

Partners

Part 9

Dev ducked back into her quarters, half out of breath as she let the door close and took a moment to sit down and think about what she needed to do next.

She'd just taken the carrier through it's flight certification, a first for her, and she was very pleased when the check out pilot had signed her off after a single round of tests.

Very good. Even though the pilot had been grumpy, and seemed not to like her. He'd muttered something about barbie dolls, which she had no idea of the meaning of, and finally just keyed in his okay and told her to land.

She had, and then gotten Jess's call to get herself ready, and now here she was. The problem was, she really wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to be doing besides getting into her pilot's jumpsuit and collect her helmet.

A shower seemed appropriate, though, so she hauled herself to her feet and slipped into the wet room, shucking out of her work coverall and into the warm stream of water, it's pulsing pressure feeling very good against her skin as she washed the dust and grime off it.

The soap smelled nice and felt even better, and she gladly scrubbed her hair to rid it of both silcon and sweat. She let the hot water pound against her for a minute, then she shut it off and shook herself hard sending droplets against the wall with tiny little spitting sounds. "Ahh."

Then she picked up a folded towel and started drying herself off, wrapping the towel around her and tucking the end in as Jess had taught her before she ran her comb through her hair.

"Hey!" Jess's voice echoed as the inner door opened. "Dev?"

"In here." Dev called out. "I was just taking a shower." She was glad she'd finally gotten the word for it in her mental storage, and could now call it by it's proper name. She glanced to her left as Jess poked her head in and gave her companion a smile. "Hello."

Jess was in the simple undergarment she wore under her heavy jumpsuit. It was a mild gray in color and hugged her body. "We'll have to pack a kit." She said. "A lot more stuff than the last time."

"I thought that was possibly so." Dev turned. "I just wanted to get clean first."

"So I see." Jess grinned. "Carrier all done?"

"Yes." Dev nodded positively. "All ready to go." She followed Jess out into the larger part of her space. "Do you know a person named Davis?"

"Ahhugh." Jess stopped and turned, regarding her wryly. "Johnson Davis? Crotchety old bastard who doesn't have a good word to say for anyone and looks like he sleeps in his clothes?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Jess indicated the pack that had come in box Bain had sent. "That's what you use for the kit."

"He was the one who did the flight check on the carrier with me. He seemed to be in some kind of discomfort." Dev reported. "So I was wondering."

"He's an asshole." Jess wandered over to cabinet and studied the corner of it.

"Um. Okay." Dev got into a pair of underwraps, then a twin of the suit Jess was wearing that felt nice and soft against her skin. "Does he feel uncomfortable about my being a bio alt?"

"No. He just hates women. He probably isn't even aware you're a bio alt." Jess told her. "He's the one thing Sandy and I agree on."

"Oh." Dev eyed her. "I see."

"So here." Jess started pointing. "You'll need the jacket, a couple of extra undersuits, and one of those colored jumps like that blue one. We don't wear blacks in places like Cape Quebec."

“Okay.” Dev neatly folded the items and fit them into the pack. “Why not?”

“Hm.” Jess held a hand up. “Okay, let’s sit down a minute and talk about being outside.” She motioned towards the chairs. Dev detoured over to her drink dispenser and got out two containers, then came over and handed Jess one before they both sat down.

“Thanks.” Jess studied the container, before she opened it and took a sip. “So you decided you like this stuff?” She held up the kack.

“Yes, it seems so.” Dev smiled. “It’s a little fizzy, and that’s very interesting to my tongue.”

“Aha.” Jess cleared her throat a little. “Okay, so - the deal is this. When we’re here, we’re just who we are. You got that right?”

After a brief hesitation, Dev nodded. “I think so.”

“When we’re out there, most of the time we don’t want to be who we really are.” Jess said. “It’s not always safe.”

Dev’s eyes lit up a little. “Oh. You mean we’ll be undercover.” She pronounced the word carefully. “Pretending to be someone else, correct?”

Jess looked surprised. “Right.” She said. “Did they give you programming about that?”

“Yes.” Dev said. “That came in the job programming. Not specific things, but the need to do that.” She explained. “And how to hide and all that. I know the programmers and Doctor Dan were concerned because we do have this.” She touched her neck. “And that’s hard to hide.”

“Turtlenecks for you.” Jess smiled, then muffled a chuckle at the look of mild bewilderment on her partner’s face. Partner. Jess sighed internally. Didn’t I say I wasn’t going to do that again? So why did I? “It’s a shirt that has a high collar.” She explained. “You just have to remember not to take your clothes off outside.”

“Okay.” Dev amiably agreed. “I won’t.” She paused. “Well, not unless you tell me to.”

Jess shot her a quick look, and swore she saw a twinkle in those green eyes. “Riiiiight.” She drawled. “I’ll have to remember that.” She waited, but the bio alt’s expression remained mild and inquisitive. “Anyway, we usually put together a cover before we leave, and we get credentials issued to us that match that. Hang on.” She got up and went into her quarters.

“Hang on to what?” Dev wondered to herself. “Hang on to the chair?” She peered around. “To the cup?” She sat back as Jess returned, carrying a folder in her hands. “Hang on to you?”

Jess paused in mid step. “What?”

“Sorry.” Dev took a sip from her container. “I was just thinking about something.”

Jess sat down, leaning on one arm of the chair. “Okay.” She handed Dev a set of cards, and a holder. “This is yours.”

Dev accepted them, putting down her container and studying the materials. She blinked, when she realized the first set of cards was a citizens credentials, with her picture on it and an unfamiliar name. “This is very interesting.”

“Yeah, not bad.” Jess was sorting through hers. “So, when we go into Quebec let me do the talking.” She said. “The names they issued us are close enough to our own that it would be hard to slip up, but think about the name they gave you so you respond to it if anyone asks you about the card.”

“Right.” Dev agreed. “What’s yours” She peered at Jess’s card. “Oh, okay. I see.”

“When we get to the North Station, you just be yourself.” Jess said. “But in the outlands - don’t let on to anyone that you’re not a... what did you call us?”

“Natural born.” Dev said. “But they won’t call it that will they? So I’ll just be a regular person.”

Jess smiled a little. “Yes.” She paused. “Why natural born?”

“Well, because you are.” Dev said. “Born naturally.”

Jess considered that. “And you aren’t?”

“No. They make us up in test tubes.” Dev responded, with a brief grin. “The scientists, like Doctor Dan, select the genes and mix us up and then give us a little zap to get the division started. Then they put us in a shell, and once we outgrow that, into an incubator. Then they hatch us.”

Jess stared at her, blinking. “Are you messing with me?” She asked, after a brief silence.

“Messing.” Her pilot mused. “Is that like... are you asking me if I’m making a joke?” She watched Jess nod hesitantly. “No., that’s really how they do it. So .. that’s why we call you natural born.”

‘All righty then.’ Jess got up. “Lets get packed and get going. We’ve got a long trip ahead of us.” She toasted Dev with her drink. “Stick some of these and some crackers in your kit if you want - always good to have some extra with us.”

“Okay.” Dev got up and retrieved her pack, making sure everything was neatly tucked inside it, and taking Jess’s suggestion she added a few bottles of kack and several packets of the seaweed crackers. She also tucked a spare pare of underwraps inside, and a set of her sleeping clothes since she remembered Jess saying they would be gone for days.

Then, after a pause, she put her book inside the pack too. She sealed everything up, and went to the cabinet to take down her flight suit and get into it. It made her a little excited, feeling the heavier fabric close around her as she arranged the clips and feeds she would hook into the carrier.

She put her boots on, straightening up just as Jess poked her head in the door, her body encased in it’s familiar black semi armor. “Ready?” She asked the agent.

“Ready.” Jess said. “Grab your pack and let’s go to the hangar.”

Dev emptied her container, then she went back and picked up her pack, slinging it onto her back and adjust the straps. She ran her fingers through her hair, now mostly dry, and went into Jess’s quarters to find her seating her sidearm into it’s holster, her hair pulled back into a tail.

Jess shouldered her own pack and they exited their quarters, emerging into the random traffic of the after lunchtime shift change. They attracted some looks, Dev realized, people who caught their flight suits and possibly wondered were they were going.

