

# Partners

## Part 12

Dev braced herself against part of the ship's metal structure, leaning back as she watched the waves roll towards them and lift the vessel up. The motion was rough and impressive, and she was thoroughly enjoying it. It reminded her of the sim sessions for the carrier she'd run only this was real, and she was getting a faceful of cold wet spray when the ship plunged down into the waves.

Behind her, back past the structure on the flat part of the ship the rest of the crew were working to get things ready to catch fish. They were preparing cages and nets, but nothing they were doing triggered any programming in her so she had no idea what it all was for.

Ahead of them, she could see the darker, roiling clouds that were the front of the storm they'd escaped from, and from what she could tell the ship was going as fast as it could heading right towards it.

Why? She'd heard the captain tell Jess that storms brought the fish up, so they would go as close as they could to the front and see what they could get.

Interesting. Dev glanced down at her scanner, observing the cluster of returns around her, and then a few much farther out. She looked out over the ship's rail, and squinted, as she thought she saw another profile on the surface heading in the same direction they were.

It matched scan. She extended it, and tuned the probes. The wiremap came back almost instantly, showing her a profile that was like, though not exactly the same, as the craft she was on. She heard a door close behind her somewhere, and then a moment later the captain crossed the deck and took hold of the outer wall, peering over it.

Then he turned around and came right over to her. "That thing comp?"

"Portable scan analyzer." Dev acknowledged. "Is that another fishing boat out there?"

"That thing say it is?" The captain countered.

Dev obligingly showed him the screen. "It looks like it." She said. "I could see the other ship, and I thought it might be like this one. Scan said it did." She reviewed the results. "Here's a hires." She tapped a control and the wiremap was replaced with a realtime image, bounced to the analyzer from an overhead met sat.

"Ah!" The captain leaned closer. "It's the Seagull." He nodded. "Headed same place we are. Lucky for me we're faster." He winked at Dev, and spoke into a comm clipped to his shoulder. "Bridge, put the fire on. Plane up."

A moment later the ship surged forward at a higher rate of speed, and the front part lifted up out of the water.

Dev enjoyed that a lot. "Excellent."

The captain eyed her. "Like that?"

"I do." She said. "It's fast like when I pilot the carrier."

He leaned against the structure next to her, bracing himself much like she was against the motion. "Must be real different from up in space." He said. "Been down here long?"

Dev shook her head. "Not that long." She said. "Have you always been on this boat?" She asked. "And your family? I thought I saw some children before we left."

"Ah, yes." The captain smiled. "My little ones. The latest generation in a very long line going back way before the end times. Long before the world took itself back from us, when there were still trees and grass back in the home country." He folded his arms. "Always been on the sea."

"Wow." Dev was impressed. She knew Jess talked about her family's long history but this was something else entirely. There was a sense of independence about the captain that was interesting. "That is a long time."

"What about you?" Sigurd asked. "What does your family do up in space?"

Dev had thought a little about what she was going to answer that question with, since she and Jess both figured it would get asked. It was interesting, in a way, to get a chance to build a history for herself other than her real one. "I grew up on a bio station." She said, since it was the truth. "I don't have a family. I never knew them."

She could see the reaction in his face, a look of near dismay. "Now I'm a tech, so the people around me there are sort of like family, but it's not the same, is it?"

"No." The captain answered. "Not the same at all." He studied her face. "You could be kin of mine, y'know. I got a daughter looks pretty much just like you." He added. "I can see int in the bones of your face. We probably share a great great somewhere way back."

Dev smiled a little. "That's nice to think of." She said. "The one thing that really interested me when I came downworld was the water here." She indicated the ocean, which was pitching and rolling around them full of whitecaps. "I thought it was amazing. It was one of the first things Jess showed me and I will never forget it."

"It is amazing." Sigurd smiled "And that's a sure sign your one of us." He chuckled, turning slightly as Jess appeared and made her way along the deck to where they were standing. "Looks like we're in a race."

Jess went to the outer wall and put her gloved hands on it. "Another fisherman?"

"Yup. I even know who it is, thanks to your tech here." He said. "Not one of my bigger enemies. We trade met sometimes."

Jess turned and came back over to them, rocking a little with the motion. She took hold of the grab bar Dev was leaning against and regarded the sea. "Aside from the obvious, how do you win the race? What do you do when you get there?"

Sigurd folded his muscular arms. "Thought you were out at sea?"

"Never saw any other boats, and besides I was six. You might have changed your methods since then." Jess said, dryly.

The captain laughed. "We'll change our traditions when Interforce does." He said. "It's a stake." He went on. "You pick your spot in the ocean and you got that, plus the distance a boat can travel at 10 knots in ten minutes to fish in." He spoke into the mic again. "Head for the banks. Drill it between the deep reef and marker 12."

"How do you know where to go?" Dev asked. "To find the fish I mean."

Sigurd winked. "That knowin's been in the bloodline for a good long time. You just know." He pushed away from the wall. "Gotta get ready to work. Stay out of the way. Don't want to explain to Justin if either of you get nailed by a hook."

He ambled off, his body balanced against the movement in a completely natural way.

Jess waited for him to disappear, then she took up the spot against the wall he'd vacated. "So." She said. "What do you think so far?"

"What do I think about what?" Dev asked. "I think this is amazing." She indicated the ocean. "I really like riding on the boat."

"You do?"

"Yes." Dev showed Jess the scanner. "I showed this picture to him. I hope that was not incorret."

Jess studied the live image, then she shrugged. "They know we bounce off the sats, so dont' see much harm in it." She said. "Did he tell you anything interesting?"

Dev keyed off the image and reset the scanner to long range biological. "He does think I'm related to him apparently." She said. "Something about sharing an ancestor way back." She pondered that. "He said I looked like an offspring if his."

Jess studied her for a moment, then shifted her gaze to one side. "I can see it." She said. "Might even be true. Do they keep track of that sort of thing up there?"

Dev waited for her scan to parse. "They keep very close track of the genetic arrangements, of course." She said. "They mix and combine them for specific sets. But making that trace back to actual people? I don't think so." She looked up at Jess. "You know all about your family, don't you?"

"Sure." Jess responded. "I've got a family scrapbook in my quarters at the citadel. I'll show it to you when we get back. Helps when you're in the out beyond sometimes, if you're from a known family. Like with the captain here – he knows my bloodline, so he knows what to expect from me."

Dev pondered that. "Not that different from us then really, is it?" She said. "They know what to expect from us, because they know our genetics and programming."

"Sometimes." Jess said, slowly. "But not always. They don't program us.." But as she said it, she had to wonder. What then was the training she'd gotten since age six if not programming, just in a different way? She pushed the thought aside and bent over the scanner. "Whatcha got?"

"I was looking for bears." Dev said. "But I don't think that's them unless they swim under water." She indicated a mass below the surface ahead of them. "What are those?"

"How did you get it to penetrate the water?" Jess took the device from her. "I've never seen it do that. Usually we just get refraction waves back."

"Oh." Dev cleared her throat. "Well, I was going over the comp from our last mission and I was looking at the intel stream

from when we were heading directly at the ocean and..”

“Those are fish.” Jess grabbed her arm and started across the deck. “C'mon. We can maybe make some major points with this.” She cradled the scanner in one hand and shouldered the door to the interior open. “G'wan with your story.”

Her story? “Oh.” Dev hurried to catch up. “Anyway, I thought it would be a good idea next time to be able to see where we were going if we were heading for the ocean so I ran the comp through a backscatter decoder and figured out the sine wave differences.”

Jess stopped, and looked at her. “Wait.” She said. “This isn't something you were programmed for is it?”

Dev shook her head. “No. That's the genetic part. Doctor Dan told me he equipped me to be able to figure things out by myself.” She responded. “So I made a routine to bend the scan waves to match the ones in the water so we could see under it.”

Jess simply stared at her in silence.

“Was it incorrect?” Dev asked, hesitantly, after a long moment.

“You scare the shit out of me sometimes.” Jess said, mildly. “No it's not incorrect. C'mon.” She started moving again, hauling up as she almost plowed into Sigurd. “Ah. Just the man I was looking for.”

“For what?” The captain said. “I'm busy.”

“Want fish?” Jess showed him the display. “Just off your port bow if you slow down long enough to catch em.”

Sigurd grabbed the scanner and stared at it. “That's 200 fathoms down how in the hell are you seeing them” He barked. “Nothing we have goes more than fifty anymore and all it can tell is rough relief not identify damn species.” He grabbed his comm. “Hold hold hold! Engines full stop get ready to deploy the deep nets! Move it! Move it!”

He tossed the scanner back to them and turned. “We'll see if you're not bullshitting. If you are I hope you like swimming.” He slammed back through the inner door and then they felt the radical motion as the ship went from full speed to nothing, and they were thrown roughly against the inner wall.

They could hear bells ringing outside, and a thunder and crash of heavy machinery.

“Sure hope that scans right.” Jess said. “I do like swimming but not in those waters.”

Dev had recovered her scanner and was adjusting it. The readings had come back with the same results and she was relatively sure they were accurate. “Can we go watch them?”

