

Partners

Part 8

Dev regarded her reflection in the mirror, reaching up to adjust her uniform collar a little. She'd found this new one in her quarters and Jess had told her it was what she was to wear to the induction and then, to the party afterward.

It was more formal looking, and less comfortable. The fabric was heavier, and thicker and it had a lot of silver threads on it making sedate designs along the front of the jacket. She straightened up a little, pulling the sleeves a bit straighter and moving her head as the high collar tickled her neck.

The uniform was a sleeveless jumpsuit and this jacket that fit over it, and though it wasn't entirely easy to move around in it, she sort of liked it. She studied her pale hair, caught back in a knot at the back of her head and nodded in satisfaction.

Her insignia were on the collar, and she touched it. There was also a metal bar on her chest that had her name engraved on it, a glitter of silver and black, the NM-DEV-1 crisp and clear.

Interesting. She'd never been labeled with her designation like that before. But natural born here did it. Maybe to point out how individual they really were?

She went over and sat down to pull her boots on. This pair were mid height, and shinier than her regular ones, and she fastened them as the inner door slid open.

"Ah." Jess entered, fastening the collar on her own uniform. "I see you're all set."

"Yes." Dev stood up. "That looks really nice on you." She complimented Jess.

Jess stopped in mid step. "What?" She looked down at herself. "This?"

Dev took a step back and regarded her. "Well, that is what you are wearing." She said. "So yes, that." She watched the other woman's eyes open wider, unsure really of why. The uniform outlined Jess's tall body really well, and her dark hair was loose, framing her face. "Why is my saying that so surprising to you? Is it incorrect?"

Jess's face wrinkled up in sort of a confused grin. "No, it's... um." She let her hands drop. "People don't say stuff like that to me." She said. "Usually." She added in a low mutter.

It was Dev's turn to be confused. "Why not?" She asked. "You're very attractive. Why wouldn't people tell you that?" She cocked her head to one side as she watched Jess blush. "In the creche, it was always okay to tell others compliments of that kind."

"Um." Jess reached up and rubbed her face. "Thank you." She said. "It's fine. Sorry I'm acting like a nitwit. It's been a long time since.. " She paused. "Anyway, if you're ready, let's go. We'll meet the rest of the ops group near the big lift."

"I'm ready." Dev said. "Lead on."

Jess turned and complied. They walked together through her quarters, and out into the hallway, which was now, thankfully, quiet and empty. "Everyone's up there." Jess commented. "We're always the last ones to go."

"Why?"

"Hm." Jess studied the ground as they walked over it. "Tradition, mostly I guess. Everyone goes up in order of their... hm. Well, their ultimate importance I guess to Interforce."

"I see."

"So either you can figure we're the most or least important." Jess went on, in a droll tone. She scanned through out of the ops area and they were in the main halls, the sound of their boots echoing softly in the silence. "I like to flatter myself in thinking the latter."

Dev was pretty sure that was the real truth anyway. She followed Jess as they turned the corner and then crossed the big rotunda and then entered a long hall. Ahead, she could hear low voices, and as they reached the curve in the hall and went through it, she saw a group of people standing next to one of the big lifts.

It was the other agents and techs, she realized as they got closer. They were standing together and as they approached, the voices stilled. Everyone was dressed like she and Jess were, and there were, she counted, sixteen of them including them both.

“About time.” Sandy snarked at Jess. “You stop to blow Bain or something?”

Jess ignored her. “We ready to go up?” She asked Jason. “Someone check in?”

“Almost.” Jason said. “They said give it five. Trying to get everyone seated.”

A moment later, the light on one side of the lift went on, bathing them in a gentle green glow. “Here we go.” Jason said. “Brent, hit the lock, wouldja?”

Brent, standing next to the doors, complied. He stepped back as the big portals opened, revealing a square, utilitarian gray box.

Everyone fell silent. It was awkward, and uncomfortable, and Dev felt like taking a step back from the crowd as they shifted a little. She could sense anger around her, and quite a few of the eyes watching Jess weren't friendly. It was hard to tell though, what exactly the problem was.

After all, Jess was just standing there next to her, with no particular expression on her face, her hands clasped behind her back. She glanced at Dev, a look of droll amusement appearing as she scanned the crowd, and rolled her eyes a little.

Interesting, but extremely confusing.