People did, sometimes. She remembered the whispered speculation in the creche when sets were being sent on assignment, and her last talk like that with Gigi when she wondered if she would ever go.

Now, Dev had to laugh to herself, or maybe at herself for that. She certainly had gotten an assignment hadn’t she? They didn’t stop to talk to anyone, and in a few minutes they were at the hangar, moving across the vast open space towards the landing pad their carrier was sitting on.

Right where she left it. Dev noted. There were six or so bio alts scrambling around the outside, and the hatch was open, last minute details being taken care of as their launch time neared. The carrier was surrounded by faint wisps of offgassing and Dev could feel a distinct thrill as she took in the vehicles powerful outline.

“Looks good.” Jess said. “Nice work.”

Dev smiled. “I just did a small part.” She demurred. “There were many people working on it.”

They cleared around the last work pedestal and approached the pad. “Well.” Jess paused, studying the side. “The mech team thought you did a good enough job to put your name on it. Good sign.” She pointed at the side of the carrier, where Dev’s name had been stenciled right under hers.

“Oh!” Dev’s eyes widened. She slowed long enough to study the letters as they walked up the ramp, dodging an exiting bio alt who was carrying a calibration rig. “I didn’t expect that.”

“I figured once word got around they might.” Jess went into the carrier without explaining that cryptic remark, but Dev lingered a moment to let her eyes trace over the blocky, capital letter DEV inked on the metal side. Not her designation, just the short name and she found herself grinning just to see it.

“Looks good huh?” Clint ducked under the engine pod, wiping his hands on a rag. “They just finished. Hope you leave it in one piece long enough for the paint to dry.”

Dev made a face. “I’ll try.” She said. “I know we caused a lot of hard work.”

“You did some yourself.” Clint said. “Good luck, Dev. Bring her back in one piece and you all in it.”

“Thank you.” Dev gave him a smile. “I’ll do my best.” She patted the side of the ship and ducked inside, only just avoiding crashing headlong into Jess. “Oh!”

“Sorry.” Jess backed up. “C’mon in. I like the new chair.” She let Dev enter then she went over and sealed the hatch. “Once you get everything squared away, lets get clearance and get out of the bathtub.”

Dev strapped her pack down next to her station and sat down in the pilots chair, strenuously resisting asking Jess what a bathtub was. She checked her initial settings, then she started up the comp and began her preflight checks.

Of course, she’d done all that before the certification lift, but her programming told her in no uncertain terms that they had to be done every single time and she could feel the stress on that which indicated to her that this was an important thing.

She listened to Jess rattling around behind her, getting her own pack lashed down, arranging her hold down straps, and checking the weapons and drop kit.

Dev settled the comm set on her head and slipped the earpiece in, hearing the low murmur of ops traffic on the link as she brought the nav comp online. “BR27006, comm check.”

“Stand by 27006.” Ops came back quickly.

“Standing by.” Dev lit up the engine systems board and started running the checks on the new systems, pleased with the response to her test signals.

“27006, Central ops, register comm check, clear channel.”

Dev tuned in the channel a little, her sensitive ears hearing the digital shaping as it evened out. “Central ops, BR27006 reads clear channel, good comm check.” She locked the signal in and released a test squirt, then studied the engine status and the readouts from the navigation comp. “Systems coming online.” She warned Jess.

“I hear em.” Jess grunted. “Give me power please.”

Dev opened the power channel to the weapons systems, her eyes flicking to her boards as the carrier drew current from their umbilical to soak the batteries. She checked the multiple fuel cells, and nodded at the full charge, reaching over to pretune the internal generator that would take over once they were disconnected from the base.

“They asking for a route?” Jess called from the back.

Dev regarded the comp. “No, they aren’t. Just standing by.” She said. “Everything ‘s online. Should I ask for flight clearance?”

“Hang on.” Jess settled into her bucket seat, locking the restraint straps around her and feeling the gently snug against her body to hold her down. They had a fast release plate positioned over her chest, and a single slap could get her out of them because you just never knew what was going to happen even in flight.

She tested the new chair, feeling it solid and easily swiveled, and she pulled down her targetting comps, pleased with the feel of the new surface under her. The chair was decently padded, and she reached behind her back, pushing the pads experimentally. “Hey.”

“Yes?” Dev turned around in her seat.

“They put extra pillows in this thing?” Jess watched her pilot blush slightly. “Hm?”

“Not exactly.” Dev said. “I asked them to add a little bit of support for your back.” She admitted. “I thought you would like that.”

Jess studied her, caught between embarrassment and pleasure. “Do you have any idea how much crap I’m going to have to take for that from the rest of the agents?”

“No, I don’t.” Dev said. “I didn’t consider them when I asked.” She frowned. “Why would they care what your chair was like?”

“Hm.” Did she care if they cared? Jess wriggled a little and felt the comfort of the extra support on either side of her spine, and at the base. It felt good, and she decided she really didn’t care if they cared. “I dunno.” She said. “It’s great, thanks Dev.”

Dev smiled, and turned back around. “All systems are online and ready.” She fastened her own restraints, taking a peek at Jess in the small strip of mirror above her console. She could see the little grin on her face as she regarded the chair and she grinned herself, glad she’d asked for that small comfort.

The bio alt doing the chair, one of the craftsman BeeAre set had listened seriously to her, and done what she’d asked without question, showing her a personal level of respect that was both surprising and gratifying. It was a small thing, but she was now very glad she’d done it.

“Okay, tell them to crack open the top.” Jess said, as she leaned back in her surprisingly comfortable seat. “Let’s get this party started.”

“BR27006 to pad support, please undock umbilicals.” Dev spoke into her mic, catching sight of two bio alts ducking under the engine pod in response. She poised her fingers over the power grid, and as they unlocked the port and removed it, she activated the internal power feed and brought them online. “Internal systems green, please clear for lift.”

“Pad control, we’re clear, BR27006. Good mission.”

“Thank you, pad control.” Dev changed channels. “Central operations, BR27006 requesting flight access please.”

Jess chuckled from behind her.

Overhead, she heard the big doors start to open and a moment later, she heard the clearance come back into her ear. “BR27006 acknowledge. Lifting.” Dev spooled up the engines and engaged the bottom jets, taking them up towards the opening roof with steady confidence.

It was a rare moment of no rain. Dev took the carrier up into the clear air, and did a circle, scanning the horizon before she settled with the carrier’s nose pointed to the north. She keyed in the coordinates Jess had given her for Quebec City, and checked her consoles one more time. “Ready?”

“Go go gadget.” Jess said. “Keep your eyes out for bad guys. I may fall asleep here in my comfy chair.”

Dev smiled, and engaged the main engines, heading them off into this new adventure.

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Cape Quebec wasn’t that far, Dev discovered. She spotted the cliff face full of lights ahead of them as her nav station beeped, and she adjusted her speed lower. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Jess agreed, putting her hand on the back of Dev’s chair and peering through the sectioned windows.

“Okay we can’t valet park this bus, so you’re going to have to land on the plateau there, see the opening?”

“Yes.” Dev said. “Go down in there?”

“Yeah.” Jess returned to her seat and locked her restraints. “There’s an old stairway cut into the rock. It’s a hike, but the carrier’ll be hidden and they won’t see what direction we came from.”

It all sounded quite mysterious. Dev angled the carrier towards the cliff wall, and cut the mains, using the landing jets to gently lower the carrier past the crevice. It was all shadows and gray stone, with water drizzling off the edges and making a constant rattle and thunder past them as she found a bit of higher stone and set the vehicle down onto it. “Okay?”

“Great.” Jess stood up and hit a set of switches. “We’ll blend in here.” She started getting out of her armored suit. “Now we need to change into civs.”

Dev finished shutting down the engines and as she did, and their distinctive whine faded, she could hear the rain falling on the carrier’s roof, and the drum of the water on the ground outside.

Outside. Aside from her brief movement from the shuttle to the citadel and her visits to the ledge, this would be her first big exposure to outside, and Dev found herself a little unsettled over it. Dr. Dan had talked to her about it - about being outside under that vast, gray sky but talking about it and doing it were two very different things.

"You okay?" Jess was apparently watching her.

"Yes." Dev opened her pack and removed the blue jumpsuit, unsnapping the catches on her flight suit. "I was just wondering what it was like to be on the ground outside."