“Sure.” Jess moved gingerly through the hall, glad it was narrow since the motion of the vessel was now extreme since they'd stopped their forward motion. She stepped over the threshold of the hatch into the next section, keeping her head down to avoid slamming it into the overhead.

Dev followed closely, slinging the scanner around her neck so she had her hands free to keep her balance. The inside of the structure was all painted a green gray and every few lengths there were hatches that had be climbed through, with hatches that could be closed off if needed.

She wasn't sure what that was all about, but the walls were interesting too, she could see many places where something had been, and which were now empty, only the clamps and weld points remaining. There were also things written there, but most of them did not seem to make any sense.

She stepped over a last divider then followed Jess up a tunnel that brought a blast of fresh, cold air to push back the smell of oil and steel. A moment later and they were outside, on the back part of the ship. Jess pulled her to one side and back against the bulkhead, and they both stood there trying to make sense of what was going on.

The crew on deck were all in motion, dragging bins over to a huge wheel in the center of the deck that was wound around with netting. As they watched, a heavy hatch at the rear of the deck was lowered, and the roiling sea boiled past it and flooded everything.

“Holy crap.” Jess grabbed her and hauled her up onto a crate in a smooth motion, just as the backwash from the water thundered against the bulkhead wall, splashing and spraying everything in it's path.

“Go go go!” A man nearby yelled. He was standing on a rotating platform, his legs braced and his hands moving rapidly over a set of controls. “Nets going out!”

The noise was incredible. Dev resisted the urge to cover her ears and watched as the wheel started to turn and as it did, she felt the ship start to move forward, and at the same time, felt Jess's arms close around her to keep her in place.

It seemed to take a long time as they went around in a broad circle but then the loudest of the noise stopped and the boat rocked as they unhitched the end of the net and it went free into the water.

Then it was quiet, save the rumble of the engines and the sounds of the crew securing things on deck. The bell stopped ringing and some of the men started dragging the bins back to the overhang next to the bulkhead, shaking their heads.

The back hatch closed, and the water drained out and they climbed down off the crate and went back to the deck. The crew looked at them, then looked away, ignoring them as they went about their tasks.

Jess led the way cautiously into the open. The back deck of the ship had a low wall on the sides, then the higher gate in the back and the steel deck in between was weathered and beaten and had patch upon patch upon patch welded into it. On either side were huge cranes with grapples on them and in front of the wheel was a huge hatch with doors the crew was fastening the grapples onto.

“Least this'll be fast.” One of the men was saying. “No idea what cap'n's doing aint never been no fish here.”

“Miss out on our spot near the front.” His companion griped. “Crazy ass.”

The clouds roiled overhead, and the wind shifted, and the men looked up at the sky. “Now what?” The first one said. “Let's go check met. That didn' feel right.”

The ship swung around again, making a big circle around the bobbing floats that had been tied to the net. “See if they got em.” Jess nudged her partner. “Before this damn storm screws us up again.” She braced her hands on two of the desk supports, blocking the wind and the motion from sending Dev flying.

Dev appreciated that. She was now between a bulkhead and Jess, and she could use both hands to study the scanner, tuning it carefully and starting her program running. For a moment, it just blinked placidly, then the display shimmered into a view of what was beneath them, giving a wiremap of the topography and showing a huge white mass just about right under them. Not knowing really what it meant, she showed it to Jess.

Her partner chuckled. “If they don't catch em they can't blame us.” She eased out from under the overhang and looked up. The clouds were getting darker and as she watched, rain started coming down, slapping her with cold, wet drops. She ducked back under cover and tugged her hood up as the wind increased, bringing it's chill with it. “Br.”

Dev had stayed where she was, feeling the cold herself as the wind blew against her face.

The man on the platform was just watching a gauge, ignoring the rain as it dripped off his oversuit. It was made of some repelling fabric since the water beaded and dropped off it, but his face was exposed and he frequently blinked to shed the rain from his eyelashes.

Pale blond, like hers. Dev noted. The man was around the same age as the captain, she guessed, but he had close cropped facial hair and she wondered if it was because he had to stand outside on the platform all day.

Then the bell started ringing again, and the deck erupted into chaos, men bolting from the forward structure and heading for the big wheel, and the man on the platform working his controls and the cranes lifting open the doors to the huge hatch.

“What are they doing?” Dev asked.

“Pulling the net in.” Jess responded. “I think.” She said. “Got to be honest and tell you I don't remember much from the last time except how cold it was, and how good fresh oysters tasted on the way in.”

Dev smiled, moving over just a little and leaning against Jess's tall body. She was holding onto a pole, but a moment later, her free arm draped over Dev's shoulders and there, in that rough and rolling sea in the rain Dev felt a sense of comfort she'd hardly expected. “What are oysters?”

“Shellfish.” Jess promptly answered. “You get them in the shallows, then you just open them and eat them whole in a swallow.”

Dev went still. “While they're still alive?” She asked, her voice rising in surprise.

“Yeah.” Her partner said. “I guess.” She said, after a brief pause. “They don't make noise or move around or anything.”

The bio alt looked up at her with a very dubious expression.

“Oh ho.” Jess laughed. “I think I finally found something that freaks you out in a bad way.”

Dev was momentarily quiet. Then she produced a pained grin. “I think you're right.” She admitted. “I sure liked the idea of that whole sex thing better.” She added in a mournful tone. “I don't think I'd like consuming live animals.”

They both turned when loud noise sounded, and got back under cover as the ship churned to a halt again and four men on the back wall started throwing metal hooks into the water, pulling them back at high speed and sending tails of wet rope skittering over the deck.

The first yanked a floating ball up over the top and ran with it to the wheel, as the back deck lowered hastily into the water. The second and third ball came over and were attached, and then the last came flipping onto the deck, the man who had hooked it grabbing it and running for the center of the deck.

The wheel started turning though, and he missed the hook for it, falling into the wheel and slamming away from it as it sent his body tumbling through the air.

Another crewman grabbed the ball and climbed halfway up the wheel, hooking it and then jumping clear, ignoring the man now lying on the deck. "Go go go!"

The wheel increased its speed, and the net started coming back onboard the ship, as several more men gathered on either side of the opening with huge, long hooked poles.

The man who had missed lay still, then a blast of water washed over the deck and picked him up, throwing him further up the flat surface towards the overhang.

"Should we help him?" Dev asked, watching the tumbling body with some concern.

Jess considered in silence, then made a motion that was half shrug and half shake. "Wait here." She jumped down off the crate and bolted across the floor, leaping over the next rolling wave and two bags it brought with it, keeping her balance across the pitching deck seemingly with ease.

She reached the injured crewman and grabbed his arm and his upper leg, hauling him up and onto her shoulders and then bracing her legs as the next wave sought to take them from under her. She waited for the water to roll back then she loped across the deck over to where a platform was bolted on the outside of the deck structure, gently letting the crewman down onto his back on top of it.

The man on the platform turned to watch her, his expression interested. Then he turned back around as the rest of the crew started yelling, and the boat suddenly changed its angle, going down at the aft as the wheel struggled to bring the net onboard. "Whoa!"

A woman came around the corner of the hatch, hopping over bins and hanks of rope as she skidded to a halt at Jess's side. "Svein! What happened to him!" She gave Jess a suspicious look. "What did you do to him?"

"She didn't do anything!" Dev had slid across the deck to join her partner. "He got hit by that big thing over there. Jess just got him from the water and brought him here."

Jess eyed her, a faint smile crossing her face. "Don't worry." She told the woman. "If I really wanted to kill him I would have just done it. I don't waste time beating people up." She got up. "You a medic?"

"Yes." The woman said stiffly. "Sorry. No offense."

"None taken." Jess answered promptly. "C'mon Dev lets.."

The both grabbed for something as the ship pitched upward violently, and high keening sound broke through all the rumbling of the engines. Jess slid against the bulkhead and grabbed hold of a steel strut, reaching out to grab Dev as she bounced over next to her. "What in the hell?"

The raucous yells of the crew rang out and they ducked their heads around the overhang to see the net being hauled back in, stuffed with brilliant wriggling forms. The draw was so intense it was nearly taking the aft of the ship underwater, and the excitement on deck was palpable.

The deck door popped open and Sigurd hopped out, a grin on his face. "C'mon you slugs! Get that damn thing unloaded before it drags us under!" He yelled at the top of his voice. "Bet we fill the tanks with one damn throw!" He reached out and slapped Jess on the arm. "Lucky little bastard you are, Drake. Haven't seen a haul like this in ten years."

"Captain." Jess's voice cut through all the excitement, and brought him around to face her. She was standing very still, her head cocked a little forward. "Don't hit me again."

Sigurd looked her in the eye in silence for a moment. Then he lifted a hand up, palm outward. "Just treating you like one of the family, Drake. No offense intended." He said, in a quiet, serious tone. "You did me a favor, you and your tech. We appreciate it."

Jess relaxed. "Sorry." She said. "Been in the field a while."