Then Jason stepped back and to one side and cocked his head at Jess. “Go on, number one.” He said, in an almost anticlimactic way, waving her forward with a casual motion “Clear a path, people.”

The discomfort increased, but reluctantly, people moved aside as Jess started forward, some with resigned expressions, some with approving ones, some just angry.

“C'mon.” Jess indicated that Dev was to follow.

Dev didn't need to be asked more than once. She stuck to Jess's back as they made their way through the small crowd, and followed her into the lift, their boots making a faintly hollow ring as they crossed the metal floor.

Jess moved to the back of it, but kept facing the wall. She stopped next to it and waited, as the rest of the group came in after her filing in with a scuffle of boots and meant to be overheard whispers. She put her hands behind her back again and braced her legs, ignoring it all.

Dev stood quietly next to her, realizing none of the rest of the people in the lift had come even with them. She wasn't entirely sure what was going on, but she could tell there were a lot of mad people, and that something Jess had done had displeased them.

She looked up at Jess's profile, outlined in the harsh white light from the ceiling. There was no emotion there, she merely watched the surface of the wall as they traveled upwards. After a moment, Jess looked at her, and slowly winked.

Dev muffled a smile, putting her own hands behind her and waiting herself in silence.

The elevator reached its destination, and the doors in front of Jess slowly opened. They now faced into the huge space, which was filled with people, all looking at them, all in the same complete silence.

Dev didn't know where to look first. Near where they were were line upon line of bio alts, all in their jumpsuits in various colors. In front of them were natural born, but also in the same kind of jumpsuits and in front of them were techs, and then the admin people.

Near the front she saw Alexander Bain, and standing next to him, to her surprise and pleasure, Doctor Dan. On a low platform at the very end of the space were a big group of people in different clothes.

Some, she recognized. They were from the creche. Some she didn't, and there were twelve people there in dark gray jumpsuits with either black or green sleeves. She figured those must be the new agents and their techs.

Jess started forward, and motioned her to follow.

Dev took a deep breath and did, as they started out and walked down the steps from the lift and into a long, stone aisle that went down the middle of the huge space. Their boots made a surprisingly loud sound that echoed a little, a discordantly disorganized noise since they were all walking at their own pace and not in step with each other.

Outside a storm was going on, and there were lightning bursts and thunder all visible through the transparent walls and roof. It was an eerie counterpoint to the silence of the crowd as they all watched Jess lead the rest of the operations agents and techs through them.

Dev could see the new comers watching them now and she straightened up, setting aside her discomfort, and the strangeness of the surroundings. She matched her steps to Jess's as they walked along the aisles, past the bio alts, and the workers, the techs and the administrators as that weird silence beat against them.

Jess walked up the steps to where Bain was standing, coming to a halt next to him and Doctor Dan, as Stephen Bock came up on the other side. She waited for Dev to come up next to her then she turned to face the low platform, letting her arms relax at her sides.

The rest of the ops agents and their partners filed in behind them and as they did, Dev sorted through the positions of the crowd, and the layers of emotion and got a sense of why so many people were glaring at her. She was aware enough of the politics of humanity to understand there was status involved here, and that was always a little uncomfortable.

It had been in the creche. She'd gone through that sense of discomfort when she'd been singled out in any way for praise, and faced the envy of her creche mates. There was that sort of thing here. Jess had been singled out, and people were mad because it wasn't them.

Got it. Dev felt a sense of satisfaction, and now she put the issue aside and exhaled in contentment, glad she was standing where she was.

Bain caught her eye and smiled at her. Dev smiled back, then caught Doctor Dan watching her with a proud grin. She wasn't really sure why he was, but it felt good anyway and she stood there quietly at Jess's side, her arms at her sides and her head held high.

Bain waited for a moment more for everything to settle, then he strolled over to the steps and mounted them, arriving at a podium planted on the edge. "Well then, people." He rested his hands on the edge of the podium. "Here we are."

He paused, but no one said a word, nor did he seem to expect them to. "I'm quite glad to welcome all of you here." He gestured at the crowd. "And to welcome our newcomers too." He indicated the platform. "I know we've had some difficulties lately, but I think now we're on the right track, and headed in a better direction."

Doctor Dan cleared his throat gently, and visibly suppressed a smile.

Bain raised an eyebrow at him. "At any rate, I'm glad you are all here, and now I will turn this over to our new senior operations agent, Jess Drake." He stared pointedly at Jess. "Agent Drake?"