Jess paused as she fastened the neck on her civs. They were rust and gold, flashier than the ones Dev was donning. "Oh that's right. You came from outer space. I forgot."

Dev smiled as she finished fastening her suit. She picked up the jacket Bain had sent her and held it, not entirely sure what should happen next. Jess seemed to be sorting through some things so she put the jacket back down and went to the dispenser and took out a small bottle of water.

"Run an external scan, willya?" Jess asked. "Doesn't pay to take a chance."

Glad of something to do, Dev went back to her station and sat down. She opened the water and took a sip, then put the bottle in its gimbaled holder and activated the scan. She set the routine running, observing the results and glancing outside the carrier window to match the terrain with the scan.

It was rocky outside, and dark with clouds and rain. The carrier was settled between a half dozen large boulders and she had slid it just under a slight ledge which protected it somewhat. The area around them was clear of any life at all - only rocks and rubble were around them with some small patches of moss being the only hint of color.

"Clear?"

"Yes." Dev responded. "Nothing for 500 meters at least."

"Good." Jess finished tucking various things in her pockets. She walked over and picked up her own jacket. "Okay. Now we climb up the steps to a path I know, and that will take us to one of the outer entrances of the city. You need to stay close with me, and for now, don't talk unless you have to. We're just here to shop, we're a couple of bored techs on a day holiday from the Rocky Mountain generating center. Got it?"

"Got it." Dev rummaged in her memory for details about the generating center which she'd had some basic programming on. Science and research were done there, she knew, along with its primary responsibility of creating and storing hydro power in massive sealed batteries.

Was it a target, she wondered. Like the facility they themselves were trying to breach?

"C'mon." Jess shrugged into her jacket and fastened a colorful patch on the outside. She waited for Dev to mimic her then attached a similar one on her sleeve. "There. Now you work for Engeline." She patted Dev on the shoulder and went to the door. "I'm keying this so only the two of us can get back in. Anyone else tries it'll blow a hole the size of the docking cavern."

"I see." Dev said. "This stop here - it's to obtain supplies?"

Jess hit the door release and the hatch thumped open, admitting a gust of cold, wet air. "Yeah. Some outside gear I need for the ice fields and to get current gossip. The intel we get in the citadel sometimes isn't really current - not to mention it could be planted. I like to listen to what's going on before I do an insertion." Another mistake on her last mission. She'd let Josh talk her into skipping the recon.

She pulled her jacket hood up and fastened the neck cover then eased down the unfolded steel steps and got her boots on the wet rock before she motioned Dev forward. Though her head was well covered by the fabric the half frozen rain pelted her face and she blinked a little at the harshness of it. "Ugh."

Dev spent a moment absorbing the experience. She could feel the half rain, half ice drops pelting the surface of the fabric encasing her, and she made a mental note to go back and thank Alexander Bain for providing the jacket to her. She lifted a hand and pulled the glove off it, feeling the sting of the rain and the chill before she put it back on. "That's interesting."

Jess eyed her. "Not interesting enough to stay out in it. Let's go." She circled the carrier and climbed up a small rise towards the cliff walls, pausing to turn and look back at the vehicle. "Nice." She complimented Dev. "That new mottled skin really works."

Now that the hatch was closed, you would be hard pressed to identify the carrier against its landscape. The outer shell had taken on the tones of the surrounding rock, blending the metal until it was almost invisible.

“Yes.” Dev agreed. “Clint was really happy with how it turned out. It's a new thing. He said it would help us hide against the clouds, too.”

“If we want to hide.” Jess turned and started away from the small ledge they'd parked on. “Quebec's a mix these days. Used to just be a supply depot, since they've got a decent harbor, but they finally dug out the cliff and fixed the roofs of all those old buildings and people drifted in from the outlands.”

“I see.” Dev was keeping up with her companions long strides with a bit of difficulty. The uneven ground was new to her, and she was having some trouble keeping her balance on it. “What do they do there?” She asked, more to keep Jess talking since she'd studied the records in comp on the place when Jess had told her they were going there.

“Fish mostly.” Jess promptly supplied. “They've got enough coastline to harvest weed, but they're big on shallow water shellfish too.” She licked her lips thoughtfully. “Be glad to introduce you to those. Since they got enough people around, they've got markets and grub too.”

Shellfish. Shell, and fish? “Do they have anything to do with that gift from Clint?” Dev hazarded.

“No.” Jess chuckled. “Well, actually..” She pondered. “Sort of I guess. They do get tiny crabs out of some of those shells and use em in stews. But the ones he sent, those didn't have any crabs in em. They just wash up near the base of our cliff.”

“I see.” Dev had found her balance now, and she was beginning to enjoy the tramp across the rocks. Jess was leading the way across a barren stretch of bare granite towards a wall, and already she could see even through the rain a narrow uneven set of steps cut into the face of it. It angled up the rock wall to an outcropping above and she couldn't see past that.

It seemed very desolate where they were. She couldn't hear anything besides the far off sound of the surf and the rumble of thunder over their heads and her face was starting to feel very cold where the rain was hitting it.

She blinked a little, as she followed Jess up a slope and across a long stretch of loose, crunchy sounding small rocks that led up to the base of the wall. There were big rocks all around them, and she peered upward as a scattering of tiny stones rattled off the cliff and fell around them. “Did those rocks come from up there?”

“Yeah.” Jess wound her way through them. “That's why we park here. People with sense stay far the hell away.” She pointed at a long rusted sign tacked to the stone, a pictograph of a crudely drawn slope and what were supposed to be boulders. “It's a rock fall zone.”

“I see.” Dev regarded the wall. “So one of those could fall down right now?”

“Sure.”

“I see.”

Jess half turned and grinned at her. “Closer to the cliff you are, safer it is. Don't worry.”

“I am not worried.” Dev kept at her heels, as they got to the base of the cliff and started up the stairs. They had been very crudely cut into the rock, and were in some places more suggestions than footholds. “If something unfortunate happens, at least I will have had lots of new experiences.”

The steps reminded her of the climbing exercises they'd done in the creche and she placed her boots with confidence, glad of her gloves as she gripped the rock edge they were climbing up. The coverings were dark gray and made of very tough fabric, thin enough for her to use her fingers well, but thick enough to keep her hands nice and warm.

It was interesting and exciting being here. She could feel all sorts of new sensations – the strain on her legs of climbing, the pelting rain, the roughness of the stone under her gloved fingertips. It was all new, and she focused on Jess's tall form, careful to step where she did once she'd moved on.

The rock smelled, she realized. It had a flat, dense scent a little like the walls in the citadel, but different. She could also smell the rain and she experimentally stuck her tongue out, catching some of the icy droplets and tasting them.

Interesting. She saw Jess slow up and halt ahead of her, and she paused, watching her companion closely. Jess moved again after a moment, but more slowly and she took one hand off the rock and let it rest against the pocket Dev knew she had her weapon in.

She decided to remain quiet, figuring Jess didn't need any distractions if there was something dangerous occurring. They were almost up near the little ledge, and she watched Jess pause again, one hand resting on the rocks and her head cocked to one side.

After a moment, the agent untied her hood and pushed it down, exposing her head to the rain but also exposing her ears which were, interestingly to Dev, twitching visibly.

Then, after a moment of silence, Jess pulled her hood back up and continued on, climbing up over the edge of the crevice and then turning, offering Dev her hand.

Dev wasn't sure what that was about, but she reached up and clasped it, a bit surprised to find herself pulled up onto the ledge to stand next to her partner. "Thank you."

"All quiet." Jess released her then moved across the ledge to an uneven square hold in the side of the mountainside. She slipped inside, then activated a hand light and paused, before she continued forward. "Let's get outta the damn rain at least."

Dev hadn't entirely minded the experience, but she found the cold a lot less inside the tunnel they were now in, and she pushed her hood back and wiped the rain off her face as she followed Jess in. "Very interesting." She regarded the tunnel which was as crudely cut as the steps outside, taking off a glove and running her fingertips over the surface.

She could feel chisel marks on the stone. "Did you cut this wall?"

"Me?" Jess chuckled low and deep in her throat. "Hell no. They sent a team out here when Quebec started becoming a population center. Ten guys with plasma cutters. You see all that rubble at the base? That was from them."