He nodded. "Better warn your tech not to stick so close then." He winked at Dev. "She'd look lousy with bruises." He turned and started across the deck, heading towards the cluster of crew now working feverishly to get the fish out of the net and into the tank before the drag pulled the back of the ship under water.

Jess exhaled, then she turned to regard Dev, who was tucked against her with a puzzled expression on her face. "Don't worry." She said. "You're safe. I only whack people I don't like or don't know." She paused. "Or those who double cross me and nearly get me killed."

Dev pondered that. "I'm really glad you like me then." She finally said. "And I'm glad you helped that man." She blinked against the wind driven rain. "Should we get out of the weather? I'm really getting cold."

Jess relaxed completely, and smiled. “You bet.” She undogged the hatch and pushed it open. “We’ve done our good deeds for the day. Let’s get something hot and check our intel so far before we get washed overboard.”

“That sure was a lot of fish.” Dev said, as she stepped over the threshold.

“Sure was.”

Dev paused, as they opened the inner door. “They don’t eat them alive, do they, Jess?”

Jess chuckled.

“Do they?”

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As it turned out, they didn’t. Dev sat quietly on a low bench against the wall of the common room, cradling a mug of pungent seaweed tea between her hands as she watched the crew stream in and out as they finished their tasks, or started new ones, their high good humor very evident.

The net had hauled in a good catch, and after they cast it out again, they had been happy with the result and ended up with enough to fill up one of the tanks and now they were powering along in the waves heading somewhere else.

It was damp and cool in the common room but still a lot warmer than outside, and on one side three women were working on preparing some food for everyone. Unlike in the creche, or even in the citadel, they were doing this in the open, cutting up some things and putting them in a big container that seemed to be over a heat source.

Whatever it was they were doing smelled good. Dev was just glad there was heat involved, which meant she wasn’t going to have to consume something either raw or alive, the thought of which was giving her quite a bit of discomfort.

Across the room Jess was talking to the captain, and everyone seemed to be ignoring the motion of the ship, even when the front of it seemed to be smashing into the water every few moments.

The bench she was on had a padded rail behind it, which you could hook an arm around to stay in place, and that was exactly what she had done, wedging herself into a corner to ride out the waves.

She was pleased her scan had resulted in success. It seemed to have broken the ice with the crew, as Jess had hoped it would, and now, though not really friendly to them, she didn’t see people glaring at them anymore. That was good. She watched Jess carefully, seeing the agent’s body posture relax and she reached out to casually grasp a hold bar against the wall as the ship pitched hard to the right.

Then she turned her head and their eyes met. Dev found herself smiling for no apparent reason at that, watching a responding smile appear on her partner’s face. It was nice to see that, in this cold and strange place. Dev regarded her cup, then she looked back up to see Jess lifting a hand briefly to the captain and then head her way.

She had good balance, Dev noted. The motion of the ship didn’t knock her offstride, and she ended up next to Dev and dropped down onto the bench without missing a step. “Hey.”

“Yes?” Dev responded.

“He wants you to use the scanner again.” Jess lowered her voice, though the sound in the common room with all the engines going blocked out most listening ears anyway. “I told him we can’t run around catching fish for him.”

Dev considered that. “Of course I can do that.” She said. “But wouldn’t it be better if I looked at their gear, to see if I could get it to do the same thing?”

Jess glanced around quickly. “Can you do that?”

“I don’t know. I would need to look at their equipment.” The bio alt answered placidly.

Jess leaned on the back rail. “Interesting bargaining chip.” She remarked. “Keep quiet about that.”

“Okay.”

“We give that to them, they get a big advantage over the rest of the fleet.” Jess said. “We’re not supposed to tip their balance.”

“I see.”

“On the other hand, they’d really owe us one.” Her partner mused. “And I’d wait until we’re in more sheltered waters. I do n’t want you banging your head on their crap trying to rig it.”

Dev didn’t really have much to say to that, so she remained quiet, sipping at her tea. The brew strange and unlike pretty much anything she’d tasted before – the seaweed it was made from stronger and a soft purple color rather than the green she’d been used to.

“Sea grape tea.” Jess peered in the cup. “Haven’t seen that in a while.”

Silently, Dev offered her the cup. Jess took it and sipped from it, rolling the liquid around in her mouth a little before she swallowed it. “Not bad.” She admitted. “They’re making a stew back there. Mostly what they have since they can add to it and it stays pretty good.”

“And it’s not alive.” Dev uttered softly.

“We made good progress.” Jess lowered her voice again “Now I’ve got to convince the captain to take this haul and sell it to the other side so I can get this mission moving before we get interrupted by pirates.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be trying to find the pirates?”

“No. I just want them to think we are.” Her partner said. “I mean... “ She glanced around. “Hell, if we bump into the damn pirates I’ll be glad to get in a fistfight with them, but we have to focus on the plan, Dev. I need to get that data.” She handed Dev’s back and watched her take a swallow of it’s contents. “That’s the goal. Don’t lose sight of it.”

“I won’t.” Dev said. “I’m just trying to keep everything straight in my head.” She explained. “What can I do to help?”

The ship rolled at that moment, sending Jess practically into Dev’s lap. “Holy shit.” Jess hauled herself upright. “Sorry about that, partner.”

“I’m not.” Dev replied in a straightforward way. “You can do that at any time.” She had moved her cup away and her skin was still tingling with the sudden connection.

Jess eyed her, and a rakish smile appeared on her face.

The women finished their work across the room, and they rang a small, yellow metal bell that immediately made everyone else shut up and move towards them.

“We’ll wait until they get theirs.” Jess said. “Even though we rank them, and don’t have to.”

Dev cautiously extended her boots and crossed them. She was now relatively warm, and sitting next to Jess was making her feel even warmer. She had her back against the rail and she set the cup down into an inset tray before she hooked both arms around it, her shoulder pressing against Jess’s.

The crew was watching them. Dev could see them glancing over, then glancing away, as they filed past the back counter and came away with steaming bowls clutched in their hands. Whatever it was smelled good, and she could feel her stomach growling in response.

It was near dark. The day had passed faster than she’d thought it would, and she found herself wondering what this group of people would do now. Would they continue to work? They did in the creche, after all. But in the citadel, when they had been there after dinner the night had been theirs to do whatever they wanted in.

She had used her time to study. She didn’t have much to study here, but she did have her book with her and she wondered if she would have a few minutes to read some of it.

She spotted one of the women approaching and she glanced at Jess. “Are we expected to help?”

Jess laughed. “No.” She nodded at the woman, who had brought over two bowls with eating utensils stuck haphazardly in them. She took one and Dev took the other. “Thanks.”

The woman didn’t say a word to them. She just turned and went back over to the work area.

Dev watched her go. “Did we do something to cause discomfort?”

Jess sniffed her bowl, then picked up the combination spoon and fork and fished out some fish nibbling it cautiously. “Nah.” She licked her lips. “These guys like their women, but they like them quiet and busy cleaning and cooking and taking care of the kids.”

Dev took a spoonful of the wet, lumpy substance and found it quite tasty. “I see.”

“They’re fine with that, but they think we’re freaks.” Jess went on. “I’ve been called everything from unnatural to a monster up here by the ice.” She shrugged. “Even when I was here as a kid, they tried to make me help them. I kicked one of them in the crotch and they left me alone.”

“I see.” Dev repeated.

“That’s why they warned us when we came on not to go around the ship alone. Not that it worries me.” Jess said. “I’ve got more firepower strapped to my body than they could buy with a dozen hauls on this thing.”

“I’ll make sure to stay close by you then.” Dev commented. “Because I don’t have anything dangerous tied to me.”

Jess chuckled. “These guys aren’t impressed by us being Interforce but Sigurd knows my rep and if he’s got any sense he’ll have told his roughnecks to steer clear.”

Dev ate what was in the bowl, watching the rest of the crew who were seated on the benches like they were, or were at the table in the middle with the captain. The ones there seemed to be the more important ones, the man who had been standing on the platform outside and a few of the others she had heard yelling orders.

What would they do next? She wondered how Jess would convince the captain to go where she wanted to go. Would she make him think there was fish there? Maybe she would. Dev thought about that, looking up when she heard footsteps approaching to find the captain and another man hunkering down next to them.

"I'm not gonna chase the storm edge." The captain said. "I got word we had a big pack ice break north east of the divide. I'm going to take us out there, and you're gonna find me another haul. How about it?"

Jess considered his words, as she continued to eat. "Northeast." She said, after a pause. "Sure that's smart?"

Dev blinked, since she'd figured in her head that northeast was exactly where Jess said she wanted to go.

The captain gave them both a reckless appearing grin. "Scared?" He said. "Fraid the abominable snowman's gonna getcha?" He looked mockingly at Jess. "I let the crew know you nailed that bait ball we pulled onboard. Now they want to see if it was a fluke."

"Not my job to find fish for you." Jess remarked. "You want to risk taking this tub into the ice pack? You can drop me off on a berg. Not my idea of fun." She scraped the bottom of the bowl. "What makes you think you'll find any fish there anyway? Maybe you're just looking to embarrass us."

