her back. Dev forced herself to set aside her worry and focus on her work. Her work was important, and she knew Jess was counting on her to get them home.

Home. Dev swallowed hard and got everything online, slipping her ear cups on and tuning comms to listen. The external sensors of the carrier brought her the sound of the storm, and the crackling of ice and she nearly jumped when Jess very gently curled her hand around a warm cup. "Oh!"

"Take it easy." Jess patted her on the back. "Don't freak out on me, okay?"

Dev took a sip of the hot liquid. "I won't." She said. "I don't even know what a freak is, much less how to get one out." She

exhaled slowly. "I hope the storm stops soon. I don't want us to get in trouble."

"It's gonna be fine, Dev." Jess said. "We'll work it all out when we get back. We don't.. I don't think we have enough information to know what's going on anyway."

"Okay."

Jess let her hands drop onto Dev's shoulders, but she remained quiet. She watched the ruffled water as she started up an absent, gentle massage, listening to her partner swallow. As she felt her own breathing come under control, the tension under her fingertips relaxed.

Dev glanced at the comp. "I think met is showing a break." She said. "Should we go?"

"Go." Jess said, releasing her and returning to her console, dropping into her seat and fastening the body restraints as she felt the rumble of the engines as the power to them increased. She reached over and picked up her own tea cup, leaning back as the landing jets fired and they started to move.

She had a little time, now. Time for them to fly from where they were to the base, a long flight since they wouldn't be stopping at Quebec to break it.

Time for her to think, and to consider things. Review all the comp. "Want a snack, Dev? I'll fire something up once we get clear of the ice."

There was a long moment's silence, then her pilot cleared her throat. "I'm not really hungry, thank you."

Jess sighed and closed her eyes. Plenty of time to deal with her freaking out tech. "Yeah me either."

Maybe too much time.

**

It was dark and there was another storm. Dev blinked and rubbed her eyes, focusing hard on the forward scan that filled in details of their path she couldn't see through the window. Her shoulders were tense, and she was tired, but she'd kept quite the last few hours while Jess worked over the comp in her station.

A glance in the mirror showed her partner leaning forward, staring at the comp pad with her elbows resting on her knees and her chin braced on her fists, a perceptible furrow creasing her forehead.

Dev went back to her controls, flexing her hands a little as she checked the course. She had the carrier on autonav, but the weather was shoving them around a lot, and she didn't want to stray too far from the throttles.

Deciding they were on safe course for the moment, though, she triggered the release on her strapping and stood up, stretching her body out as she walked quietly over to the drink dispenser.

"How's met?" Jess asked, after a moment.

"We are going around the edge of a storm." Dev answered promptly, as she selected a beverage and watched it be assembled. "I think once we get past it our flight will be smoother."

"Anything on comms?"

"No." Dev took her cup and turned, leaning against the console and regarding her partner. "Just two nav beacons on autonomous."

Jess leaned back in her chair and put her hands behind her head. "That's strange." She said. "Should be some chatter." She regarded Dev's slim form, encased in it's lined jumpsuit. "Do an all scan and see if you pick anything up. At the least, Northern should be checking in – we're not far from there."

Dev nodded, "I will." She said. "Do you think someone saw or heard the other machine blowing up?"

Jess's lips tensed into a smile. "You'd think, huh? That old training cave is inside Northern's scan range. I should get them on comms and tell them I took care of their pirate problem for them."

"I think they will be surprised."

"I think you're right." Jess pulled a pad over and synced comms to her station. She put her headset on and tapped out a code, setting the comms channel to scan the local bandwidths. "Let's see if they have a beacon out."

Dev went back to her seat, but didn't take it. She stood by her chair watching the consoles, giving her back a chance to straighten and lose it's stiffness. She could feel the rumble of the carrier's engines through the soles of her boots, and she resisted the urge to close her eyes.

She was still upset, and still worried about Doctor Dan. But she was also tired, and looking forward to getting back to the citadel. Maybe Jess was right, and they had more information about what had happened, and then they could figure out what to do about it.

Maybe they were already doing something about it – she thought maybe the man Bain might have sent someone out already, to try and help, or at least find out where they were taking him.

She hoped so. Maybe by the time they got back to the citadel, it would be over and Doctor Dan would be safe. Dev leaned against the front console and looked out into the darkness. It would be nice to get just some time to rest and sleep, she reasoned, in the comfortable bed in her quarters.

“Huh.”

Dev turned, and saw the frown on Jess's face. “What's wrong?”

“Not getting anything on scan.” Jess muttered. “Not even a listening beacon.”

“What does that mean?”

Jess folded her arms over her chest. “I'm not sure.” She admitted. “It could just be met interference. Happens sometimes, or maybe the rig at Northern got knocked offline. That happens sometimes too.” Her eyes flicked over the pad. “I don't want to send a squirt out – it'll ident us.”