Dev felt Jess take a deep breath next to her, and she gave her a smile of encouragement as she walked forward and then up the steps to where Bain was standing.

She could see all the newcomers watching her and she suspected if she turned around she would see all the other people watching her too, but Jess merely exchanged nods and places with Bain, leaning against the podium for a long, silent moment.

"So it's a time of new beginnings." Jess said, after that pause. Her voice, low and vibrant, rolled through the chamber and echoed softly. "I've learned the hard way not to live in the past, and you all shouldn't either." She eyed the newcomers. "Don't look back at where you came from, or who you left behind because every day means something different here."

Bain had stepped to one side, and now he nodded silently.

Jess paused. "If there's anyone here who should be tradition bound, it should be me." She went on. "I'm the eleventh generation of Drakes who've worn this uniform and my brother Jimmy called me last night to tell me my nephew's the twelfth."

The newcomers exchanged glances. Jess studied them. "But I figured out recently tradition buys you nothing." She said. "So do yourselves a favor and keep your eyes open to all the possibilities out there." Briefly, she studied the young faces focused on her. "That's all I have to say. Welcome."

With that, she turned and walked back down to where Dev was, coming to stand next to her and folding her hands in front of her as she stared pointedly at Bain.

“Excellent.” Bain didn’t miss a beat. “Instead of the long winded blather you’d have gotten from others, we can now perform the induction and start the celebration. Thank you, Drake.”

“Sir.” Jess pronounced, putting just the slightest drawl on it. She gave Dev a sideways glance, one eyebrow lifting.

Dev grinned at her and carefully imitated her earlier wink.

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The party was loud. Dev kept close by Jess’s hip as they squeezed their way through the room, towards a place where people were getting drinks. The big space had been rearranged, the podium and platform removed and tables full of food were now appearing on the fringes.

Jess got to the bar and leaned an arm on it. “Gimme a grain straight up and..” She turned to Dev. “What’s your poison?”

Dev’s brows creased. “No, wait.” She held up a hand as Jess started to explain. “Does that mean, what do I want to drink?”

“Yeah.”

Dev considered. “Do they have the stuff we had at dinner?”

“And a beer.” Jess told the man behind the bar, a bio alt who was staring at Dev intently. “Hey!”

The bio alt jerked and reached for the drinks. “My apologies, agent.” He handed Jess a glass and then offered Dev another, taller one.

“Thank you.” Dev took the glass. She looked around. “Wow.”

“Freaking mess.” Jess muttered. “C’mon.” She eased past a group of engineers and techs and found an open spot near one wall. “Glad that’s over with.”

“Are you?” Dev leaned against the wall next to her, watching the crowd go by. “I thought you did great.”

“Dev.” Jess half turned and looked at her. “C’mon. Those things are supposed to be an hour long with six pages of notes. I blew them off and everyone knows it.”

Dev studied the crowd. “They all don’t look unhappy.” She said. “And I heard people saying they were really relieved not to have to listen to... um.” She paused. “To all the bullshit?” She pronounced the last word carefully. “I think that’s what they said.”

Jess chuckled wryly. “They didn’t, did they?”

“Yes. What’s bullshit?”

“Ah.” Her companion leaned against the wall next to her. “Its the excrement from a four legged, hoofed cud chewing mammal that no longer exists.” She replied. “The male of the species.”

Dev looked at her, then she took a sip of her beer and merely shook her head.

“Let’s hang out here for a little while.” Jess said. “See who comes over and starts trying to suck up to me.” She regarded the crowd with an ironic eye. “See if any of the new bio’s has the guts to come talk to you.”

“Agent?” A soft voice interrupted them. “May I take your jacket?”

Jess turned to find a server there, a young bio alt almost her height, with curly red hair “Sure.” She put her drink down on the small table next to them and undid the catches on her jacket, stripping out of it and handing it to him. “Dev?”

Dev had already put her drink down. “Is this usual?” She undid her jacket, as the bio alt patiently waited. “Thank you very much, Ayebe.” She handed him the fabric, receiving a real, though brief smile from him in return. “Have you been downworld long?”

“Six months.” Ayebe said. “It’s a tough adjustment.”

“To some things, yes.” Dev agreed, picking up her glass. “This.” She lifted it.

“Yes.” He chuckled. “I will have your garments sent back to your quarters.” He gave Jess a nod of respect, then he went on to the next group.