Sigurd laughed. "Maybe I am" He said. "I guess we'll just find out won't we?" He got up and tapped the man with him on the head. "Let's go Lars. Tell the crew they got till mid's then they need to start cranking."

Jess watched them go, tipping her bowl up to drain the last of the liquid into her mouth. Then she let her elbows rest on her knees and licked her lips. "Nice."

Dev just scratched her nose, having nothing really to add to that. She poked in her bowl and scooped up a bit of fish, chewing it thoughtfully. The meal was mostly that, with thick, well cooked pieces of seaweed in it and it was a little spicy. She decided she liked it.

From her peripheral vision, she saw the women take away their work materials, moving off through a heavy door set in the center of the common space. "What's in there?" She indicated the door.

Jess glanced at it. "That's where they live. Got some common crew quarters on the outer corridor, where we got put. In there's where the kids usually are, and where they bunk. I was surprised when you said you saw them outside."

"I see." Dev set the bowl down and picked up her scanner, adjusting it and directing the beacon towards the door. The wiremap came back quickly, diagramming a dense, compact space of three levels that had a number of hot targets scattered across the rooms.

Jess peered at it. "Don't let them see you doing that." She warned, in a very low tone. "They take their space very seriously." She went on "But get as much detail as you can."

"Okay." Dev tuned the device, aware of Jess's body pressed against hers. After a few minutes, she turned the scanner off and let it hang from the strap around her neck. "What do we do now?"

"Wait." Jess let her elbows rest on her knees. "Wait for us to get into this back of beyond spot he's got his eye on." She stood up and stretched. "Let's go get some rest, Devvie."

Dev's brows twitched at this morphing of her name but she got up and followed her partner across the open space, her balance only slightly tested as the ship seemed to have found a less fractious path for a few minutes. She set her bowl in a deep sunken space with the rest of them and tried to ignore the intent stares from the men they were going past.

Jess seemed oblivious. She led them towards the side door in the bulkhead and worked the wheel latch that held it shut. She pulled it open and ducked inside, with Dev right behind her as they moved from the stale, flickering light of the common room to the dim, burnished orange glow of the corridor.

Here, the motion didn't matter as much as the space was barely large enough to admit Jess's shoulders when the agent was facing forward. The walls were rough and covered in old weld points, and the lights themselves were wrapped in steel and thick gritty glass.

They were alone in the corridor.

"What is this area?" Dev asked, as they went through a slightly wider space.

Jess looked. "Probably was an engineering station." She said. "Most of these old boats are from that last big fight. When humanity realized they were so fucked they couldn't afford open warfare anymore and they abandoned everything."

"Oh." Dev examined the now dark consoles with some interest. "So the fishermen took them over?"



“Some of them, yeah.” Jess reached their little space and bumped the door open. “No locks.” She commented, as she entered, ducking her head to clear the hatch. “They were the very few who could get the creds to run them, since they had fish to trade.” She waited for the hatch to shut behind Dev and then she examined the latch, removing her long knife and wedging it in place to keep the mechanism closed.

“I see.”

Jess went over to where she'd lashed her pack and stood quietly for a moment, studying it. Then she touched the bio patch on the side and regarded the gentle green light that flashed briefly before she opened it. “Least they've got some brains here.”

Dev had done the same to her pack “Did you expect someone to come in and disturb our things?”

“Never can tell,” Jess started divesting herself of her weapons. “More expect the kids to come in looking for swag than anyone else. They're always looking for trade goods.” She unfastened and removed her jacket and hung it on one of the two hooks near the hatchway.

Beneath the hooks there was a metal grilled box split in two, and Jess deposited her boots in one side of it. “I remember hearing stories about those times, when this was a fighting ship. Remind me to look em up when we get back home.”

Home. Dev stood up and took off her outer coat, putting it on the hook next to Jess's and feeling the cool damp of the room penetrate her jumpsuit. She'd never really had much to call her own at the creche, so the thought of her quiet, spacious quarters in the citadel being home was surprisingly appealing to her. “Okay.”

“Cold?” Jess was watching her.

“A little.” Dev rubbed her arms. “I'm glad we brought these.” She indicated her dark green jumpsuit, which at least covered her pretty much from head to foot. “Jess, you seemed in discomfort when they said where we were going. Didn't you want to go that way?”

Jess had unpacked her sleep bag and was spreading it out on the top bunk. She chuckled softly. “I do.” She said. “I'm not sure I really want to enter the pack ice, but it's the right direction, and if he gets a good haul chances are he'll want to offload where we need to be.”

Dev copied her motions, snapping the hooks at the four edges of her bag to the bed supports. “Okay.”

“But I don't want him to know that's what I want.” Jess went on. She was now in her black jumpsuit and she boosted herself up onto the upper bunk and sprawled over her sleep bag, exhaling as her body relaxed. “You scanned for com, right?”

“Yes.” Dev was just putting her scanner into it's dock. She triggered a download of the scan, taking a seat on her bunk and extending her legs out into the small space of the room. “Most of the tech is in that central area. In this space, there's nothing really except for the lights and a comp in that place I saw the children.”

“Library probably.” Jess mused. “Kids were getting lessons.” She stretched and sighed again “One of the things they trade for in places like Quebec on our side, and Dover on the other side. Comp mods for the kids, and for nav and met.”

“It's an old comp.” Dev studied the readouts.

“Sure.”

“If I could mod our scan to find the fish, I'm not really sure why someone hasn't.” Dev commented. “We got sine wave mods as basic in school.”

Jess didn't answer for a few minutes, then she shifted a little, rolling over onto her stomach and peering down at Dev. “I never did.”

Dev looked up in surprise. “You didn't?”

The agent shook her head. “They teach us what we need to know. Sine wave manipulation wasn't on the curriculum for front line soldiers in the cause back in school.” She studied Dev. “There's a feeling too... I think that old fashioned goons like the ones here don't trust tech.”

Dev blinked at her, obviously confused.

“You take tech for granted.” Jess said. “So do I, since my family's pretty stocked and I went from home to Interforce and there's plenty of that there. But out here, tech's like your crazy uncle. Know what I mean?”

“Not in the least.” Dev responded readily.

Jess chuckled. “These people rely on themselves. Not on outsiders, or tech, or comp.” She said. “They use it when they can get it, just like they're using us for their own purposes, but they don't trust it.”

“Or us.” Dev concluded.

“You got it.” Jess said. “So they might trade for something that could do something useful, like that scan, if you could set it to just do the fish finding, but they'd never waste their time learning the theory behind it. Does that make sense?”

Dev remained quiet for a brief time. “It makes sense as in, I understand what you said, but it doesn't make sense as in, how do they expect to make things better if they don't learn how it all works?” She settled the scanner into its case, making sure the connection to the inductive charging system was solid.

Then she wriggled back and lay down on her bag, watching Jess's face hanging over the top bunk, its dark and shaggy framing outlined in the low, orange light. “Don't they want to improve their future?”

“There is no future here.” Jess said. “Its' all short term, just like it is for us. You can't really think about what you'e going to be doing in a year, or ten years, or even tomorrow when you're focus is really on how to survive today.” She extended a hand down and smiled when Dev reached up to grasp it. “Let's get some rest while we can.”

Dev squeezed her fingers then let her go, squirming around and getting the bag's covering over her, relieved when the light, strong fabric immediately trapped the air around her and warmed it. She wished, briefly, that they were back in the carrier uncomfortable as that had been, since then at least they'd been able to sleep next to each other.

Warmer. She remembered the feeling she'd had when she'd woken up before, with Jess's arm draped over her. Warmer, and nicer.

She thought about the fishing people, living from day to day.

She thought about school, and all the things she'd learned and never wondered why and about the kids here who were only taught the things they needed to know to do what they did.

She wondered, a moment, about what really the difference was between natural borns and bio alts.

“Hey.” Jess's voice interrupted her.

“Yes?”

“Y'know, it's warmer up here.”

On the other hand, Dev now found herself appreciating the need to deal with the present. “Is it?”

“C'mon and see.”

Well. Keeping warm was important, wasn't it? Dev climbed out of her nest and lifted herself up onto the upper bunk, where Jess was already enfolding her in fabric and a tangle of long arms and legs and, she was glad to note, much warmer air.

Nice.

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They woke to chaos. The lights had gone completely off, and a klaxon blared suddenly, making the walls vibrate as it jerked them both upright.

Dev was glad they hadn't decided to meet up in her bunk on the bottom or else she suspected her partner would have been knocked out cold. She felt Jess shift and she quickly tried to get out of the way, as the sheets pulled tight against her.

“What the fuck?” Jess released the catches on the sleeping bag. “Don't move.” She planted her hands on either side of her partner. “Coming over.”

Dev pressed flat against the bed, her heart hammering in her ears as she felt Jess launch herself over her, landing on the ground with a thump of bare feet against steel. Once she was sure she was clear she reached down and grabbed the scanner, turning it on and using the screen to light up the cabin they were in

Jess was halfway into her jumpsuit, now outlined in the blue silver glow. “Thanks.” She said. “Let me get this suit on then you grab yours. I want you with me.”