Dev set her cup into its holder and walked back over to where her partner was sitting, coming round the side of the weapons console and looking at the comms display Jess had up. The spectrum was empty, that she could see herself, without even the background scatter she was used to flickering once in a while. “That is quiet.”

“Too quiet.” Jess said. Then she exhaled and pulled the pad over, bringing up the control surface and keying in an encrypted data channel. “I didn't really want to do this.”

Dev just watched quietly, one hand on the back of Jess's seat, as she finished setting up the call request and initiated it. She pressed her ear cup a little more firmly and concentrated, as they waited for a response.

For a very long moment there was nothing. Then a soft burble sounded and the comms link went from pulsing to green.

“Ten, ten.” Jess said.

“Ack.” The response came back.

“Inbound, passed North. No sig.” Jess reported.

“Ack.” The response repeated. “Standby.”

Jess settled back in her seat. “Least we got a response.” She remarked. “I wonder if they heard something.”

“Drake.”

The voice coming back startled both of them, and made Jess lean forward. “Here, sir.” She started moving her knee in a nervous motion.

“Don't bother with North.” Bain said. “Where the hell have you been?”

“As far as Market Island, sir. Had to transfer back via boat, steal a pirate's old carrier, blow that up, get my bus back, and now we're inbound.” Jess said, succinctly. “Situation?”

“Just get here as soon as you can, Drake.” Bain said. “We've got trouble.”

Jess felt a mixture of excitement and pleasure, along with a tinge of apprehension. “Ack.” She fell back into battle speech.

“Tell him about Doctor Dan?” Dev whispered, anxiously watching her face.

Jess hesitated, then triggered the comms again. “Sir.”

“Drake?”

“We spotted two black trans outbound with battle damage.”

Now the silence was on the other end. “Ah.” Bain finally said. “Interesting coincidence.”

Jess and Dev exchanged looks. “I'll squirt the comp.” Jess said, when the silence continued. “We saw activity.”

“Do not bother, Drake. Just get here.” Bain said. “Out.”

Jess studied the closed channel for a moment, then she reached up and canceled the subcarrier. “So.”

Dev went back to her area and sat down in her pilot's chair, triggering the restraints. She leaned forward into flight position, and ran her eyes over the controls, trying hard not to throw up her recently drunk tea. “So I guess you were correct.” She said, after a minute. “They wouldn't send us.”

“No I figured they wouldn't” Jess answered quietly. “They knew what my vector was. They'd have rerouted us when they sent the recall.”

“I see.”

“Sorry, Dev.”

“It's all right.” Dev said, after a bit.

Jess got up and came over, sitting down on the carrier deck next to her chair and leaning back against the console. She extended her long legs out and sighed. “Let's wait until we get back there and find out what happened.” She said. “I know I keep saying that, but I don't know what else to tell you.”

Dev glanced down at her. “It really is okay.” She said. “I just remembered something that Doctor Dan once told me. He said it was so important to get all the facts first, before you do something because, for example, if you're thinking of walking out a door, it would be very helpful to know first if there was vacuum outside.”

Her partner chuckled softly. “Yeah.” She acknowledged. “It's a hoary old saying in the corps. Know what teeth are in the mouth you're sticking your hand into.” She reached over and put her hand on Dev's calf. “Glad you get that.”

Dev did get it. She wasn't entirely sure she agreed with it, but she understood that she had very few options to do anything else. One of the other things she'd learned from Doctor Dan was patience, and now she knew she had to be patient and wait to see what would happen.

“Want some rations?” Her partner asked. “We've got another twelve to the base.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “But maybe we could get some rest. My eyes are bothering me.” She admitted. “We're past the storm now and met's clear the rest of the way.”

Jess smiled more easily. “In that case, let me get the bunks set up. Chances are we don't get any downtime when we get back so we'll take advantage of some good weather now.” She got up and patted Dev's shoulder, heading back to the rear of the carrier to put the sleep platform in place.

She wasn't sure if she should feel anxious or not. The fact they'd gotten Bain on the wire as soon as she called in seemed like it was a good thing, but he'd sounded pissed off about her taking so much time to get back. She pulled the shelf down into place, and popped the doors on the sleep bag storage, tugging the two plush bags out and sliding them into place.

Well, she'd been halfway across the planet on a mission. Jess patted the two bags and turned to rummage in the ration case when she stopped, staring into it as her mind registered what she was doing. She looked over at Dev, who was taking readings and adjusting knobs, pretty much what a tech was supposed to do, but here she was not only catering to her partner but enjoying doing so.

What the hell?

“Thank you.” Dev had joined her. “Should I get you some tea?”