"I see." Dev activated her own hand light, and examined the wall. It had interesting sparkles in it, not that different from the walls in the citadel. The floor was as uneven as the walls, and she focused the light there, avoiding the unexpected angular cracks and bumps as they walked along.

It was out of the wind here too, and warmer because of it. Dev ran her hand through her hair and noticed Jess was having to duck a little as she walked. "Is it a long way in here?"

"No." Jess said. "Couple more minutes."

And in a couple more minutes, in fact, they were moving from the narrow tunnel and squeezing through a crack in the rock so narrow Jess had to take off her coat to fit through, and Dev almost did. Then they were in a more regular hallway, with smooth walls, evenly spaced low lights and a faint look of dusty disuse.

"Emergency tunnel." Jess shrugged back into her jacket and fastened it. "Place for them to run to." She closed her hand light and stuck it in her pocket as she led the way up a gently sloping floor. "Minute or so, and we'll be in the lower levels."

"Okay." Dev caught up and walked along at her side.

"Whatever you see, just keep your mouth shut." Jess said. "It could be weird for you. There'll be other bio alts here, but it's not like in the citadel."

Now, what did that mean? "Okay." Dev agreed anyway. She saw Jess raise a hand a little, and she slowed, keeping behind her partner as the hallway they were in ended in a big, square opening and a murmur of sound reached her. They crossed another wide hallway that led off into dusty silence in both directions and then they were moving through a wide arched opening into a cavern filled with people.

Jess moderated her pace, turning her purposeful walk into a more casual stroll, sticking her hands in her jacket pockets and letting her head turn from side to side.

Dev copied her, glad she had a chance to absorb what she was seeing. Unlike the uniformity she was used to in both the creche and the citadel, the people and the sights were far more random here. There were people who looked like workers, but their overalls were patched and so worn and covered in dirt it was impossible to tell what color they were supposed to be.

Then there were other people, in skin tight suits carrying boxes with lights, and other people who were covered in strangely mottled garments and heavy boots.

The smell of the place was past her ability to self describe. It was a mixture of strong scents and musky tones, overlaid with the more familiar intensity of machine oil and salt she was becoming familiar with in her new home. A few people glanced at them, but then moved on, and she followed Jess along the perimeter of the space towards a set of long, shallow stairs.

They passed a pair of men with scrubbers, removing a layer of oil from the floor and Dev felt a jerk of recognition as she took in their visible collars. Effens, her memory supplied, wearing roughly finished gray coveralls with dark maroon sleeves.

They didn't look up as she and Jess went past, their eyes firmly on their task as they patiently scoured the floor. Normal, she thought, having worked with a few of that set in the creche. They received a lot of programming for cleaning – it's what they did in the creche, in fact, specialists in maintenance.

Did Jess think she would find that strange? Dev pondered the thought.

They walked up the shallow stairs, moving into a more brightly lit space that suddenly, as they emerged at the top, also became a lot louder. Dev almost stopped walking as they turned a last corner, and she was looking at the inside of a large, high roofed cavern filled with..

Well, filled with everything. “Oh.”

Jess turned and peered at her, slowing and closing the distance between them. “This is the market.” She said. “Remember, we're just techs on holiday, looking to shop.”

“Okay.” Dev followed Jess's lead and unfastened her jacket, which had started to become very warm. She left it hanging open with its hood pushed back, and followed her partner towards the ball of chaos ahead of them. The rock walls echoed back the sounds of all the people roaming from area to area, voices raised.

After a minute, it sorted itself out and her programming kicked in, and she knew what she was looking at much to her relief. This was a center where people came to offer up things they did and products they made for sale. There were dozens of rows of little rooms, made from what looked like stones cemented together.

Each room had some people inside it, and ledges on all four sides where they had things displayed. Some room had lots of other people on the outside looking at the things, some had few, but there seemed no reason behind what was next to what, or why some were popular and some weren't.

And the people. Dev had never seen this many people in one place, not in the creche, and not in the citadel, including at the party. There seemed an endless sea of them all dressed in widely varied combinations of clothing, strange things on their heads and a mixture of things on their feet that completely escaped any of her programming.

She really couldn't process it all. So she stuck at Jess's side, resisting the urge to latch onto her jacket as they started moving into the market area and into the surge of human traffic. She blinked her eyes a little, finding them watering slightly from the pungent smells.

“Crazy, huh?” Jess commented, as she sidestepped two men arguing loudly.

“Yes.” Dev said, in a positive tone.

“Everyone around brings their stuff here to sell.” Jeff confirmed Dev's programming. “You can get some interesting trinkets here, see?” She detoured over to a stone house. She picked up one of the wares, a bit of stone that had been hollowed out to leave a small dishlike depression at the bottom. “You put scented oil in here, and light it. Makes a nice smell.”

Dev regarded it. Then she looked all around them, and back up at Jess, one of her pale eyebrows lifting a little. “Do they make them any larger?”

Jess grinned, and turned, finding the merchant watching them with wary politeness. “How much?” She indicated the trinket.

“Quarter credit, citizen.” The man replied promptly. “Third if you buy two.”

Jess dug in her pocket, pulling out a handful of something and singling out two bits of it to drop on the table. “Here.” She picked up a second and handed it to Dev. “Keepsake.”

The merchant snapped up the glittering bits on the table and gave her a look of much greater respect. "Citizens." He inclined his head in their direction. "Good market to you."

Dev regarded the item with some bemusement.

"We can try it out later." Jess winked at the merchant, then she bumped Dev with her shoulder and led the way further into the melee. "Most of the stuff is pretty useless." She confided to Dev. "These guys just hope to pick up a credit or two to add to their allotment, maybe afford a bottle of grog once in a while."

"What did you give him?" Dev asked curiously.

"Ah." Jess dug in her pocket again, then held her hand up. "Turn your hand over."

Dev did, only to find a scattering of brightly glinting bits landing in her palm. She studied them, discovering squares of yellow metal with numbers stamped on both sides.

"In places like this." Jess had drawn her over into a corner. "You don't have scan cards. People don't like to identify who they are or what they're buying."

"I see."

"So this is hard credit. The biggest one's a full cred, then there's a half, a third and a quarter. It's gold." Jess added. "You know what that is?"

"Yes." Dev looked at the squares in surprise. "I never expected to see it in this form. We used it all the time on logic boards in the creche."

"Well, here you can trade it for stuff." Jess closed her hand over the credits. "Put em in your pocket. Spend em if you want." She paused, and her eyes flicked over Dev's shoulder. "But not right now. C'mere." She moved closer and put her arms around Dev, turning her back on the crowd.

Dev hastily put the handful of metal into her pocket and hesitantly returned the contact, feeling the warmth of Jess's body as she pressed against it. She had no idea at all what was going on, but the sensation was very pleasant and she was halfway wishing they could try that kissing thing again after a long moment of it.

"Hold still." Jess's voice breathed into her ear. "Look past my arm and tell me if a tall guy with blond hair and a scar's gone by."

It took a very long moment for Dev to sort that out and figure out what to do about it. She peeked past Jess's elbow, and saw three men strolling by, glancing slowly around them. One was, she noted, tall and scarred. "They're behind us." She murmured back.

She could feel Jess breathing against her, and decided it was very nice. "Now they are past us, and going away." She said, after a few more moments. When Jess didn't answer, she looked up, to find Jess looking back at her, with an expression that actually made her heart skip.

It skipped! Dev's eyes widened. What an incredibly odd sensation.

Then Jess sighed and released her. "Okay." She took a step back and turned cautiously, watching the men's backs as they retreated. "I don't think they saw me." She eased out into the stream of people again. "Let's stay behind them, just in case."

Dev's whole body was tingling, and she really didn't much care about the men. However, she followed along obediently. "Who were they?"

Jess chuckled without any real humor. "The bad guys." She said. "Very interesting they ended up here, huh?"

"Very interesting." Dev said, not entirely referring to the men. "Very interesting indeed."

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They lost sight of the men in the crowd a little while later. With so many people and so many distractions it wasn't that out of the question, but Jess was still annoyed with herself that she let them get away. "Damn it."

Dev waited quietly nearby, as her partner quartered around four of the rooms there, letting her own eyes gently move from face to face as the crowd moved past her.

“Hey kid.”