Dev had absolutely no argument with that at all. She waited for Jess to move towards her overjacket and then she slipped out of the bag and rooted around for her own clothes. She left the scanner leaning against the bedpost and jumped into her suit, getting the catches closed just as a voice blared on the speaker calling battle stations.

Battle stations?

“Looks like they kept the old com chips.” Jess had her coat on, and was seating her weapons in their holsters. “Once we get out to the deck keep that scan on and recording. If this goes way bad they'll want to pick up the comp.”

Dev was pretty sure she didn't really want to know what that meant. She got her jacket on and slipped the scanner around her neck fastening the outer closures as she reached down for her boots.

The klaxon continued. Jess got her boots on and headed for the hatch. “Stick close.” She yanked her knife free and sheathed it, and then she worked the latch and shoved the door open, ducking to get through it as she flipped on the light

from her kit and slapped it into place along the axis of her blaster.

The hallway beyond was also dark, and the ship was rolling the water, sending them slamming from side to side as they made their way aft towards the working part of the ship. .

Dev could hear running feet, and the whine of machinery and the sound of men yelling. Above that though, she heard a roar that didn't seem to be part of the ocean. She put a hand on Jess's hip and stayed close by her, the sound of the klaxon making her grimace as they passed under one of the speakers.

They reached the door and Jess put her shoulder to the hatch and shoved it open, hauling herself back and sweeping Dev behind her as they were hit with a blast of light.

Then the light was gone and Jess surged forward. "I got a bad feeling about this." She hopped out the hatch and onto the deck, and bolted for the bulkhead wall.

It was loud and chaotic. There were crew behind several walls and the pedestal, all yelling, the laser traces of hand blasters blinking in the darkness in multihued flares.

Dev followed, seeing the blast of light cascade across the deck, coming from above. She tipped her head back as she headed for where Jess was flattened, seeing a huge silhouette momentarily outlined in backwash against roiling black skies.

Programming triggered, and she sucked in a shocked breath as she reached Jess's side. "Jess!"

Jess unsafed her heavy blaster. "Yeah?"

"That's a carrier over us."

"You got a look at it?" Jess turned and stared intently at her, going otherwise very still.

"Really fast one." Dev said. "But it matched a pict image." She touched the side of her head. "Older type, BM series, not like ours." She recited. "Smaller engine cones, bench inside, multiple launch attack model."

Jess sighed. "Fuck." She gently pushed Dev against the wall. "Stand there, poke the scan out that square hole and just get good tape of what I do."

"Okay." Dev said, feeling unhappy and incorrect. "Take care."

Jess smiled briefly. Then she closed her eyes, and took a breath in, letting it out slowly. Then she simply exploded into motion, coming around the bulkhead and onto the deck just as it lit up with a huge flare of white light, that outlined forms dropping from the sky.

Dev got her scanner in place and triggered the recorder, blinking her eyes rapidly to clear the light flare so she could see. The deck was alive with alighting figures and as they landed and rifles started swinging around Jess struck.

It was awful and to her, scary. Jess was moving so fast it was hard to keep sight of her, blaster fire missing her on all sides as she twisted and turned, a dozen figures swiveling to target her as she calmly laid down her own fire.

Rifle tucked against her side, hand gun in her left hand, she was shooting in two directions at once while moving in a third, never pausing in motion for even an instant. She took down one of the enemy, then two, then she leaped up onto the side wall of the ship as it pitched, jumping out and over two others who were rushing towards her.

Dev's jaw dropped a little, as she watched her partner flip over in mid air, shooting down at the two figures and blasting them into pieces just before she landed and turned and let off a barrage in a sweeping motion that took out two more descending figures and sent them spinning off into the ocean.

No hesitation. All smooth and deadly motion.

She was a deadly force, and the men facing off against her knew it. Dev could see their faces in the wash of the light, their eyes wide, pointing, diving for the deck, ducking away from her motion even though they wore the same uniforms and were cut from the same apparent cloth.

Through the roar of the surf and the carrier engines, she heard a wild yell ring out, high and bold that made the hair on the back of her neck lift. She saw one falling figure shift sideways and head right for Jess only to watch in astonishment as her partner took one long step and then crouched, shooting off the deck and colliding with the figure as she swung her free hand out and around and the light caught a thick spray of liquid as the figure seemed to come apart as she hit it.

Jess tumbled in the air and then righted herself and landed, dropping into a crouch as bolts flew over her head and slammed into the outer wall of the ship and ricocheted back almost catching her as she leaped again over them and tumbled lazily into the air before the deck came up to meet her and she landed square, turning in a circle with both guns outstretched.

Men were yelling. The carrier above them suddenly shifted from white to red lights, and a loud horn blared out. Dev had no idea what it all meant, but she kept recording, as Jess closed in on two more of the attackers, now too close to use blasters so it was hand to hand

She kicked the legs out from one and sent him into the fire of another of the enemy, his body blasting apart into chunks as the plasma bolt touched him. Then she grabbed the second, swinging him around as he aimed the butt of his gun at her head. He missed his target by a fraction, then Jess had her knife out again and slashing, and the red light caught a spray of liquid as the knife cut deep and then flashed free.

Her laughter suddenly rang out over the chaos. She slid sideways and put her back to the ship wall, head swinging around as she looked for her next target.

Hooks suddenly caught the light, and four figures hauled on to them, as the carrier started to lift off. Jess dropped to her knees and braced her rifle, sighting up as the figures lifted clear and the lower guns of the craft activated, and swung around.

“Jess!” Dev let out a yell, as she recognized the configuration. “Guns live!”

“See em!” Jess yelled back, squeezing the trigger and letting off a barrage at the muzzles moving her way. The carrier's shielding took the hit and she knew she was likely about to get blasted along with the rest of the boat when a fast moving body made her jerk around just as Dev hit the deck next to her, sliding across the icy surface and slamming into her with stunning force.

Her automatic reactions seized up, throwing her body into confusion as the kill instinct was unexpectedly stifled, and she went with the motion as they both ended up behind the big net wheel just as the deck lit up with an overhead barrage and she had to throw her hands over her head to protect her eyes from the flash.

“The'yre going to shoot you!” Dev yelled. “Get down!”

“The'yre going to shoot you too now!” Jess yelled back, as a line of blaster fire came right at them counter to the carrier's motion as it lifted away and headed south. With a curse she grabbed Dev and yanked her out of the way, rolling out of the line of fire as the blast hit the deck again and sent a cascade of energy across it.

The backwash hit them and Dev felt her ears pop and her body arch and cramp, an almost fire burning over her senses before it was gone and over, and the sky was dark again.

Every inch of her was tingling. Dev got her knees under her and straightened, twisting around to find Jess right behind her, gun muzzles still glowing faintly, a light that vanished as the ship recovered and turned on the outside lights on the deck, bathing them in a white orange glow.

The engines rumbled to life. Dev caught her breath, and looked at her partner. “That was interesting. In a bad way.”

Jess slowly put her guns down on the deck and sat down next to them, letting her hands rest on her knees, her fingers twitching in a jerky rhythm. Her breathing was coming short and hard, and after a minute, she looked up at Dev with cold, expressionless eyes.

Killer's eyes. Compassionless and remote.

It was stark, and terrorizing, seeing the cold and merciless machine behind those eyes and yet, Dev didn't either think or hesitate before she reached out and clasped her partner's shoulder, far more worried than scared. “Are you all right?” She asked. “You seem in real discomfort.”

For a moment Jess kept staring at her, then her eyes blinked, and the muscles under Dev's fingers relaxed and the breath came out of her in a long, trickling sigh. She lifted her hands and rested her head against them, fingers still twitching.

Dev forgot all about the bad guys. She put her back to the chaos on the deck, blocking the view of the crew of her partner. “Jess?”

“I'm okay.” Jess muttered. “Just coming down. Give me a minute.”

Dev wasn't sure what that meant, but she watched the planes of Jess's face ease after a moment, taking on familiar character and leaving behind that cold, hard mask that had put a chill down Dev's spine. “I'm sorry if I was incorrect.” She said, in a quiet tone. “You told me to stay behind.”

Jess blinked a few more times, then she looked up at Dev with a strangely wry expression. “We'll talk later.”

“Hot damn!” The captain's voice rang out over the deck. “Get the engines revved! Put us back on course and get this deck ready to fish!”

Jess lifted her head. “Don't...” She scrambled to her feet and sucked in a breath. “Hold it!” She called out in a commanding tone.

Dev got up and stood, uncertainly, at her side. “What's wrong?”

“Go get a scan of the bodies, especially the hands.” Jess turned to face her. “Before the throw them over.” She added. “Need to know who the hell they are.”

Dev studied her for a moment. “Are you sure you're okay?” She asked, lifting the scanner up and keying it.

A very brief smile appeared on the agent's face. "I'm fine." She patted Dev on the arm. "G'wan so they can clean up."