“Um.” Jess pulled out two ration kits and handed her one. “Yeah, sure.. ah. Thanks.” She sat down on one of the fold out stools and opened her meal. It was fish rolls and mushroom cakes, and just looking at it felt like being back in the citadel. “That stuff on the boat was better than most of this.”

Dev was seated next to her, busy with her own box. “Do you not like it?” She took a bite of the fish roll. “I think it's fine. A lot better than some of the things we had in the creche.” She felt a sense of anxiety thinking about that suddenly, a mental image of being back there, at those tables, looking at those sterile trays coming up into her mind. “The food on the boat was good too, but the best thing was those shrimps.”

“In Quebec?”

“Yes.”

It seemed so long ago. Jess smiled, and bit into her fish roll. “We'll get back there again.” She said. “Y'know they have a winter festival in a month or two. We can go for that. Most of the citadel does.”

“Is that like a party?”

“A little.” Jess felt herself relaxing. “But it's more fun.”

Dev remained quiet for a while while she ate. “I think I'd like that very much.” She finally said, when they were almost finished. “I hope we get a chance to do it.”

“We will. I promise.” Jess put her wrapping away in the recycling bin and unzipped her jumpsuit, stripping it off and letting it hang from her waist. She sat down on the edge of the sleeping platform and pulled the aid kit from the drawer underneath it, removing a cleaning pad and wiping off the almost healed wound on her shoulder.

Dev put her wrappings away and finished her tea, setting the cup into the holder and walking over to the sleeping shelf. She pulled the catches down on her lined over-suit and took it off, feeling a sense of slight chill as she folded it up and tucked it neatly into one of the two lockers built into the carrier wall.

That left her in her under-suit, and she sat down on the shelf, letting her legs dangle as she waited for Jess to finish. “Your

cut is almost gone.”

“Yeah.” Jess had smeared some antiseptic cream on the jagged line. “Just don't like to take chances, specially after that damn stab in the back.”

Dev reached out and stroked her arm, tracing the burned in patterns. “Jess, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Jess eyed her partner.

“Can I get one of these, when we get back?”

Jess stopped moving. “One of what.. one of these?” She pointed at her markings, watching her partner nod. “You don't have to do that, Dev. Techs don't.”

“I know. You said that.” Dev said, in a calm voice “But... if they do end up sending me back I would like to have one, so I can remember it.” She looked away. “And remember you.”

Jess merely sat there, stunned. Both by the bio alt's words and by the gut wrenching upset they stirred in her. She opened her mouth to deny the possibility and then stopped, finding herself unwilling to lie to her partner. Or to herself for that matter.

She let her hand fall and exhaled. “Yeah, okay. If you really want one I'll do it for you.” She said. “Give you one for the last run we did, and this one even though we didn't finish it out.”

Dev nodded in what looked like relief. “Thank you.” She said. “I'm sorry if that caused you discomfort.”

Jess finished her tending. “Yeah well it's gonna cause me a lot more discomfort if they try to send you back because they're going to have to go through me to do it.” She pulled up her under-suit and stripped out of the jumpsuit, draping it over the bars and hoisting herself up onto the sleeping platform next to Dev. “Discomfort to the point of blowing my head off. Lay down. Let's get some rest.”

The lights dimmed as they both settled down next to each other, the soft rumble of the engines sending a rhythmic vibration through them. Jess folded her hands over her stomach and looked up at the overhead, visible in the dim lighting as a blur of gray dark weave.

After a few minutes she turned her head, to see Dev curled up on her side, head resting on her arm, eyes closed. As she watched the bio alt's face, those eyes opened and met hers. She felt like a physical thing the sadness there, and she reached out to put her hand on Dev's arm. “We'll be okay, Dev.”

Dev smiled, and put her fingers over Jess's, letting her eyes close again.

Jess closed her own eyes and let her mind go still, only to be nudged by a memory that surprised her. Her father, in one of the few, last meetings they'd had before he'd been taken by the other side when he'd joined her for an unexpected dinner, at the citadel.

She hadn't even know he was visiting. He had just shown up t the entrance to her quarters that night and she'd been so happy to see him she hadn't thought to ask him why.

Plain dinner, just talk about home, and family, and her progress in the corps. She'd said something about them, and us, and her father had swirled his drink in his cup and sipped it, watching her over it's rim.

“Jesslyn. Those are powerful words, us and them.” He'd told her. “Be careful. One day you might find yourself to be the us, and this..” He'd circled his finger to include the citadel. “Might be them.”

She hadn't understood then. But now, lying here in the dim light, she suddenly did because when she'd just said 'We'll be okay.’ Her and Dev had been we, and Interforce had somehow, become them.