“You know him?” Jess asked, casually.

“That Ayebe?” Dev pondered the question. “I know his set.” She explained. “I trained with a group of them doing rec in the creche. I don’t think I know that specific Ayebe though.”

“They all have the same name? I’ve heard them called all sorts of stuff here.”

“They’re all Ayebes. A-B.” Dev pronounced the letters separately. “I think he’s an A-B-800 Instance 6. But they get nicknames sometimes.”

“Oh.” Jess said. “You don’t have that problem.”

“No. I’m the only NM-Dev.” Dev agreed.

“One of a kind.”

“Yes.” Dev said. “So it seems.”

“I like that about you.” Jess told her, noting the faint blush that was visible despite the low lights.

“There you are.” Jason appeared next to them, with Brent and Elaine in tow. “Nice speech.” He gave Dev a brief smile. “Short and sweet. Half the citadel wants to kill you the other half wants to kiss you.”

“Which half are you?” Dev asked, unexpectedly.

Jason paused in mid breath, and stared at her. “What?”

Jess started chuckling. “Which half are you?” She asked Dev, then paused, looking embarrassed as the conversation seemed to fade out for a second and a bubble of intensity formed around the two of them.

“Well, I definitely don’t want to kill you.” Dev said, after just a little too long a moment, as their eyes met.

“Anyway.” Jason apparently caught his breath and plowed ahead. “Bain’s happy. No one else matters.” He clapped Jess on the shoulder. “Sandy decided to take a bottle to her quarters and get drunk so you don’t have to worry about her jackass tongue tonight. Ready to dance?”

Jess was still looking at Dev’s face. “Sure.” She muttered. “I’m ready for anything.”

“Great.” Jason turned and stood on his toes. “Hey, they finally got the grub out. I’ll grab some. Brent, stay here.”

Brent took up a spot against the wall next to Dev, folding his muscular arms over his chest and watching the crowd with a skeptical frown.

Dev leaned next to him, sipping her beer. After a minute she turned and looked at Jess, and smiled, getting a smile back as Jess lifted her mug and both eyebrows at her.

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“Here you go.” Jess took a seat on the ledge next to Dev, handing her a plate of assorted goodies and then setting her cup down.

Jason and Elaine, and Brent and Tucker were ranged on either side of them, holding an informal court as a long parade of people came up to say hello.

Dev was happy to sit quietly and watch, kept well supplied with treats from Jess’s frequent escapes through the crowd. They were on one end of the big room, in the curve, with the transparent panels providing a colorful backdrop as the storm continued to rage.

She had her legs pulled up crossed under her, with a plate balanced on one knee, and was fully occupied in listening to Jess talk to the other agents as she kept an eye on people approaching from her peripheral vision.

There was a lot of conflicting emotion going on. But Jess seemed to be in a pretty good mood, so she supposed the party was going well.

The food was good, and she was enjoying it. She and Brent had traded fish rolls, since he preferred the ones with the crunchy seaweed in them and she liked the other kind, and she had spent some time talking to him about the work she was doing on the carrier.

He liked that sort of thing too, so now he was explaining about how he tweaked the engine tork on his carrier and she was wondering if she could try doing that on hers. On theirs, she mentally corrected herself, since the carrier really was assigned to Jess.

Jess was sitting side by side with her, and their shoulders were pressed against each other. Since their shoulders were both bare, it was a warm and pleasant sensation she was very much enjoying just as she had enjoyed their banter earlier.

It made her feel good, to think that Jess was beginning to trust her a little, enough to joke around. Dev knew that was rare, both between bio alts and definitely between bios and natural born but she liked it. She thought about what she'd asked Jason, and then what Jess had asked her, and it made her smile.

Of course she didn't want to kill Jess. Dev munched her fishroll, stealing a glance at her companion's profile. Of course, she really didn't have any idea what kissing her would be like. It was an intellectual question since she'd never kissed anyone, but she supposed it would be all right.

"Ah, here they come." Jason nudged Jess. "The kids finally scraped up the guts to come meet you."

"Would you stop it?" Jess growled. "I've got enough crap to deal with."

"C'mon Jess. Enjoy it for a change." Jason waved the newcomers forward. "You earned the bump. No one gave it to you." He said. "Screw that bitch Sandy and her buddies. They're just farting jealousy in three colors."