It did not occur to Dev that someone was addressing her, until she felt a tug on her sleeve. She looked quickly to her right, to find a stocky man with thick silver hair next to her. “Yes?” She decided no response was probably more dangerous than following Jess's strict order to not speak.

His eyes were dark, and shrewd. “That coat ain't worth nothing. C'mere, lemme show you what I got.” He pointed to his little room, which had garments hanging everywhere around it.

Dev scanned the surrounding crowd, finding Jess at the next little room over, picking through some hats while she carefully watched the passers by. Since her partner was so close, she decided it would be all right to look at the garments, and therefore she followed the man over and listened to his pitch.

She knew what a pitch was. Her programming had given her enough background on the cities to get by with, and Dev herself wasn't nearly as naive as she apparently appeared. There had been little markets in the creche, in fact, when they'd gotten a chance to get a few rare treats and she understood the concept even of bargaining.

This did not seem really the place to engage in that though. Dev studied the clothing, and reached up to touch a piece of it, a jacket made from a smooth, tough substance.

“Ah, like that one huh? Didn't figure you for shark though.” The man came over and lifted it down. “Nice hide.”

Shark. Dev glanced over at Jess, who was deep in discussion with the other vendor. With a faint shrug, she took off her issue jacket and tried on this other one, finding it surprisingly comfortable. Shark was a fish, she recalled. It felt very strange to be wearing the skin of an animal, but it felt a bit like heavy fabric and it didn't smell like fish.

“Looks good on you, kid.” The man said, watching her shrewdly. “Where ya from?”

Dev removed the jacket and donned her own. “How much cred is this?” She asked, deducing this would distract him from asking her more questions.

“Two cred.” The man said. “Dont' bother trying to bargain with me, kid. I can see how wet behind the ears you are.”

“All right, I won't.” Dev handed him back the coat. “Excuse me.”

“Wait.” The man looked very surprised. “Hold on, you don't want it?”

“Not for that amount.” Dev started to move off, angling her steps to end her up in the same room as Jess was. She could see the taller woman was concluding whatever her business was, and Dev wanted to be close by so they could move off to their next thing. Whatever that was.

“Wait, a cred and a half.” The man scurried after her. “C'mon, kid. You know you want it.”

Dev turned and faced him. “I have a one cred piece. If you would like that in exchange, that would be good. If not, then I have to be moving on.”

“Nah it's worth more than that.” He shook his head.

“All right, good bye then.” Dev turned and started walking again, seeing Jess putting something in a sack.

“Okay okay.” The man got in front of her again, holding the jacket out. “One cred.”

The motion caught Jess's eye, and Dev saw her wheel around and start towards them. “Okay.” She dug one of the bits of metal from her pocket and inspected it, then took the jacket from him and handed it over. “Thank you.”

“Highway robber.” The man grumbled, looking at the bit. “Why I should...”

“You should what, Roderick?” Jess had reached them and now she leaned her elbow on Dev's shoulder. “Are you giving my friend a hard time?”

Dev watched his face in fascination as it turned dead white under his beard and he backed away from them with some of the same look of fear as Clint had. “Not at all, Jess.” She told her partner. “I was just making a purchase from him.”

“No harm, no foul.” The man held his hands up. “What brings you here?” He asked, looking around quickly.

“Havent' seen you in a while.”

“Let's go have a cup of kack and we can talk about it.” Jess moved forward, forcing him to retreat. “I had you on my list of people to chat with anyway.” She casually looked around. “Business looks slow right now.”

Roderick nodded briefly and turned, leading the way back into his room. “Digger, keep a look on the store.” He told a younger man standing there. “Me and the ladies have business.”

Digger smirked. “Sure.” He folded his arms over his faded and patched overalls and watched them go. “No problem.”

They followed the merchant into the back of the small room, then down an unexpected set of iron rail lined stairs that went down in a spiral under the floor. The sound from the market dimmed and then cut off, as they reached the bottom, and were inside a cramped, spare dwelling with a low ceiling and rough stone floors.

It was well used, and long lived in. There were shelves made from stones and old boards, and two corridors led off towards the back that were curtained off with carefully opened and cleaned sacks.

Roderick led them into a square common space with a table and four chairs. “Didn't know the kid was a friend of yours, Jess.” He pulled a chair back and sat down, placing his elbows on the table and folding his hands.

Jess took the seat facing him. “She's my partner.” She said briefly. “Give me the scoop. What's going on here. I saw Red Dog.” She glanced at Dev, who took the seat next to her. “I don't think he saw me.”

He nodded. “I was surprised to see you. I heard about Wellington.”

Jess shrugged.

“There's a price on you.” Roderick said, after a bit of silence. “Ten thousand credits. Gold.” He cocked his head a little. “I sent that news in to base. So I'm really really surprised to see you here. I know you've got brass ones, but that ain't smart.”

Jess's face didn't so much as twitch. “I've got a job to do.” She said. “That what the Dog's doing here? Looking for me?”

“No.” Roderick shook his head. “He and Jersey are looking for dirt on some new project on our side.” He glanced around the space. “You hear anything? Some big thing, your way?”

Jess considered the question, giving a side glance at Dev before shaking her head. “Nothing I know of. You?”

Dev's face was a study in wry innocence. “I haven't heard of anything.” She said. “But I've only been here a few days.”

“Ah, new class. We heard they were in.” Roderick exhaled. “Well, I can say you sure pissed off a lot of people, Jess. You get the body count from that last run? Five hundred.” He eyed the agent. “Credits or not, if they catch you they're gonna splat you.”

“Five hundred for one?” Jess smiled thinly. “Guess the old man'll consider it a bargain.”

Roderick finally loosened up, chuckling a bit. “Maybe. But be careful. You get caught napping his ego won't think of it that way. You know how it is.” He shifted a bit, tapping his fingertips together. “Anyway, most of what we're hearing is the usual. Seen a few more of them sniffing round though.”

Jess nodded. Then she turned her head and regarded Dev. “What'd he scalp you for?”

Dev's brow hiked just slightly, as she gazed back at her partner.

“The jacket.” Jess pointed. “What'd it cost ya?”

“Oh.” Dev cleared her throat. “A credit.”

“Told you she chewed me down.” Roderick said. “She's a kid but not a stupid one. That's one of my best pieces she picked out.” He studied Dev. “Where ya from? Waterside I'm guessing since you knew right off the skin.”

“She's a westcoaster.” Jess said. “Monteray headlands. So yeah, she knows the water.” She tapped her fingers on the table. “I need some ice boots, two pair. Who has em?”

Dev folded her hands quietly, and just listened. She made a mental note to check where Monteray was when she got back to the carrier, and somewhat irrelevantly wondered if it was a nice place. She knew the stark, scattered islands on the other side of the inland sea were supposed to be striking.

She'd seen pictures of a few of them.

"I'll send Digger. Petros had about a dozen pair, not sure what's left. He'll steal every last credit of yours if you try it though, he can spot one of us easy as sneezing." Roderick stood up. "Be right back."

Jess waited for him to leave, then she gave Dev a little smile, and pointed at the jacket, making a come hither gesture with her fingers. Once her partner had complied, she studied the garment, her brows lifting a little at the smooth, soft texture and the finely stitched patterns on it. "Nice." She handed it back. "Find me one next?"

"Sure." Dev grinned. "I was actually looking for one for you as I was concluding my deal." She added. "I think I saw one on the other side of the little house."

"Sale stall." Jess said. "Rod's one of our outside agents." She added, in a very low tone. "He gets paid to just sit and sell and watch."

Dev nodded. "I remember from the class." She fell silent as Roderick returned, dusting his hands off as he entered.

"All right, that's set but I gotta go back up stairs. People'll rob me blind otherwise, and we've got Festival coming. My wife wants a few things... can't afford to lose my stock."

Jess and Dev stood up. "How's Karyn?" Jess asked. "She still working upstairs?"

"Got in with Maersk." Roderick led them back to the stairs and started up them. "Got us a better slot after Festival, be something moving out of this place."

"Nice." Jess glanced around her as she climbed up the steps. "Maersk, huh? Maybe you'll end up riding one of their super c's. Bet the quarters are nicer than these are."