Somewhat reassured, Dev turned and made her way across the slippery deck towards the first of the bodies. The engines had steadied the course of the ship, but they were still plowing through white ruffled seas and she balanced carefully as she watched the crew back away as she approached.

Strange. She had no idea why they might be wary of her, since all she'd done during the fight was yell and slide across the ice like a crazy person.

She knelt down beside the body and started the scan, glad she'd put on her heavy coat when a blast of ocean spray coated her liberally. The scan chimed softly and she reviewed the results, then she passed it over the hands that were already freezing to the deck.

The body was in a typical black battle suit, the twin to the one Jess was wearing, right down to the blue trim on the collar. She finished the scan and got up, storing the results before she headed to the second, catching sight of the captain crossing behind her and heading in Jess's direction.

Dev circled around the body and knelt down, positioning herself so she could keep an eye on her partner. Jess had picked up and holstered her weapons, and was tucking her hands inside her jacket as the captain reached her.

She seemed all right, but Dev was still concerned. She set the scan up and reached out to grasp the stiffening shoulder, rolling the body over and straightening it. The fact that the man was dead didn't bother her.

Bio alts were programmed to be very pragmatic about life, and death. Dev herself had seen any number of her kind put down in the creche, for various reasons and she felt no emotional charge as she studied the dead man's face. He was young, and had very short cut blond hair, with a thick knotted scar that went across his face and through one lip.

Dev captured the details carefully, then she passed the scan over his hands, waiting to hear the beep as the device picked up the embedded chips under the skin.

The device remained silent. Dev redid the scan, but got the same results. "Hm." She did it a third time, this time recording the result or lack of it and closing the cover. Unexpected. She got up and went to the other two casualties and then she headed back towards where Jess was still talking to the captain.

Four bodies in Interforce uniforms, three of them without the chips Dev knew they all carried, including herself. She'd gotten her set the morning before she'd left the creche, and she remembered the bone deep tickle as they'd activated the programming for it.

She remembered seeing Jess getting hers reactivated, on her very first day at the citadel, and how she'd flinched, and flexed her hand in reaction. "Jess." She paused, seeing the suddenly intent look from her partner.

"Done?" Jess said.

"Yes."

"So, captain." Jess put a hand on Dev's shoulder. "Did we deliver?"

Sigurd grinned. "Gotta admit, that was pretty slick." He said. "Bastards came down on top of us before we even caught them on radar. Looked like your side, huh?"

"It was a carrier." Jess acknowledged. "Bet they won't be back though."

"Not today." The captain agreed cheerfully. "You done now? I need to clean my deck."

"Done." Jess nodded, watching him as he walked off, yelling orders at the crew. "Shit."

"Jess." Dev opened the scanner and called up the results. "I found something unusual." She keyed up the second set of comp and showed it to her. "No ident."

Jess took the scanner and peered at it. "None of them?"

"The first one had." Dev reached over and switched the record, displaying it. "The rest didn't. I thought it was a bit unusual."

"A bit?" Jess's voice lifted. "Those are reg uniforms. Here's the scan tag." She pointed. "And that was a carrier, even though it was an older one. No one should be onboard it that isn't one of us."

Us. Dev felt just the tiniest prickle of pride at that, no matter how inappropriate the time for it. "What does this mean, Jess?" She asked, as her partner slowly started to move across the deck, still studying the scanner. They eased past the crew who were now dragging the bodies to the side, and gained the shelter of the bulkhead.

"Good question." Jess finally said, handing the scanner back. "Let's talk about it later." She folded her arms and regarded the busy deck. The attack didn't seem to have fazed the crew at all, and most were returning arms to an insulated locker

before moving out to go back to work.

Sigurd came back over to them, rubbing his hands. "Ready to head into the slot?" He said. "See it? Right there." He pointed up and forward, where the solid inky black of the sea was abruptly bisected by a ghostly gray wall looming up unexpectedly in front of them.

"I see a head on crash." Jess said. "Not much else."

The captain chuckled "There." He grabbed a post as the ship veered. "That crack."

Jess squinted, seeing a long, dark line in the gray. "You're taking this thing in there?"

'Hehehe. Scared?"

"Yes."

Sigurd looked at Jess in surprise. "Thought you jiggers didn't admit to that."

"Stupid ones don't." Jess eyed the oncoming wall. The ship lights now bounced off the ice and she could see the separation between the two big sheets, the waves rushing up against it and bouncing back. She could feel her breathing returning to normal, and the energy that had been making her muscles jerk was easing.

She was out of the need to be zoned. The harsh black and white flatness had eased from her vision, and she could feel the bowed tension in her back releasing as she leaned against the wall of the ship.

Had she freaked Dev out? She watched her partner grip the rail to keep herself steady, her head turning a little as she watched everything. It didn't seem like it. "Dev?"

"Yes?"

Jess hesitated. "Never mind. We'll talk later." She turned to the captain. "Why there?" She asked, walking over to the side of the ship and peering over the rail. "What do you think you'll find in there?"

"You tell me." Sigurd said. "How about it, tech? Wanna give that thing a whirl?" He came over next to Jess. "We know schools tend to hide up in the crevasse. Give's em shelter from the big current they're just a little tricky to set the nets into."

"Why at night?" Dev asked.

"That's when they there." The captain grinned at her. "They sleep at night. Get it?"

The alarm went off. "Standing by to move forward, cap'n!" A voice rumbled over the hailer. "Have clearance."

"C"mon." Sigurd motioned them forward. "See it for yourself. You'll only get the one chance." He rambled towards the side of the ship clearly expecting them to follow and they did, coming to the near rail just as the ship lunged and tumbled through the surf.

The walls of ice towered over them, and Jess tipped her head back, feeling a blast of cold air hit her, along with a wash of icy spray. She refastened her neck cover a little more firmly and felt her eyes widen a little as the brash lights of the ship hit the ice and sent a dozen jolts of color through the surface.

She felt like they were entering a cave. The dark clouds over head were formless and impenetrable, and as they slipped between the walls the thunder of the waves nearly deafened her, thrumming against her ears with an uncomfortable vibration.

She lifted one hand and covered her right ear, wincing.

Through the thickness of her jacket she felt Dev's touch on her, the heat of a grip on her elbow and then the press of Dev's shoulder against hers as they were surrounded by rumbling echoes.

"Loud huh?" Sigurd yelled.

The noise was pounding in her head and Jess felt suddenly sick.

"Drop the net!" The captain bawled into the loudspeaker. "Drop ! Drop!"

Dev could see the real discomfort on her partner's face. She looked around at all the activity, then she carefully gripped Jess's arm and tugged her towards the hatch that would block some of the sound that was bombarding them from all directions.

It wasn't terribly comfortable for Dev, the discordant waves were making her head ache and she was glad to get the hatch open, and then closed after her and Jess, the seal thumping into place and dropping the noise level by three quarters.

It was a physical relief. "Ah" Jess leaned against the wall, rubbing her ear and wincing. "Thanks."

Dev shook her head rapidly to clear it. She could still feel the ship moving but the roar of the waves and the echoes had faded to almost irrelevancy. They were alone, in the mostly dark corridor, in relative safety.

Jess exhaled, flexing her hands. "Let's go look at that scan." She finally said. "Something's not really adding up. What was that ambush all about?"

"They wanted the fish?" Dev hazarded a guess.

"Why drop a full on assault team to the deck in that case? Why not just put the guns on them and threaten them?" Jess wondered. "Were they after fish, Dev... or were they after something else." She slowly turned her head and looked around. "Like this ship instead?"

Dev picked a spot on the wall next to her and leaned on it. "Why would they want this ship?"

"Why would they want an old carrier?" Jess countered "How many of them didn't have tags? They weren't Interforce, Dev. You were right about that. Those weren't agents." She exhaled reflectively. "If they were I'd be dead."

"I see."

"We all get the same training. Some of us are better at some things than others, but we can all do a first class job of kicking ass and those guys could not more kick my ass than they could flap their arms and fly."

"I see." Dev murmured. "You... seemed very successful."

Jess stared quietly at the opposite wall for a few moments. "I'm very good at killing people." She acknowledged. "You shouldn't really have come that close to me while I'm like that. I don't always know the difference between my friends and my enemies when that old fog of war descends."

Dev remembered that laugh. She thought about what she'd done, and that run across the deck and the irresistible need that had driven her. "I didn't think about what I was doing." She admitted. "I just did it."

Jess just nodded. "Let's go back to our digs." She draped her arm over Dev's shoulders and pulled her close. Then she turned fully and wrapped her arms around Dev and hugged her.

Dev smiled, returning the hug with a sense of wholesale relief. Things might be getting confusing, but this, at least, certainly wasn't.

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Jess was very glad to get back into their little scrap of a cabin, away from the sounds and the wary eyes of the crew. She felt raw, and it occurred to her it was the first time she'd been in the zone since Josh's betrayal. She hadn't thought about going into that space before she'd done it, and now that she'd come out of it she wondered why she'd felt so nervous back in the citadel.

She remembered being nervous, and that sick, roiling feeling in her guts as she'd imagined going back into action but when the time had come, she hadn't even thought about it.