Jess wished, now, that she'd asked him if he'd ever had that happen. She knew he hadn't met their mother until after he retired, but something somehow, now in her memory told her there had been a personal knowledge there

Hm.

**

Dev took the controls as they came within range of the citadel. From the outside, the huge cliffside looked unharmed, and in the pale gray light of midday there was little action to be seen around it. “Control, this is BR27006, inbound.” She enunciated carefully into the comms, once short range beam had come up.

“BR27006, acknowledge.” Control came back in response. “Stand by for deck open.”

“Sounds normal.” Jess commented, from her fully strapped down and activated position. She had her hands on the weapons controls and the guns had power, but were for the moment quiescent.

Having little to compare it against, Dev just nodded. She curved the carrier around the craggy peak and then slowed to

hover, as the hanger roof started to peel back.

She felt well, and rested. They had slept almost all the way back, and she'd woken to find herself tucked into Jess's arms which had surprised her but in a very good way.

It wasn't even raining. Hadn't been for several hours, and Dev wondered if they might have a minute or two to go to that little shelf and look out at the sea.

The roof finished retracting, and Dev tipped the carrier forward a little, inspecting her path before she settled lower and engaged the landing jets. "We're entering the bay."

She saw the weapons active indicators switch off, as she gently moved lower into the cavern, descending through the rings of lights. "Control, this is BR27006 requesting a landing pad."

"Stand by, BR27006."

Dev could see a lot of activity around the cavern, there were at least ten carriers on pads, and four more in tech prep, more than she'd seen there before.

"BR27006, please land pad 67, stay to taxi path."

"Acknowledged." The bio alt located the slot and boosted a little, sliding over and then descending to the pad where she could see a tech team waiting for them. She let the carrier down lightly and then cut the jets, shunting power back from the engines to the battery store.

Despite how discomfiting it all was, she was glad to be back in the citadel. There was a safety there that made certain parts of her relax having the solid walls around them. "Landed."

"Felt it." Jess shut down her station and released her restraints. "Send the logs and let's get our gear off."

Dev waited for the hookup to latch on, and the lights went out briefly as they switched to ground power. She ran through the shutdown process and saw from the corner of her eye the bio alt crew coming in to service them. No foam spray this time, just quiet, serious faces intent on the external ports and the engine servicing.

"Bet they're glad we brought it back in one piece this time." Jess chuckled.

"Almost. There is some damage to the rear, and one side." Dev said, mournfully. "But not like last time." She saw the incoming log request and set up the sync, then shut the comp down. "Done."

Jess was standing in the rear, stuffing things in her pack. "Busy outside."

"Very." Dev had carefully finished putting her things away and swung her pack to her back, cinching the straps tight and walking back to join her partner. "Okay to open the hatch?"

"Sure." Jess got her pack closed and ran one final check on the weapons rack, making sure all the portables were shut down. She got behind Dev as the hatch opened, blinking a little at the flood of mechanical chaos that flooded in. "Wow."

A speaker clicked on overhead. "Drake, NM-Dev-1, to debrief, urgent."

"Ah." Jess felt paradoxically relieved. "Let's go, Devvie." She followed the bio alt down the ramp and onto the walkway, lifting a hand to return the greeting of some of the senior mechs. "Let's find out what the hell's going on."

Dev paused and stepped a little to the side to let Jess get ahead of her, and then she followed down the hall and through the gateway into the security passage that led to the debrief rooms. There was no one else heading that way, and they didn't meet anyone.

Jess paused before the door and put her hand on the pad. "Drake, NM-Dev-1 for debrief."

The door slid open immediately and they went inside. A fraction of a second later, Stephen Bock and Bain entered from the other door, both looking harried and upset.

"Stephen." Jess greeted their supervisor. "Sir." She gave Bain a nod, as she sat down in one of the comfortable chairs.

"Sorry it took us so long to get back here. We were far outland."

"So you said." Bain leaned against the table. "Glad you are finally back." He turned his attention to Dev. "And you too, my dear."

"Sir." Dev replied briefly, folding her hands on the table.

Bock sat down and rubbed his temples. "Where do I start?"

"Agent Drake already knows part of the matter." Bain said. "Since she saw the transports, and I assume by the way she said it, the unwilling passenger aboard."

"It's in the comp." Jess said. "But yes, we saw Doctor Kurok."

Bain studied her. "And you didn't go after them?"

Jess leaned back in her seat. "We weren't in our carrier at the time." She said. "We were in an old rig being used by ice pirates to give Interforce a bad name. Wouldn't have lasted five minutes in chasing them."

Both men blinked at her.

"Ice pirates?" Stephen Bock repeated. "We got a squirt about that from Northern. Said you'd gone crazy looking for ice pirates in the Northlands."