Jess regarded the new agents and their partners dourly. They all seemed ridiculously young to her, all slim and leanly muscled, with short cropped hair and cleanshaven faces.

Of the agents, four were men, and two were women. All of the techs were men, but that wasn't unusual. Two of the male agents had dark hair, two had light, and both women had brown hair and looked like each other.

Very average.

The tallest of the men came forward. His name plate said Arias, M and he had a quiet self possession. "Agent Drake, I just wanted to compliment you on your speech."

Jess eyed him wryly. "Yeah?" She said. "If you blinked, you missed it." She said. "Maybe I'll get lucky and they won't ask me again."

"Remember when Bricker did it last year?" Jason said. "Kept us standing there for an hour and a half. Bastard."

"Well, if that's the case, I'm glad I inducted today." Arias half turned. "This is my partner Chester." He motioned forward a tech standing just behind him. "He's a west coaster."

"Hey there, Chester." Jason lifted his glass. "So am I." He said. "Rainer Islander."

Chester produced a grin. "My uncle lives there. He likes it."

"This is Elaine Cruz, and her partner Tucker." Jason went on. "This is my partner, Brent." He paused, then glanced at Jess, raising one eyebrow.

For a moment, Jess stared back at him impassively, then she looked at the new agent. "I guess you already know who I am." She remarked. "This is my partner Dev." She tilted her head in Dev's direction. Then she went back to munching on a seaweed fish wrap.

Dev looked over at her with a startled expression. Then she recovered, and smiled. "Hello." She greeted the agent. "Nice to meet you." She added. "Welcome to the citadel."

"Mike." The agent stuck a hand out and smiled when Dev shook it. Then he turned and motioned the other new agents forward.

Dev took the opportunity of the distraction to look back over at Jess, who, after a moment, lifted her eyes to meet hers. After a brief moment, Jess shrugged a little. "Hell." She said. "I can't go on calling you my bus driver if you keep saying nice things about me now can I?"

Dev smiled happily. "Thank you. Now I really do feel like I belong here." She responded in an undertone, as the other new agents came up in front of them. She turned to face them, finding herself looking at one of the new female agents. "Hello."

"You're the bio alt?" The woman asked.

“Yes.” Dev responded cordially. “NM-Dev-1.” She added, taking a quick sideways look as she felt Jess shift, and became aware that her companion’s attitude had shifted, from casual to alert, her pale blue eyes fixed on the newcomer. “Is that a good or bad thing for you?”

The woman seemed caught offguard. “Um.. “ She lifted her hands a bit and let the drop. “I don’t know, really. We just heard about it when we were heading out here.” She said. “I’m April.” She said, belatedly extending her hand. “Did you say... Dev?”

“Dev.” Dev confirmed, shaking her hand. “Welcome.” She felt Jess relax and turn her attention back to her plate, which was nearly empty.

“So is it true you got all your stuff in a week?” The brown haired man next to her asked. “I’m Doug.” He added. “April’s mule.”

“Doug.” The woman gave him a look.

Jess gave them both an approving look, but didn’t interrupt.

“That’s not exactly true.” Dev said. “I had my basic instruction starting when I was five, and went to advanced school when I was twelve. So I’ve been learning a long time. I did get a big dose of programming before I came here, but that was mostly all the tech stuff I needed to do my job.”

“Not so different from us.” April said.

“No, not at all.” Jess said. “I didn’t think a bio alt would work, but Dev proved me wrong.” She said, in a matter of fact tone. “Uncomfortable as that is for all of us. It is, what it is.”

“I don’t think I’ve proved that yet.” Dev objected. “I’ve only done one mission with you.”

“Did you know they’ve been playing the recorder file of that one mission in the rec center for the last two days?” Jess asked, her brows lifting.

Dev blinked. “No, I didn’t.” She responded honestly. “Why would they do that?”

“And she’s modest too.” Jess addressed the assembled agents, who chuckled softly. “That’s what I meant about going with change. I thought this was going to be crap. I was wrong.” She regarded Dev. “Who knows? Maybe we won’t need a thirteenth generation of Drakes doing this.”

“You really want that?” Mike asked. “It was my ticket to school. Rest of my family harvests grubs and half of them can’t read.”

“Mine too.” Jess agreed. “The ones who don’t get taken to Interforce, that is. I’ve got a brother raking weed, and another doing recap for the processing station downhill.” She extended her arms, and the light hit them, showing the burned in sigils. “But every dot’s a dead body on these.”