Just like Dev hadn't thought about it.

She looked up at the ceiling, flat on her back on her upper bunk as Dev worked to consolidate the scan files and parse the data inside them below her.

Dev.

Dev had done good. She'd done just what a tech was supposed to do right up until she'd broken orders and bolted across the deck, more concerned about Jess's ass being in trouble than her job. Even though that was against regs, and wrong from an ops perspective, Jess was smiling at the ceiling because every agent she'd ever known always wished for a tech that would do exactly what Dev had done.

You wanted to trust. You wanted to know someone really, honestly, had your back. She remembered that one odd night, in the back of a bar in Quebec City when she'd found an old instructor from field school and gotten him drunk and they'd talked.

Retired agent. He'd come out of the field when he'd been part of an ops move that had gone wrong, and lost his tech partner in an explosion of body parts. It happened. He told her, still feeling it all those years later that it hurt, but he was glad he'd trusted in the right place.

Jess thought about Dev's body coming apart in a blast meant for her, and she closed her eyes, because it did hurt. A fierce pain gripped her chest and she reached up to rub the spot, shaking her head a little at the discomfort. She flushed the image and after a moment the pain faded, and she could breathe again.

"Jess?" Dev came over and stood next to her head, the bio alt's blond hair gently reflecting the dull light in the cabin.

"Here's an ops recap. Do you want to review it?" She leaned her arms on the bedframe and turned the scanner so Jess could look at it.

Jess found herself unable to focus on the screen. She looked at Dev's profile instead, watching the faint twitches along her

smooth skin and admiring the nice shape to her face. After a moment of silence, the bio alt looked over at her, head tilting just a little in question.

What amazing eyes she had.

“Jess?” Dev asked, after another long, silent moment. “Are you all right?”

Jess grinned briefly. “Yeah.” She said. “Sorry. I’m still buzzed from the fight. Takes me a while to come all the way down.” She focused with some effort on the screen. “Roll it. Let me see if you got my good side.”

Dev complied, glad that the ship had mostly stopped tossing around. She held the scanner steady and watched Jess watch it, the screen overlaid with data from the merged scan.

“That is an old carrier.” Jess said, after a pause. “They were current when I was in field school. I trained on them.” She studied the text scroll. “Look at those guys.” She leaned closer and pointed at the figures dropping from the carrier. “Lines.”

“Not the jet pack we have?”

“No. They’d be idiots to use that in the weather we were in anyway, but this is old style. We used to rappel before they stabilized the packs so..” She watched the scanner print the ident details on the still moving figures. “Nice job of integrating the scan, by the way.”

Dev smiled, and her eyes twinkled a little. “Thank you.”

“This guy.” Jess pointed at the screen. “He was chipped.” She studied the readouts. “We won’t know who he is until you squirt that back home but he was one of us.” She watched the man move. “See that? That’s field school training.” She watched him swing clear of the deck obstacles and release at just the right time to drop him behind a barrel for shielding. “He went faster, and got behind something. Not an idiot.”

Dev nodded. “Those people didn’t.” She watched three others drop. “But they’re all in our uniforms.”

“Oh yes.” Jess nodded. “They make a good show, but one thing’s for sure, they don’t have current comp because if they scanned us before they put a move on us they missed picking up me.” She flexed her hand. “They didn’t know I was here.”

“No, I don’t think they did.” Dev said, as she watched the recording. “You can see this person here, that one you said was real? He saw you, and look.” She pointed. “See his face?”

Jess smiled a bit ferociously. “Know what that is?” She said. “That’s an ‘oh shit’ moment.” She could, in fact, see the expression and the widened eyes as her own figure flickered past, arms outstretched, guns firing. It always made her twitch, watching herself on the comp, always thinking of what she could have done better or different, always finding some fault with her body position or aim or..

Anyway.

“You move so fast.” Dev commented. “It’s amazing.”

Jess eyed her. “You think so?”

“Yes.” Her partner said, and then fell silent as she apparently decided that was answer enough.

Jess watched the scan play out, until the lights blared on and she saw the carrier start a recovery phase, and the picture suddenly got out of sync and lost focus. The pickup caught some low voice and then Dev’s yell to her warning of the carrier gun shift. “Did you curse?”

Dev pondered that. “I think so.” She admitted. “When I realized they were going to try and shoot you.”

Jess reached over and patted her on the cheek. “Good girl. You learn fast.”

Then scan cut out, the playback ending as Dev had shut down prior to her bolt across the deck. The scan screen went dim, and Dev shut it down. “Do you want me to send it?”

“You think you can get a signal out?” Jess asked. “No, wait, tell you what. If you can get sig, then just squirt the bio idents we pulled off. Let’s see what that gets us. I’m not ...” She paused. “I’m not really sure where the vector is on this, Dev. It could be tied in with the leak.”

Dev nodded. “Okay, I’ll see what I can do.” She turned and sat down on her bunk, then she squiggled back and leaned against the pillow, raising up one knee to brace the scanner against as she worked.

Jess folded her hands over her stomach and studied the ceiling again. There was so much to think about. Who were the impostors? Why were they attacking ships dressed as Interforce agents? Were the interesting little golden sparkles in Dev’s eyes something that happened naturally or were they engineered that way?

She let out a slow breath. Now, where did that thought come from? Why should she care either way about those sparkles?



“Hey Dev?”

“Yes?”

“When they make you.” She said. “Do they pick stuff like what color hair you have or is it just skill sets?”

Dev didn't answer for a little while. “I'm not really sure.” She finally said. “I think... I never heard Doctor Dan say anything like that. About what we look like, I mean.” She paused. “It's more about what you do, than what you look like I think.”

“Huh.”

“Why did you ask me that?” Dev said, after another pause.

“Just wondered.” Jess said. “Just was curious if he did it on purpose or not.”

“Do what?” Dev asked.

“Made you so damn cute.”

Dev swiveled and stuck her head out from under the top bunk, peering at her partner with a puzzled expression. “Am I?”

Jess rolled over onto her stomach and peered over the edge of the sleep bag. “I think so.” She allowed. “I really like looking at you.”

Dev blushed a little, but grinned. “I'm glad.” She said, after a moment.

They remained in place, studying each other. “You think I'm cute?” Jess finally asked, resting her chin on her wrist.

“I think you're beautiful.” Dev answered readily. “And also cute.” She added, when she saw the surprising blush darken Jess's skin. “I've never seen anyone as pretty as you are.”

“Okay, got it.” Jess felt lightheaded from the blood rushing to her head. “Thanks.”

Dev pulled her head back in and extended her body out on the bed, resting her head on the pillow area of her bag. That had been interesting, if a bit confusing, but she was glad Jess liked how she looked since she didn't much have any choices in that area.

It did make her wonder though, about whether they made bio alts look a certain way or if they left it to chance like the natural born did. That made her think about what the captain had told her, about family, and how he thought he could see something in her face that he recognized.

Was that true? She flipped through the vid in the scanner until she picked up an image of him and she studied it briefly. Was there something familiar there?

She really didn't know. But then the image shifted and the captain glanced at the record sensor with a certain look and Dev realized there was something she recognized there but not from her mirror. There was something in that look, in the half humorous expression that reminded her very strongly of Doctor Dan.

Ah. She nodded to herself. Maybe that was why she felt like she knew him. That idea made sense to her, more so than some story of ancient connections between them. Feeling more settled, she set up the transfer for the squirt and started parsing for signal, narrowing the range and tuning out the discord of the metal interference around them.

She could feel the ship moving under her, pitching back and forth but the motion was far more gentle and it came across as almost soothing. The scanner meeped at her, and she regarded the tuning, shaping the signal and altering the waves to lock on to a master sync passing overhead.

From the met sat, she registered the channel and riffled through the interconnects to find one for her relay. There were two, and she picked the strongest, encapsulating the squirt and sending it through. A full second later she got the relay confirmation and then she severed the connection, backing out of the sat and closing down the channel.

She set a timer, to go back for retrieval since the scanner was a send and reply system only not consistently online like the carrier was. “Jess, the ident has been sent and accepted.”

“Good.” Jess responded. “The captain said the carrier was on top of them before they realized what the signature was on their radar. Too much EMF – not surprised they didn't see it.”

Dev was studying the scanner, keying through it's comp. “We didn't see it either.” She said.

“What?”

“I left the scanner on low band.” The bio alt said. “While we were resting. It didn't pick up anything either.”

“Really?” Jess swung her head over the bunk edge again. “Nothing?”

Dev slid out of bed and set the scanner on Jess's bunk again, displaying the screen. “Just the systems onboard. Even the met scan, I see the storm edge here, but nothing else.” She ran the comp back several hours, flickering across the screen. “See?”

She leaned her elbows on the bunk, her head nearly touching Jess's.

Jess ignored the screen, and leaned closer, grabbing Dev's earlobe in her teeth and gently nibbling it. She heard the hastily stifled laugh from her partner, and then she released her and refocused on the scanner. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"Um." Dev studied the screen. "No scan." She finally recalled. "No sign of the carrier before it attacked us." She ran the comp again. "I didn't try to scan them as they left, though."