"So crazy I found them." Jess said, in a mild voice. "More to the point, they found me, attacking a fishing craft halfway through no man's land."

They both blinked again.

"I added the information to the comp transfer." Dev spoke up for the first time. "I got it on the portable scanner."

Bain and Bock looked at each other. "This rather changes matters." Bain said cryptically. "Drake, how close did you get to target?"

"We'd just left Market Island when we were recalled." Jess said. "So probably.. six hours?"

"Shit." Bock cursed. "It was a double cross."

Jess looked from him to Bain. "Mind telling us what's going on?" She asked. "We were damn close to terminus on this." She indicated the screen. "Roll comp. See for yourself."

Bain grunted and sat down. "As Bock here said, where to start."

"I don't even think the beginning will help." Bock covered his eyes with one hand. "Shit."

**

Dev regarded the stone wall in her shower, the slate dark from the water she was standing in the path of. It felt wonderful, hot and mineral scented as it warmed her body and rinsed all the travel stains off her. She soaped herself clean and rinsed off, then shut the water down and got out to dry herself.

She put on fresh underthings and a clean off-shift jumpsuit and settled behind her workspace, regarding her quarters and thinking about everything she'd just learned.

The transports had been an envoy from the other side coming to talk – a truce, caused by the destruction she and Jess had caused. Scientists, they had met with Bain, and Doctor Dan too, and Doctor Dan had agreed to go with them, along with some other Interforce people to a place to sit and talk, in a neutral area.

So Jess had been right. Exactly right when she had said they didn't know everything.

They had been recalled along with all the other teams so that nothing bad would happen while they were talking. Dev understood that well, and Jess had nodded, too. That would have put the people talking in danger, and if they had reacted then maybe Doctor Dan and the others would have been killed.

So Jess had been doubly right.

But then they had gotten a message, short and desperate, saying it was all wrong, and Doctor Dan and the others were being taken back to the bad guys place.

And then the people at North Base had tried to stop them.

They didn't know what happened there, but no communication had been had from that base since.

Jess had been very angry at all of them, asking how they could have believed the other side wanted a truce? Bain had just said sometimes you have to take a chance.

Take a chance? Dev exhaled. So now Doctor Dan, and the people from Interforce were somewhere being held and they couldn't do anything about it because everyone thought they would be hurt if they tried to get them back.

So they were trying to figure out what to do, and that's also why they hadn't just sent them after the transports.

It would have been very wrong for them to chase the transports. Dev felt a little humble, remembering what she'd thought about letting them go, and why they hadn't just gone to help.

But all the teams were here now and surely, they would make a plan, and just as surely, that plan would include her and Jess because Bain had even said they had been waiting for the to get back to decide what they were going to do about it. The man Bock had said it was a shame they'd recalled them in fact, because if they had finished their mission, they would have something to bargain with them with and now they really didn't.

Bain said he thought the whole thing was to get them to stop Jess from her mission, and that Jess should be very flattered

because they had turned over half the earth in the assumption that she'd have been successful.

Jess did seem happy about that, in a reserved kind of way. Dev had just found herself wondering why Doctor Dan had decided to go with them. He was smart. Wouldn't he have realized how unusual the request was?

Dev left off thinking for a while and got up, going to her dispenser and retrieving some kack and a package of the small seaweed crackers. She took them up to her relaxation area and lay down on the couch, very glad to have a few minutes just to sit quietly and what was it Jess had called it? Decompress.

Which was really strange because where she came from, decompression was definitely not something anyone would find relaxing.

She sipped her drink and opened her crackers, nibbling on them and stretching her body out along the comfortable couch with a sense of contentment. Jess had told her she had some time before they would be expected to do anything else – she was doing something, and said maybe when she finished they would go get some rad.

But right now, she could just lay back and have her crackers and be glad she wasn't having to drive something. She paused as she heard sounds in the next room, the door closing and two voices.

Jess's, of course, and she thought the other one might be Jason.

Maybe Jess was getting her mark. Dev considered that, and hoped her partner would remember that she'd asked to get one too. She wasn't sure Jess really approved of it, but the more she thought about it, the more she really wanted one. If nothing, nothing else, if she ended up going back to the creche for sure she'd be the only one there with one.

Unique. Dev regarded the ceiling. Unique even if they made another of her set, because that other Dev wouldn't have this mark. Only she would have it and she wanted that.

She faintly heard Jess laugh, and the male voice raise in exasperation. Then she pulled her book from her jumpsuit pocket and opened it up, bracing it against one upraised knee as she sipped her drink and started to read.

After a few pages, her comms beeped. Surprised, Dev regarded the small, embedded unit, then she put her cup down and reached over to trigger it. "Hello."

"Ah, hello, is that Dev?"

"Yes." Dev responded. "Clint?"