A silence fell, and the new agents exchanged glances.

Jess turned her arms over, since the sigils went around in a band. “Clear means stalemate. Green means we won. Red means they won.” She looked dispassionately at her skin. “Yellow diamond means I ended up in med.”

Dev examined her companions arms intently, since some of this code was new to her.

“Maybe it would be better to have them do it.” Jess said, after she let the silence go on for a moment. “Most of us don’t survive to forty.”

“Wow.” Mike finally said.

“Don’t tell ya that stuff so much in field school, huh?” Jason smiled thinly “They didn’t when I went through.” He hopped off the ledge and stretched his arm out next to Jess’s. Despite his greater height, their fingertips matched, though the burned sigils only went halfway down his arms just past his elbows.

Elaine circled to come up on his other side, showing her own. “People will talk crap here.” She said to the newcomers. “But this tells the real story.”

Dev watched intently, seeing the young faces that surrounded them absorbing the information. She felt that they were a little ambivalent about her, but that was okay. She hadn’t gotten the outright antagonism she’d sensed from Sandy and her partner, or the two other older agents she hadn’t been introduced to.

She reached over and touched Jess's arm, running her fingers over one of the more intricate sigils, which also had a prominent yellow mark on it. To her surprise, she watched goosebumps rise behind her fingers and she looked up, to find Jess watching her. "Was that a bad trip to med?"

"Broke my back." Jess said. "So yeah." She looked down at the mark, which bore six green roundels. "They kept me in a fuser for a week, and then in a pin rack for two more. I'd rather have died."

Dev grimaced. "Well, I'm glad you didn't."

The sound of clapping drew all of their attention. "Enough war stories, people." Bain was standing nearby "Go dance and have fun for a change. Tomorrow's soon enough to be serious." He waved them all towards the lit, open area, and as he did, music started playing.

Jess made no move to stand. Jason and Elaine exchanged glances, and then Jason held his hand out. "Shall we? Show the kids how it's done?"

"You're on." Elaine said, and they walked through the crowd as others moved along as well, and the music picked up in both pace and loudness. "Cmon, kids."

The newcomers shuffled, and then trailed after them, as the lights went down to a lower dimness, and that only let the lightning overhead become more prominent.

Jess and Dev were left at the ledge, everyone else obeying Bain's orders.

Jess turned her head and studied her companion. "Do you dance?"

Dev tore her eyes from the dance floor and returned the regard. "I have absolutely no idea what that is." She responded. "It looks like they're walking across a very hot floor with no shoes on."

Jess laughed gently. "Yeah, I'm not much for it either." She admitted. "I'm too self conscious, I think." She said. "I'm always aware of how stupid I look flopping around like a fish out of water there."

Dev studied her. "Are you a fish out of water here?" She asked. "You seem different than the rest of them."

Jess looked up, with a startled expression. "I belong here." She stated flatly. "Are you saying I don't?"

Oh no. Dev felt immediate distress. "I'm sorry." She said. "I didn't mean to be incorrect." She slid off the ledge and faced Jess, her brow creased. "I'm very sorry."

Jess responded to the near panic in her voice, her anger dissolving as she put her hand on Dev's shoulder. "Hey. Take it easy." She said. "It was just a weird question, that's all."

Dev studied her with a worried expression. "It's just that you've been so.. " She paused, unsure of whether to continue. "I don't want you to be angry. I meant that in a good way."

Jess leaned on her elbows, clasping her hands together. It was almost dark in the room, save the dance lights, and it gave her an illusion of privacy. "Maybe I have always been a little weird." She admitted. "No matter how much history my family has of this."

"You're not weird." Dev said, automatically. "You just see so much more than they do. They're so... um.. " She paused again. "Not as deep as you are."

Oh. Jess sorted through that, detecting that it was, in fact, something positive. "Sorry I freaked you out."

"Excuse me?"

Jess chuckled wryly. "You hit a sensitive spot of mine." She admitted, in low tone. "I've always been a rebel. They all know it. That's why so many of them are pis... are mad that I got senior."

"Oh." Dev slowly eased herself back up onto the ledge, her heartbeat starting to settle.