Roderick chuckled dryly. "We all got our place." He emerged into the store and looked around in a studied, casual way before he moved away from the top of the steps and let Jess come up after him. "So there ya are. See? I made a right bargain." He added loudly, a truculent note now back in his tone.

Jess strolled through the store, examining the wares. "Yah, well, we'll see." She eased between the hanging garments, pausing between two racks to study the crowd. She was aware, suddenly, of a presence at her back, but after the first jolt she realized it was Dev, standing quietly behind her.

Very quietly. Jess looked over her shoulder, slightly amazed at the way her new partner blending into her surroundings, standing just so between the haphazardly hung clothing, only her pale eyes moving.

A sudden commotion distracted both of them, and Jess swiveled to face the sound, her hand dropping to her jacket pocket as her body stiffened in reaction. Ahead of them, in the open lane between the stall they were in and the one across, two men had grabbed a third, a tall lanky figure with, she realized, a bio alt collar.

"I told you not to touch me you freak!" One of the men yelled.

The bio alt hunched his shoulders, and remained silent, holding his hands up in surrender. "Sir, didn't mean to bump you."

"You did it on purpose!" The man shoved him against the wall. "Probably going after my credits, huh freak?" He lifted a hand and balled it into a fist. "Were you?"

The bio alt cringed. "No sir." He said. "I was just walking. I tripped."

"Freak." The man shoved him again, then walked off, shaking his head. "C'mon. Stinks around here. Place is full of these freaks these days."

The merchant across the way came out of his stall. "Get out of here." He yelled at the bio alt. "People'll think you belong to me. Move along!"

The bio alt moved away from the wall and hurried away, keeping his head down and by a jog in his stride, missing the kick aimed his way by the irate man. As he passed them he furtively looked their way, jerking his eyes backward when they met Jess's.

Jess waited a moment, then she turned. Dev was still standing behind her, still with a mild, untroubled look on her face, still completely silent. "It's like that here."

Dev tilted her head slightly. "Like what?"

"What they did." Jess said. "A lot of people who don't have bios don't like them."

"I see." Dev pondered the scene. She saw the man from across the path come over and talk to Roderick, who half shrugged, and lifted his hands in a resigned gesture. "They don't like them, why?"

Jess exhaled. She was saved from an immediate answer by Roderick coming over to them.

"Ladies, you see anything else you want?" He asked, swinging around the shelves and pausing with his hand on one of the racks. "Day's not getting any younger and neither am I."

"What was that all about?" Jess asked, jerking her head towards the spot where the altercation had taken place.

"What?" Roderick frowned. "Oh, you mean those guys?" He shrugged. "Usual crap. More of the hooty boys are getting the jelly bag brains and the city's started to put them to work places. Got a lot of oldtimers who don't like it." He added. "But those guys? They're just a bad fight looking for a place to happen. Wasn't the bio, it woulda been Digger coming back with the boots."

Jess stole a glance at Dev, surprised to find that same mild look on her face. "What do you think?" She found herself asking, her brain momentarily forgetting where she was. She held her breath for a second, wondering what her bio alt partner was going to say about that.

Could almost be anything. She hadn't really dialed in on Dev yet.

"What do I think?" Dev repeated. "I think that one right there would fit you." She pointed at a long coat hanging behind Jess against the wall. "And it matches your eyes."

Roderick chuckled low and deep in his throat. He removed the jacket and took the hanger out, tossing it over to Jess. "Your friend's got some smarts, Jess. Didn't know they were sending them out of school with that these days."

Jess accepted the diversion, shrugging off her jacket and slipping the new one on. She twitched the shoulders straight and found the sleeves long enough for her long arms. "Huh." She fastened it, then turned, raising her arms and holding her hands out. "Not bad."

The coat was actually quite attractive, Dev thought. It was far less bulky than the one they were issued, and the cut of it was flattering to Jess's tall figure. It was made of something like the same thing the one she'd bought was, and she thought Jess was pleased with it. "It's very nice."

"All right." Jess exchanged coats again. "What are you going to get out of me for it?" She asked Roderick. "You robber baron you."

Roderick chuckled and held a hand up, looking casually all around him before he spoke "I'll bill the old man." He said. "Digger'll drop the rest of it over with Jonton. I assume you're going to go eat there?"

Jess smiled.

"Robber baron? You call me that?" Roderick bawled. "Take it! Get out of here you wanton hussies!" He started forward, waving the hanger the coat had been hanging on. "Get out! Get out! Before I call the guard!"

"Watch it old man!" Jess yelled back. "Take your threats and shove em! Let's go, Dev." She turned and walked out of the store, heading sharp right and then taking a left as she cleared the next stall over. She paused and got behind a column, leaning against it and looking at the sleeve of the jacket with complete absorption.

Dev stuck right with her, finding something in the booth to look at as Jess watched what was going on them intently. It was all extremely strange, and she wasn't comfortable at all with what was going on, but she examined the little pouches on display in front of her and kept herself relatively out of view.

"Okay." Jess finally said, turning and putting a hand on her shoulder. "Good job, Dev." She said, in a very low voice. "I know it's crazy here, but you'er doing a great."

Dev smiled. "Thanks." She whispered back. "It's very confusing."

“I know.” Jess now clapped her on the back. “Let's go get something to eat. I bet you never tried hopping shrimp, now did you?”

Hopping shrimp. Dev had to admit the experience was overwhelming her programming. There were too many new experiences, and too much uncertainty for her to comfortably handle. “No.” She answered. “I know what a shrimp is. Why does it hop?”

“Ah.” Jess put a companionable arm over Dev's shoulder, and guided her along the path, towards another set of long, low steps. “Come with me, my friend. I will introduce you to my favorite meal and show you why they hop.” “You meet the shrimp before you eat it?”

Jess chuckled. “I'll have to take you shrimping sometime.” She said. “Maybe limpet collecting too.”

Dev eyed her.

“Maybe we can find some cockle stew.”

“I think I'm glad I brought that pack of crackers.” Dev commented mournfully. “I wouldn't know what to do with a cockle.”

Jess's sudden laughter drew stares, but they were moving up the steps before anyone could get too close a look or stop them and then they were gone, disappearing into the strident chaos of the wet market.

Behind them, a squad of bio alt cleaners tentatively emerged, looking cautiously around before they started sweeping half a day's debris from the floor

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It turned out that hopping shrimp were a lot better than they initially sounded. Dev regarded the plate in front of her, a deep blue glazed platter covered in bright orange and pink animals curled in a half circle that smelled really really good.

They had cups of something sweet and fizzy in front of them, and the shrimps, and a flat cake that was rather seaweed like but had a drier, earthier taste.

“Now.” Jess picked up a shrimp. “First you rip the head off.”

Dev watched her with some bemusement. They were seated in a small alcove at the back of the eating place, amongst a few small alcoves that were tucked away out of sight, with a light gauze curtain around them and artfully placed strong lights on the curtains that made it impossible for anyone to see in, but for them to easily see out.

The man in charge of it had known Jess by sight and had seemed to be expecting her. He'd shuffled them quickly into their little hiding place, and shortly thereafter, the plates had arrived.

“Then you suck their heads out.”

Dev jerked, coming rapidly back into focus. “You what?”

Jess applied her lips to the back of the animal's head and inhaled, making an odd whistly sucking sound. “You suck their heads out.” She repeated. “Try it.”

Obediently, Dev picked up a shrimp and twisted it's head off, turning it around and inspecting the interior before she hesitantly put it to her lips and sucked at it. A small mass of spicy goo hit her tongue, and she mouthed it, analyzing the taste before she swallowed it. It was rich and full of flavor and the spices filled her throat in a surprisingly nice way. “Oh.”

“Oh good, or oh gross?” Jess asked, in an apparent good mood.

“That's excellent.” Dev responded. “I've never had anything like that before.” She peered inside the head.

“I knew I liked you for a reason.” Jess set the head down. “Okay, now on this part, you pull the legs and the shell off, like this.” She demonstrated. “And you eat this part inside.” She watched Dev, with a complete focus and seriousness that tickled the hell out of her, strip her first shrimp naked and bite into it, chewing it with intense thoughtfulness. “Well?”

Dev swallowed, and stared intently at her plate. “Can I eat this part too?” She picked up the shell.

“No.” Jess chuckled. “It's like chewing fingernails. Just eat the inside. So you like it?”