"Yeah, yea, it's Clint. I heard you guys got back and just wanted to know if there was anything special you needed checked on the bus."

Dev considered that thoughtfully. "The port side took a pretty big hit and the rear panel." She said. "We escaped a cone and ended up in an ice cave for shelter."

".. a cone?" Clint sounded confused.

"Yes, a big round thing in the storm, that made a lot of wind?"

"Oh. A tornado." Clint replied. "Got it, we'll check. Glad you'er back safe and sound."

Dev smiled. "Me too. It was a very exciting trip." She mentally marked down the tornado word, so she could call the cone the right thing the next time. "Thank you."

"Okay, well, later!" Clint said. "Bye."

"Bye" Dev closed the comms and nodded to herself. "He is a nice man." She decided, and she went back to her book, smiling when she came to one of her favorite parts.

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"Jason, don't start with me." Jess dropped into her chair and indicated the one across from her. "It's not my damn fault I was halfway across the planet when this all went down."

"It was crazy." Jason sprawled across from her. "I thought the whole friggen base had chewed weed. Peace talks? Truces? I mean, what the fuck?"

Jess lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "Maybe they thought they could game them." She said. "Bain didn't say why he did it. Just threw the facts at me."

"Crazy" Jason shook his head. "I hear maybe they went for North?"

"I passed North on the way in. No comms, no scan, no nothing." Jess said. "Dev couldn't even pick up a sideband."

Jason shook his head again. Then he eyed Jess. "How's the kid doing?" He asked. "See she brought your bus in right side up this time."

“She's fucking brilliant.” Jess said bluntly. “Best tech I've ever seen.”

“You shitting me?” Jason leaned forward. “She's been here two weeks.”

“Drives the bus.” Jess ticked off her fingers. “Drove an antique bus probably older than I am neither of us could have started up. Drove a damn fishing boat. Rigged the damn portable scanner to penetrate the water and find a god damned school of fish big enough to fill their whole tank.”

“No shit.”

“No shit.” Jess picked up her steaming cup of grog and sipped it. “Started off thinking this was bullshit but no more. Wouldn't trade her for nothing.”

“Huh.” Jason grunted. “At least the whole tech thing's settled down. No one thinks they're going to get a knife in the back so much. Everyone figured he was turned and that's it.”

Jess considered that. “Or that's what everyone wants to believe, either to avoid getting another bio alt or just because that's what they want to believe.”

Jason shrugged. “We're working again.” He said. “The other newbs are settling down.” He studied Jess. “Sandy didn't respond to recall.”

Jess straightened up. “What?”

“Was out on a recon south. Got a positive accept on the recall, but no response. No one's heard from her for two days.”

Jason watched her face. “Comp lost contact with her signal after the recall. Bock's going to send a team out to see if they see any thing at her last coordinates.”

“Damn.” Jess frowned. “I saw a couple of the regulars at Quebec. Couple more at Market Island, and the old shark was at the fishery. No one came after me though. Market boys made me, and I offed Brenegan.”

“Yeah?” Jason looked surprised. “Didn't hear that on the recap in ops.”

“Just filed.” She indicated the pad. “Wanted to make sure Dev got all her props. She handled being in the out lands like an old timer.”

Jason smiled a little. “You like her.”

Jess looked away, then back at him. “Yeah, I really do.” She said in a straightforward tone. “Never worked with another female before. A lot less of that competitive crap.” She opened the desk storage and removed a bag, opening it and pulling something out. She tossed it to him. “Here. Fell all over the deck of the boat when Dev got us out of that damn volcano going off on Market.”

Jason whistled, and his eyes widened. “Wow. Nice one!” He held the black diamond up to the light. “Clean!”

“Big blast.”

He glanced at her. “For me?” He held the stone up, grinning when she nodded. “Sweet! Thanks bud.” He tucked the diamond away. “You give one to Dev?” He asked, with a teasing tone to his voice.

“She's got her own bag.” Jess responded dryly. “I split the take with her. Only fair since I'd be fish food if she hadn't figured out how to out power two long guns heading out after us.”

“She' allowed to own that stuff? She is a jelly bag, remember.” Jason remarked. “I don't' think they own stuff.”

“She's a field tech and they do own stuff.” Jess said. “Let em argue with me about it. Can't have it both ways, Jase – if she's got her life on the line for us, and doing the job – you can't come back and say she's just a bio.”

“Huh.” He grunted. “Well, anyway.. you want your mark? I figure we're all gonna be headed outbound real soon so might as well do it now.” He removed the heat gun that had been holstered at his hip. “Too bad you didn't get to go all the way on it, Jess. I heard talk in the mess it would have been a real big score.”