"You were busy protecting my ass." Jess agreed. "So." She studied the data. "Either the trash in the sky obscured them or they obscured themselves. Found a way to block the scan spectrum."

"is that possible?"

"Used to be. We used to know how to build stuff that could hide from anything. Now?" Jess shook her head. "Why bother? We can use storm fronts and vectors to slip in undetected. Stealth is expensive." She pondered the thought. "Though it sure gave them the advantage tonight, didn't it?"

"Did it?" Dev asked. "What would have happened if they had seen them coming?" She set the scanner down and studied Jess instead. "Could they have hid somewhere?"

"Aren't we hiding in somewhere right now?" Jess turned the question back. "Granted, not many places to duck behind on the sea but Sigurd's been sailing these waters since the dawn of time. He could have avoided them I bet."

"Hm." Dev put her chin down on her forearm. "Do you think these guys were the pirates?"

Jess shook her head. "Other side."

"Even though that one person had a chip?"

"Even though." Jess sighed. "A few have changed sides, over the years. I didn't recognize him though. Not someone I knew. Could have been from another base." She theorized. "I'm thinking they wanted the ship to help them infiltrate one of our centers... maybe even Base Ten."

Dev propped her head up against her hand. "So. They were trying to do the same thing we are?"

Her partner chuckled wryly. "More or less, yeah."

"I see." Dev straightened up. "Would you like some hot tea? I will go get some from the big room." She shut down the scanner and put it back in its cradle. "I think we're still in the ice thing."

"Sure." Jess said. "Just be careful. After tonight I don't think any of them would put a finger on you but watch out."

Dev shrugged into her jacket and closed the fastenings, tugging the hood up into place before she went through the hatch and stepped into the hallway. Mindful of Jess's warning, she looked in both directions, but the hallway was empty and she turned and proceeded down it towards the common room with almost silent steps.

Far off, she could hear the sounds of the crew working, and below, the grind of the engines and gears. It was quiet as she emerged into the central corridor and then made her way to the inner hatch, pushing it open and going inside cautiously.

The room was mostly empty as well, only the two women were inside, working at the rear of the room. They turned and looked as she entered, but then went back to what they were doing without speaking.

That was okay by Dev. She went to the dispenser and took out two cups, studying the choices. After a moments pause, she decided on seaweed tea and requested two portions, waiting as they brewed and emitted a gentle cloud of spicy sweet steam into the air.

The inner door to the room opened, and a set of piping voices emerged. Dev turned to see two of the children come in, their tow heads and small bodies attracting her attention. They brought a smile to her face, and a memory flashed into her mind's eye of those few times in the creche when she'd taken a turn at minding the youngers, filling in for the proctors when they'd been called to other things.

A little boy, and little girl. They clamored around the two women asking for a snack, their tousled hair and hide singlets contrasting with the steel deck and dull gray paint in odd counterpoint.

One of the women turned and caught Dev watching. "What are you looking at?"

"The children." Dev answered readily.

The two had spotted her now and they focused on her. "Who're you?" The boy asked, tipping his head back to look up.

"Dev." She answered.

"Keep clear of her, Edguard." The woman said. "Her kind's not safe for the likes of you."

Dev regarded herself, then she looked at the woman in question, cocking her head to one side. "My kind?"

“Those that do nothing but kill and maim, and take.” The woman said. “Like those who attacked us. You’re one of them, no matter you don’t carry the guns openly.”

Dev capped the now finished cups. “We defended you against them.” She said, after a pause. “Does that make us the same?” She studied the women. “We mean you no harm.”

“Don’t you?” The woman herded the children back into the inner sanctum, leaving the other woman to finish the work.

The second woman waited for the door to close, then she turned and regarded Dev. “Don’t mind Eva. She hates everyone.” She came over, a small case in her hands. “Some of us know the difference between techs and agents, and between you lot, and pirates. Really.”

Dev produced a mild grin. “Jess doesn’t think the people who attacked you before were Interforce.”

“Of course she’d say that.” But the woman smiled back, offering the box. “Have a cake. I bear no ill will to you. If they were, or weren’t, you fought on our side tonight so all’s fair for now.” She studied Dev’s face. “They said you were a spacer.”

“Yes.” Dev took one of the wrapped items in the box. “I was born in space, on a bio station.” She examined the item, then put it with the cups. “Thank you.”

“Dev’s a funny name.” The woman said. “But then, so’s Hilda, my name to you I suppose.” She said. “What’s your family name?” She watched Dev’s face intently.

My name never seemed strange to me..” She felt programming kick in. “And I’d rather not talk about my family.”

Hilda studied her for a long moment. “No offense intended. Family’s everything to us. I just wondered. Sigurd thought you maybe were kin, way back.”

“Thank you.” Dev smiled at her. “It would be an honor for me if that was true, but I have no way to know as I have no knowledge of my ancestors.” There was something in her that strongly resisted lying about what she was. She found herself almost incapable of claiming that made up identity.

She wondered why.

The words seemed to please Hilda, however. She relaxed visibly and offered the box again. “Take one for your.. ah.. whatever it is you call each other.”

Dev did. “Jess is my partner.” She said, unable to repress a tickled of pride at the words. “I’m sure she’ll appreciate it, so thank you.” She put the cake with the other one and picked up both cups, grasping the handles in one hand. “Please excuse me now. The tea will get cold.”

Hilda stepped back. “The nets are out, but Sigurd’s giving them time to collect. We’ll be here in the crack at least till dawn.” She said. “Shouldn’t need your guns until then. But you never know.”

“You never know.” Dev agreed. She ducked through the hatch and re-entered the corridor, now spotting two dimly lit figures making their way towards her. The ships roll had almost ceased now, and she was able to keep a steady balance as she approached the men.

Would they cause her trouble? Dev kept her expression mild, as she came within the nearest pool of light and they spotted her. But the two men paused as they recognized her, and both moved back flat against the wall to let her pass.

“Tech.” One said, in a respectful tone. “Can I get the hatch for ya?”

Ah. “Yes, thank you. It’s that one there.” Dev said, waiting for him to undog the latch and open it for her. “I appreciate that very much.” She smiled at the crewman.

The man touched his head with one hand, and then they went past, continuing down the hallway towards the commons. Dev stepped through the hatch and leaned against it to close it behind her, her eyes flicking to the inside of the room to find Jess’s tall form near the far wall, her suit stripped down off one arm. “Hello.”

“Hey.” Jess turned to face her, one hand holding a pad against the front of her shoulder. “Give me a hand with this, wouldja?”

Dev put the cups and the cakes down and went over to her. “What’s wrong?” She stripped off her jacket and put it on the hanger.

Jess removed the pad, exposing a puncture wound halfway between her neck and shoulder. “Pain finally kicked in. Just need you to clean this out and pack it.” She regarded her arm dourly. “When I’m fighting I never feel it.” She looked past Dev. “Whatcha got there?”

“Some tea, and some little cakes the woman called Hilda gave me.” Dev said, absently. She focused on her partner’s shoulder and nodded a little at the burst of programming that told her what to do with it. This had come in the second round

of deep time, and she'd woken with an almost discomfiting understanding of critical aid.

She retrieved the small aid kit from their pack and took out the cleaner, as Jess edged around her and investigated the cakes. "I got to see the children. They seemed to be afraid we would damage them."

Jess snorted, as she unwrapped the cake and sniffed it. She took an experimental nibble as Dev cleaned her shoulder, making a pleased, grunting noise at the taste. "Not bad."

"How did you get this?" Dev asked, ignoring the edible commentary. "I thought they had energy weapons with them. This seems to be a sharp implement that hit you." She could see whatever it was had a jagged point, and it had gone almost the length of her fingerjoint into her partner's body, but that the bleeding had already mostly stopped.

"My own clumsiness. I threw myself against the wall where the harpoons are." Jess finished the cake and took a sip of the hot tea. "Anyone give you any trouble on the way there and back?" She asked. "Seems pretty quiet."

"No, everyone was correct." Dev applied salve to the wound, and sealed it with a breathable skin bandage. "Hilda said they would remain here in the ice space until dawn."

"Good." Jess reached up and cupped the back of Dev's neck, tilting her head to one side and gently kissing her on the lips. "Tomorrow we need to get Sigurd to sell his fish to the bad guys. But between now and then I think we should work on keeping each other warm, don't you?"

Dev was surprised. They were in a strange ship, where lots of unusual things were happening, and Jess wanted to spend time practicing sex?

Jess's lips touched hers again, and she felt her body react, her hands reaching out to caress the smooth, bare skin she'd only so recently been working on – hearing and feeling the quiet sounds of the catches on her jumpsuit parting. "Sounds like a great idea." She heard herself say, as she savored the rich burn in her guts.

"Thought you'd agree."

She did agree. She didn't really understand, but as her body pressed against Jess's, and the sensation built she decided she really didn't need to understand it.

She just needed to enjoy it.

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[Continued in Part 13](#)