“Yes.” Dev said, positively. “Do we ever get this where we live?” She regretfully set the shell down and picked up another animal, ripping it's head off with more confidence.

“No.” Jess sighed. “They aren't found around our shoreline, and they won't pay to have them brought in. The idea is we're self sufficient at home.” She started in on the rest of her plate. “Damn shame. But it's one of the nice things about going outside.”

Dev got through another couple of shrimp before she started conversing again. “You asked me before about the bio alts.”

Jess glanced up quickly. “Didn't mean to.”

“What were you expecting my reaction to be to that?” Dev asked. “Did you expect me to be upset?”

Jess chewed her shrimp, then took a sip of her drink. “I don't know what I expected. Yeah, maybe.” She said. “Were you?”

Dev's eyes met hers. “They teach us to expect that.” She said mildly. “To expect natural borns to treat us poorly. To make fun of us, to be mean to us, that sort of thing.” She sucked another shrimp head, her eyes widening a bit at the odd sound it made. “We know what we are, Jess.”

Jess sat quietly a moment, watching her. “Do you?” She mused. “I don't think you're like that guy mopping the floor over there.” She indicated a lone figure, in the distance.

“I'm exactly like him.” Dev didn't sound at all upset about it. “Except I'm a different gene set, and I have different programming.” She watched her partner. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“You're not like him.” Jess repeated. “I've been working with bios since I got out of field school. I never met any one of them that was anything like you at all.” She nibbled a bit of her flat cake. “Is that why you were so surprised when I was... um... nice... to you?”

“Yes because you don't have to be.” Dev said. “We know that. We just... take what we get, you know?”

Jess's face went still and serious for a moment, then she grinned a little. “Well, you got me.” She said. “And I don't buy that whole story so you'll have to deal with that.” Her eyes dropped to the table and she fiddled with a shrimp, then she looked back up to find Dev looking at her with a gentle, sweet smile on her face.

It made Jess blush. She felt uncharacteristically off balance and she she could have sworn all of a sudden her tongue felt fuzzy. “Anyway.” Her fingers pried the shrimp apart, and plucked the legs off. Then she looked back up. “Is that why you freaked out when you thought I was mad at you?”

Dev stopped in the act of sucking a head out. She put the item back down. “Yes. We never want to make our assignments mad. It means... they teach us that it means we're not doing a good job.”

“That's horsecrap.” Jess regained her equilibrium. “People sometimes just get mad.” She said. “It doesn't mean anything like that, at least not with me.” She took a swallow of her drink and glanced past the curtain, studying the passing crowd outside before she returned her attention to her table companion. “Okay?”

Dev reached over and touched her hand. “I'm very glad I got you, Jess.” She said, simply. “You're really special.”

Jess was caught in those eyes again, in the crystal clear warmth of them that made her feel shy and strangely unsure. She'd never really felt like this before and it confused her, a little.

Excited her, a little. Definitely it was distracting her more than a little and she almost missed the subtle shift in the lighting and the sound of approaching footsteps until it all penetrated her senses and she shifted, jerking her head towards the curtain. “Police. Just keep cool.”

Dev went back to quietly ingesting her shrimp, producing a mild look of inquiry when the curtain was jerked back, and revealed two men standing there in black suits with shiny black chestplates and helmets.

“ID.” The one in front said, extending his hand.

Jess produced hers and handed it over, and a moment later, Dev did the same.

The policeman flicked a scanner over both sets, and studied the results, then handed them back. "What's your business here?"

"Lunch and shopping." Jess said, casually. She held up the neatly tied bundle that she'd made of her jacket, and pointed at the plates.

The man studied her, then studied Dev, who looked back at him with interest.

"Ladies." The man gave them a half wave and moved away. "Enjoy your day."

They went on to the next little alcove, and the curtain swung closed again, obscuring them. Jess waited for them to engage with their neighbors, before she removed a small box from her pocket and keyed it, directing it after the police and tapping a few entries.

Dev heard a very high pitched, very soft whine, and she watched with curiosity as Jess reviewed the results then put the box back into her pocket. "Is that a usual interview?"

"What, the cops?" Jess glanced after them, a faintly disapproving look on her face. "Eh. Looking for non citizens to bust. They attract em here, since the weather's such crap. They round them up and toss them back out into the scrub or ship em off to the edge to let them go forage there."

Dev looked a bit confused. She picked up one of her few remaining shrimp and worked at it. "What is a non citizen?"

"Well." Jess seemed glad of the distraction. "You get tested, right? Kids do, like I did. Either you get aptituded to a training school, or you test for brains, or some skill, or you don't" She took a long swallow of her drink. "Those that don't can't get citizen status. They get tossed into the outlands, and have to fend for themselves."

Dev blinked. "That's very interesting."

"If you can do something, you get cit status. Or.. " She lifted a hand. "If your family is in service, like mine is, then everyone gets automatic cit status, and a minimum level job somewhere. Reward, I guess." She ate her last shrimp, looking regretfully at the plate. "But the non cits try to sneak in anywhere they can, and beg or steal what they can to live off of. You get real tired of scraping lichen to eat and catching water bugs after a while."

Dev tried to imagine that. It was hard for her to fathom, because in the creche everyone had their purpose, after all, they were made to be useful, weren't they? No one was left out, even if there was an 'out', there was always work, and a function for everyone and they were taken care of, fed, and housed as the valuable resources they knew themselves to be.

"I was glad, when I tested in." Jess commented. "I didn't want to spend my life hauling nets, or supervising a power station at the waterline."

Dev only just kept herself from reaching out to touch Jess's hand again. "But you do something very difficult."

"I do... we do." Jess smiled at her. "But on the flip side, we live in nice digs, and have creds to spend, and eat well. It's worth it."

Dev looked at her identification, studying the picture, and the name, and the pretty, embossed emblem with a number that marked her as a citizen.

Interesting.

Except she wasn't. She wasn't even a non citizen. Beneath the neck on the rich blue jumpsuit she was wearing she had the same traced collar as the man she could just barely see washing the floor and she knew a moment of deep, disturbing confusion because she wasn't entirely sure of how she should feel about it all.

She was different. She was bio alt. She was hatched and raised in the creche to serve her assignment.

And yet. She looked up at Jess, who was busily pulling the legs off a shrimp. As if sensing the attention, Jess glanced up and met her eyes, tilting her head a little in question.

And yet.

More footsteps approached, and Jess grew wary, her body stiffening up and her balance shifting even in her seat so it was over the balls of her feet. "If I tell you to duck, you duck." She reached out and picked up her glass, casually looking to her right as the curtain stirred and drew aside.

"Ah." She grunted. "It's you." She relaxed perceptibly.

"It's me, myself." A short, dark haired and bearded man with a thickly muscled body sidled up to the table. "A gift for you, princess." He put a bundle on the padded bench seat next to where Jess was sitting. "And who is your very pretty friend?" He wagged his bushy, thick eyebrows at Dev. "Much improvement over your last one, yes?"

Jess snorted slightly. "This is Dev." She said. "Dev, this is Jonton, more commonly known as the Pirate of Quebec." She gave the man a wry look. "Jonton's something of an old family friend, and this is his place as you probably guessed by the fact his name's on the sign outside."

"Hello." Dev responded. "It's very nice to meet you."

The man smiled, showing a mouthful of teeth that were curiously decorated with tiny engravements. "It is my pleasure, Miss Dev." He bowed. "Any friend of my old family friend here, is a friend of mine." He turned back to Jess. "A very great improvement over this last one for sure."

"Definitely" Jess agreed. "Smarter, has a lot more common sense, a better bus driver and much cuter on top of it." She winked at Dev. "I got damn lucky."

"So I hear." Jonton leaned against the table. "Especially what I have heard lately of your luck." He lowered his voice, touching her arm. "I am pleased to see you here in good health."

Jess grinned briefly. "Thanks." She touched the package. "This the boots? I'm glad they're done. I need to get clear of here. Too many eyes around."

"It is. May you have good wearing of them." He bowed again. "Till next time, princess! And again, so nice to meet you, Miss Dev." He stepped back and then ducked out of the way, leaving the curtains to slowly swing back closed again.

They were both quiet for a moment. Then Dev gently cleared her throat. "What exactly is a pirate?"