Jess stood up and came around the side of the workspace, unfastening her jumpsuit and pulling it down. “Yeah.” She took the seat next to Jason and braced her arm. “So give me two kills, and two levels. Leave the third level blank – who knows? Maybe I'll get to go back.”

“No med for you this time though.”

Jess smiled. “No, just this hit.” She touched her chest, and the fading wound. “And that was my own stupidity, on the boat. That's where the first kill was.”

“Guy you asked for ident on?”

“Yeah. He was with the pirates. Led the attack on the boat.” She indicated the bag. “I brought back his tags. Was he active? Name wasn't familiar.”

“Disappeared. Used to be one of Sydney's boys.” Jason heated up the gun and put his hand on Jess's arm, picturing the pattern he was going to burn into her skin. “Way I heard it there was some kind of three way action going between this guy, and Sydney and his tech.”

“Huh.” Now it was Jess's turn to grunt, and she did, taking a deep breath as she heard the gun trigger. “They were working the Northlands.. maybe he was doing it to trash old Syd's rep.”

“Ready.”

“Go.” Jess closed her eyes, as the heat and pain started. “Maybe that's why he shut down when I asked him about the pirates.”

“And why he sent that squirt.” The soft sizzle of burning flesh was loud between them. Jason carefully traced the outline of the mark. “Bastard's always had it in for you.”

“I screwed him over.” Jess kept her breathing even. “He has reason.”

“Does he? Way I heard it he brought it on himself.” Jason said. “Color.”

The buzz changed slightly and the burn became more intense. Jess kept her head down, the pain bothering her more than usual. Maybe she was still tired. “Yeah maybe.” She exhaled. “Dev wants me to give her one of these.”

The buzz stopped and Jason leaned forward to look her in the eye. “What?”

Jess blinked at him. “What part of that didn't you get?” She asked. “Finish the damn thing so I can stop sweating.”

The buzz resumed and she closed her eyes again, and the silence extended until it was finally over. Jess straightened up and ran her fingers through her hair, glancing at the red raw burn on her arm “Thanks.”

Jason put the gun down. “Did I hear you right? Your rag doll wants a mark?”

Jess erupted up out of her seat so fast it startled both of them and the loud crack as her fist hit his face echoed harshly against the walls. “Don't fucking call her that!” She lunged at him and took them both to the floor, seeing red in her vision as growl emerged from her throat.

“Jess! Jess!” Jason rolled onto his back and put his hands flat on the floor. “Jess! Hold it! Stop! I'm sorry!” He kept his breathing steady as he saw the ice cold eyes bore right through him. “I'm down. I'm sorry Jess. Sorry.”

For a moment the mask didn't change – and then Jess's eyes blinked and she released him, rocking back to take the weight of her knee off his chest. “That's my partner.” Jess rasped. “Don't you say crap about her like that.”

“Okay.” He held his hands up. “Sorry, Jess. Didn't mean to trigger you.”

Jess half stood and dropped back into the chair. “Yeah, been a long couple of days.” She rested her elbows on her knees and exhaled. “Just don't be an asshole, okay?”

“Hey.” He got up and cautiously sat down in the other chair. “Maybe I'm jealous.” He watched the tremors in her hands, wound up until they started to ease. “I'm not used to them being more than custodials, Jess. You've worked with her I haven't.”

“Yeah I know.” She slowly leaned back, feeling exhausted. “If we go out together, you'll see.” She glanced at him, then got up and went to the sanitary unit, grabbing a cloth and wetting it, then bringing it back over “Here.”

He wiped his face, studying the blood that stained it. “You always had a truly kick ass punch.” He stated mournfully. “She must be good cause you never hit me for dissing a tech before no matter where they came from.”

A soft knock came at the inner door, and after a pause it opened and Dev poked her head inside. “Everything correct in here?” She asked. “I heard a noise.”

“You heard your partner breaking my nose.” Jason told her. “And I'll be on my way to med to get a reduction kit and plas.” He got up and reached for the burn gun, but Jess put her hand over it. “Right. See you folks later.” He kept the cloth against his face as he left, and the door slid shut behind him.

Dev crossed the floor with a diffident expression, sliding her book into her thigh pocket. “Are you all right?”

Jess gestured her towards the other chair. “Yeah, I'm fine. Just got ticked off at something he said.” She propped her arm upon the desk. “He just finished giving me this.”

Dev leaned closer to examine the mark. “Oh.” She clasped her hands. “Can I get that one?”

Jess grimaced. “You really want one?” She asked. “It hurts. Really hurts.”

“Yes, I do.” Dev responded at once. “Will you do it? I'd rather if you would.” She reached over and put her hands over Jess's. “That would make it very special.”