"I've never done things... the right way." Jess went on. "I always did what I thought was best, not what I was told. I've been in trouble more times than.. " She sighed. "I embarrassed the hell out of my father. He was such a regulation stickler." She paused. "He told me I should change my name so he didn't have to hear it from everyone when I screwed up."

Dev put a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry." She said. "I really didn't meant to upset you."

“I know.” Her companion pulled one long leg up and wrapped her arms around it. “No way for you to know about all that stuff. We’ve only known each other for what... three days? Four?” She looked sideways at Dev. “It’s fine, Dev. Its a good question, and I don’t mind talking to you about it.”

Dev nodded, and kicked her heels against the ledge a couple times. “To tell the truth.” She said, after a long pause. “I think I know I’m different too.” She said. “Maybe it’s because I’m a dev model. But I was always really aware of being... I think you called it a one off.”

“Good or bad?” Jess asked.

The bio alt thought about that for a long time in silence. “When I became aware of it.. I guess I was around ten or so, it was a really lonely thing to think about.” She said. “None of us has any family. But at least everyone else had their set mates and I remember being at a celebration.. sort of like this.” She indicated the room. “And I realized I was the only one of my kind there who was alone.”

“Mm.” Jess grunted softly, deep in her throat.

“It was uncomfortable.”

“I bet.” Jess looked around the room, watching all the moving bodies and hearing the laughter and music. Then she turned her head back towards Dev. “Wanna go steal a tray of brownies and go for a swim?”

Dev looked back at her and grinned. Then she indicated the room. “This is all a little much for me.” She admitted. “I’m not used to it.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice.” Jess slid off the ledge and waited for Dev to join her. Then she put her hand on Dev’s back and guided her towards one of the walls. “I know a secret way.” She announced. “And it passes right by the prep area for the kitchen.”

They left the noise and the celebration behind them, as Jess scanned open an unmarked black door and they passed through into a bare, utilitarian hallway and as the door closed, it cut off all the clamor like a knife.

“Oh.” Dev looked behind them, as silence took the place of the chaos.

“Soundproof door.” Jess remarked, leading the way to an equally unmarked lift door, which accepted her palm scan without complaint. “Not many people know about this back route.” She waited for the lift to open, then stepped inside. After Dev joined her, she keyed a command on the inside panel and the door slid shut.

It opened again, at the lower level, but inside the medical area. Jess strolled through the pristine halls, keeping her eyes forward and not looking into the exam rooms on either side. She debated telling Dev why she knew the back way, then decided against it.

Hopefully, she would never have to witness the situation that elevator was there for.

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The gym was silent and half dark, and the water was again soothingly warm. Jess carefully spread her arms out along the tank wall, just relaxing in the liquid and glad of the relative quiet around her.

Relative, because Dev was paddling around idly, practicing her swimming.

Jess watched her unobtrusively. Despite her concentration, she could sense her pool mate was distracted, the expression on the bio alt’s face thoughtful and somewhat withdrawn. She wondered if Dev was still worried about upsetting her. “Hey.”

Dev looked up. “Yes?”

“C’mere.” Jess crooked a finger at her.

Obediently, the bio alt swam in her direction, her body already moving with burgeoning assurance through the water. “Damn.” Jess sighed. “I sure wish I could learn that fast.”

“What?” Dev reached her and grabbed the edge of the wall, since the bottom was below her reach.

“You’re already picking up swimming.” Jess remarked. “I said I wish I could learn like that.” She lamented. “And that wasn’t anything that was programmed, was it? That’s how you learn?”

Dev paused in the water, her eyes going a little unfocused. "I never really thought about that." She said. "But I guess it is. We're conditioned to learn. It's good when you have programming for something, but sometimes you don't and you need to be able to do it anyway."

"Like what you did in the carrier, evading the bad guys."

"Yes."

"I'd say that's a damn good thing." Jess said. She moved along the wall, bumping Dev a little until they were shallow enough for her to stand. "Thanks for indulging me in being an anti social sourpuss."

That made Dev smile. "The party was okay." She said. "But I think it is going to take me a while to get used to things like that. When we had them in the creche, there wasn't any drinks involved and no.. uh... dancing."

"Probably why they didn't call it a party."

"Yes, that's true." Dev agreed. "It was always called a gather, or a gathering. We did get treats sometimes though. Candy balls, or a bit of cake."

"You like that stuff."

Dev nodded, visibly more cheerful. "They told us it wasn't good for us, but yes, I do." She said. "I think you do too."