Jess chuckled. "I'll tell you later, when we're back on the bus." She studied her plate to make sure she'd consumed everything on it. "We need to get out of here before someone spots me and starts trouble." She looked up at Dev. "You done?"

"Well, since you said not to eat the shells, I suppose I am." Dev gazed mournfully at her plate. "They were excellent. Thank you very much for bringing me here."

"It was my pleasure, Dev." Jess said, her voice taking on a gentle tone. "I remember my first time in this place. My father brought me here after I graduated basic school. I thought the city was the coolest place on earth." She tucked the jacket she'd gotten under her arm, and picked up the boots.

"May I take that?" Dev offered, pointing at the boots. "My jacket's smaller."

"Your everything's smaller." Jess handed the bundle over and they slid out from behind the table, pausing to let Jess study the outside space before she stepped through the curtain and held it for Dev. "To the left there, and down that ramp."

Dev went as directed, and they slipped out of the wet market and started downward. Jontons place had been on the edge of the market, which was now becoming quiet as the merchants started packing up for the day. The market area was high ceilinged, and the sounds echoed, to the counterpoint of thunder rolling overhead.

Dev could smell the dampness, and the salt and fish tinged smell in the air as they edged past two men maneuvering a cart full of fish down the ramp beside them. She stuck close to Jess's side as they passed from the light of the cavern into the darkness of the tunnels, and after a few minutes walk, Jess paused to fasten her jacket.

So Dev did too. She put her bundles down and got herself sealed up, then picked the packages back up as Jess moved on. Neither of them spoke, and Dev could see the tension in her companions face as she scanned and rescanned the area.

It felt a little dangerous. They walked to the base of the ramp and then Jess turned right and angled over across traffic to a side corridor that led to a set of stone steps. A group of bio alts came past them, easing to one side of the steps to get out of their way.

Dev recognized the set, but dimly, from much earlier memories when groups of bio alts would be loaded on shuttles, all of them happy, waving as they left to what they were sure would be good assignments.

They didn't look very happy now. Dev met the eyes of one of them, and he looked quickly away, hunching his shoulders. A Geebee, she remembered, but this one and his mates had scars on their faces, and threadbare coveralls – and one was missing fingers.

Dev exhaled a little, as she followed Jess down the steps and along the right hand side of a busy tunnel, now mostly workers were passing them, citizens in gray and green jumpsuits and men driving small electric cars. The two of them were mostly ignored, getting only brief, dismissed looks as they made their way downward.

“Here.” Jess pointed at a dark offshoot tunnel. She ducked inside and then her hand light appeared to light the way, as they went down another set of steps, these crooked and then under a crumbling arch, to another set of steps – these heading up.

Abruptly all the sound cut off, and as they climbed, Dev could hear a soft roaring sound. “Is that the sea?”

“Yes.” Jess was one step up from her, and she moved steadily upward. “And some rain. I can smell it.”

Dev sniffed, but there were so many smells around it was hard to tell which one Jess was talking about. She could smell a metallic, not quite pleasant tang coming from the rock they were walking over, and a tinny, dry smell she didn't recognize.

Far off, she caught a bit of what she thought was the ocean, that wash of salt and brine she remembered from the little outside balcony Jess had taken her to. The steps were getting narrower, and she shifted the package to her right hand, letting her left one rest against the wall.

The surface was interesting. It felt rough and cold against her skin, and a bit moist. It was irregular, and when she looked down, the steps were too.

They turned a corner and started up a more steep set of stairs, and now Dev could feel fresh air coming in and blowing against her face. She could hear the thunder, and was aware of a rich, wet smell. “Is that the rain?”

“Yeah, put your hood up.” Jess got hers fastened just as they reached a landing and were faced with a small opening.

Dev fastened the snaps on her hood and followed Jess out into a fierce downpour that pelted hard against her body and nearly knocked her backwards. She steadied herself against the rock face and blinked hard as water filled her eyes. “Wow.”

Jess turned and gripped her sleeve. “Careful. It's steep here.” She slowly worked her way down the rough cut steps they'd climbed up earlier, pressing herself hard against the cliff surface. It occurred to her that staying in the city might have been a wiser choice, but she'd started getting that itch between her shoulder blades and the last thing she wanted was a firefight in the middle of Quebec.

Probably end up with all of them in jail, those that didn't end up dead.

The storm suddenly cracked and thundered right over head, and with a yelp, she ducked as a landslide of sharp stones came cascading down on top of them. “C'mon!”

Dev scampered down after her, feeling sliding under her boots and an unsteadiness in her balance as the rock seemed to shiver under her. She half slid the last part to the bottom, then she joined Jess in a full out bolt for the carrier as a heavy rumble warned them of trouble coming down.

Rocks started to bounce past her, and she felt an impact on her back as they got to the bottom of the slope and then ran across the boulder strewn area in front of where they'd left the bus.

Jess looked behind her, and her eyes went wide. “Oh crap! Dev! Move it! Get to the bus!!! Move!!!”

Dev didn't bother looking. She bolted past her companion and triggered the hatch, ducking inside as Jess caught up to her and heading for her seat as a sound started coming around them that was louder than anything she'd heard in her life.

She heard the hatch seal behind her and got her harness in place as she was already reaching out to start up the engines and get the power systems up, her hands moving in programming boosted speed and precision she didn't have the luxury to think about.

"Better boost! We're gonna get creamed!" Jess bellowed, thumping into her own seat. "Or there isn't gonna be enough of this damn thing for Clint to.. ugh!"

"Hold on!" Dev didn't hesitate an instant. She kicked the landing jets in full force as soon as they spooled and took the carrier straight up for just long enough to clear the boulders before she cut in the mains, boosting clear of the ground as she heard the bump and clang of rocks hitting the outside of the hull.

No time even to put her headset on. She got away from the cliff at full speed for a minute, then she cut in the rear scan and the screens came alive with the sight of the entire face of the cliff sliding down and collapsing in a destructive rush that blasted over the tiny plateau they'd been parked on minutes before.

"Holy shit." Jess stared at the screen.

Another crack of thunder and a blast of lightning rocked the carrier. Dev instinctively ducked and flinched as the forward screens whited out, then she adjusted the tint and cut in comp "We're getting weather warnings." She said. "Too much interference."

"Find a place to put her down." Jess directed. "No one'll be out watching now anyway. Stupid god damned storms." She pushed her hood back and raked the wet hair out of her eyes, as the carrier rocked back and forth between blasts of lightning.

Dev set up comp and searched the map ahead of them, spotting an overhang on the other side of the small valley they were currently coursing through. The carrier flashed over bare rock and dark pools of rain, the coated front window giving her a clear view of the sheets of water slamming against the carrier with intimidating force.

"Get her down." Jess warned, as they both felt the engines hesitate.

Dev did, aiming for the overhang and slamming the landing jets on just as the mains cut out and they dropped hard. Lightning was striking all around them, multiple bolts coming on either side as she got the vehicle under the ledge and cut power just before a bolt hit them full on, making the power blank out completely for a few long seconds.

Then the batts came on and they were safe, the landing feet leveling the carrier as the storm came on in earnest. For a few minutes, the rumble and thump almost deafened them, but after that it steadied down to a dull roar and they both let out a breath of relief at the same time.

"I'll tell ya, Dev." Jess let her body relax against her seat. "You really are worth your weight in gold credits."

Dev turned her seat around, glancing down at herself, before she regarded her partner. "I think it's possible I might have to cash that in if I keep almost wrecking this transport." She gave Jess a wry look. "That was really intimidating."

Jess started unzipping her jacket. "It was." She said. "But we made it. Now we just have to wait out the storm and then head off to North Station." She stood up and hung her jacket on one of the hooks near the drop pack. "And hope no one's stupid enough to try and follow us in this."

Dev undid her restraints and stood, getting out of her jacket as well. She hung it up next to Jess's and riffled her damp hair out. "So now we just wait?"

"Now we just wait." Jess leaned against the drop suit, a faint smile appearing on her lips. "Of course, this could be the moment I tell you to take your clothes off."

Dev met her eyes, and smiled. "Because we can wear our uniforms in the North place?"

"Well." Jess pushed off from the suit and started unfastening the wrist catches on her jumpsuit "That too."

**

[Continued in Part 10](#)