Jess felt her heart rate settle, and her body relax as she looked into Dev's eyes. The anger finally leached out, and with it went the twitching and the urge to hurt something. It had surprised her, that reaction but now seeing the look of somber affection bathing her, it didn't surprise her any more.

She was caught. A faint smile appeared on her face. "I'll do it." She leaned forward and brushed her lips against Dev's. "And maybe we'll get lucky and we'll get a night at home tonight."

Dev's eyes brightened, and she grinned. "I'd like that."

"Me too." Jess picked up the burn gun and adjusted it. "Take your suit down, partner. Let's make you a marked one."

Dev felt a sense of crazy pride erupt in her. She undid the catches on her jumpsuit and pulled it down to her waist like Jess's was, straightening in the chair and tucking her boots under it. "Go ahead."

Jess put a hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eye. "It's really going to hurt." She warned her. "A point of pride with us is, you don't scream."

"Okay." Dev agreed. "I'm ready."

"I hope I am." Her partner muttered, as she got the gun into position. "Hang on, here we go."

Dev heard the buzz a brief instant before it touched her arm, and then she blinked, as a searing pain lanced into her skin. It built faster than she'd expected, and she only barely had time to focus past it before her body reacted. She concentrated on her own heartbeat, hearing the hammering in her inner ear as the buzz grew and faded, and then grew again.

It did, as Jess had warned, really hurt. But she'd learned how to deal with that in the creche, in the long hours and days of various tests and trials and the brief training on what it would be like if they did wrong and had to face discipline. So she thought of other things, of the things she'd shared with Jess, and their missions so far, and the cones, and the shrimps at Quebec and...

The buzz stopped. The pain didn't, but now Jess was putting her hand on Dev's knee and she knew it was over. She opened her eyes and looked at her partner. "Did I do okay?"

Jess's lips tensed into a smile, one that warmed her eyes as well. "Like you'd been taking them for years." She said. "Let me get some cream for ya, and for mine too." She got up and went to the sanitary area, disappearing for a moment.

Dev took that time to look at her arm, which now had two areas of horribly reddened, burned skin visible. The pain was vivid, but it was now a throbbing ache rather than being on fire and she examined the pattern with a sense of lightheaded fascination.

They started at the tip of her left shoulder, one set with some colored balls and bars, and then the second, with only two colored balls and an empty bar on the bottom. It was fuzzy and indistinct looking, due to the swelling but she could see when it healed it would look like the brown marks that patterned Jess's arms.

That made her very happy, happy enough not to mind the pain. She looked up at Jess as her partner returned, and studied her new marks. "It's almost the same except for this bit." She indicated a small area on her skin.

"Uh huh." Jess carefully smeared some healing cream on herself, then turned her attention to Dev. "That little bit is mine. It means you are."

Dev felt lightheaded again. "I'm.. yours?"

"Yes." Jess gently treated the burns she'd made on Dev's arm. "You are my partner, right?"

"Absolutely."

Jess finished putting a light gauze bandage on her, and handed her a small jar of the cream. "Put it on often. It'll help it heal." She said. "Hungry?"

"Yes."

"Let's go get some chow." She eased the jumpsuit up over Dev's shoulders and fastened it. "Know what?"

Dev flexed her hands a little, and gave a small nod. "No, what?"

"Glad you did that." Jess leaned forward and kissed her again and this time it went on for a while and she felt her breathing shorten as Dev's hands fit themselves along her ribs making her nape hairs prickle. It felt insanely good and it was very hard not to unfasten her partner's suit and move over to the bed.

So hard. Dev's breath tickled her collarbone and then their lips met again and she knew she either had to pull back or take it forward and finally the newly scorched skin on her arm tipped the balance. Jess let her head rest against her partners and savored the moment, as Dev very gently put her arms around her and gave her a hug.

That made her smile. She exhaled regretfully and stepped back, fastening her own suit and running her fingers through her

hair. "I sure hope we won't be heading out until tomorrow.

Dev produced a rakish grin. "I hope so too." She admitted. "But I think it would be good to hurt a little less first." She regarded her arm. "You were right."

Jess ruffled her hair.

The bio alt shifted her gaze back to Jess. "You were also right about going after Doctor Dan. I'm sorry I gave you discomfort over that."

Jess rested her arms on her shoulders. "Trust me, Dev. I learned the hard way so you maybe won't have to." She grinned briefly. "C'mon. Let's go to the mess, then you can come back here and help me unpack this stuff of my father's my brother had sent here."

Dev regarded the bags and containers tucked against the wall. "Sure." She followed Jess out of the door. "What is it?"

"What was left in the house." Jess evaded the moving bodies in the busy hallway. "Maybe you'll get lucky and get to see a picture of me as a kid."

Dev smiled and put the ache of her arm aside. "Excellent."

**

[Continued in Part 17](#)