Jess licked her lips. "The whole tray of brownies clue you in to that?" She laughed. "I'll probably be sick tomorrow from it but I don't care. It was worth it." She paused. "Another one of my faults. I live for the moment." Her eyes went to Dev's face, watching the subtle tension relax.

Ah. That made her feel better. "I think the kids took to you all right." She said. "Better than I thought."

Dev considered that. "I don't think they made up their minds yet." She said. "They seemed to want to be friendly though."

"They did." Jess said. "Jason was right. I pissed off half the room and at least didn't alienate the other half." She turned and leaned against the wall, stretching her shoulder out. "But at least they got to meet you and interact before some of the other assholes got to them over breakfast."

Dev leaned her back against the tank wall and folded her arms over her chest. "I don't think Jason was in the part that wanted to kill you, by the way." She remarked.

Jess half turned and regarded her. "No, and you either apparently."

Dev hesitated, then turned her head and met Jess's eyes, a very faint smile appearing on her face. "You didn't really think I would be, did you?"

"No." Jess managed a small smile of her own. "I'm not the most social person out there but I didn't figure you hated me."

"I don't" Dev said. "I like you very much." She paused and thought. "I did wonder, though, what it would be like to kiss you." She added, in a mild tone.

Jess blinked. "You did?"

"Yes."

Live in the moment, isn't that what she said she did? Jess did not stop to think, even for a second. "Okay." She turned and leaned over, tilting her head slightly to one side and kissing Dev on the lips, completely unprepared for the jolt in her guts and the instant and powerfully sensual wash that sent tingles to every inch of her body.

She meant it to only last a second but it went on longer than that, until a door slammed in the distance, and she drew back, to find Dev staring at her, eyes round and astonished. "Uh." Jess croaked out, then fell silent

"That." Dev finally said, on an unsteady breath. "Was not at all what I expected."

Jess was finding it a little hard to catch her own breath. "Me either" She eventually muttered. "What in the hell did I just do?"

Dev rubbed her eyes with one hand "Well if you don't know, I definitely don't." She muffled a short laugh. "But wow did that ever surprise me."

Jess folded her arms over her chest and rested her head back against the wall of the tank, feeling the unsteady race of her heartbeat thundering in her ears. "Me too." She murmured. "Me too."

They looked at each other. Another door slammed in the distance, and Jess looked up over the edge of the tank, and then back at Dev. "Not sure what's going on. Maybe we should get out."

"Okay." Dev said. "Maybe we should."

They were both silent for a moment more, then Jess started laughing, shaking her head and plowing through the water towards the steps. Dev let herself sink down into the water and swam after her, using the casual motion to give her time to stop...

Shaking? Dev flexed her hands as she got to the shallow end and could walk the rest of the way. Stop something.

**

Dev closed her locker, aware of Jess's closing presence behind her. She turned just as the taller woman arrived and smiled. "That was nice." She said.

"It was." Jess agreed. "C'mon back to my place. We'll share a cup of grog."

Dev nodded, happy to deposit her damp towel into the dispenser with Jess's and follow along. She found herself still thinking about the kissing thing. That had been *very* interesting. She hadn't expected it to feel like it had and if she concentrated she could still sort of feel how it felt on her lips.

"Dev?"

"Huh?" Dev jerked a little, looking up to find Jess looking at her in bemusement. "Um.. sorry."

"You okay?"

Was she? Dev wasn't entirely sure what she was at the moment. "I think so." She said. "Maybe I'm just a little tired." She suggested. "That was a long session in the gym today."

"Yeah, it was." Jess agreed, with a sigh. "Reminded me again of how little time I've been spending in there lately." She rubbed her bare arms with her hands. "Too much time spent in med instead."

"Is your back all right?" Dev asked.

"Yeah. It's okay." Her companion twisted her body a little. "Just out of condition a little. Wish they had a pill or an instant program for that, I'll tell ya."

Dev smiled. "Me too." She admitted. "It's a lot of hard work." She looked around at the empty halls. "Is the party still going on?"

Jess had been watching the ground as she walked. "Huh?" She cocked her head. "Oh. Yeah. Right. The party." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't care. Maybe. You want to go back to it?" She looked at Dev who was shaking her head side to side definitively. "Right. I should check met, I guess... see when that window's going to happen... how's the carrier?"

Dev blinked at the onslaught of rambling details. "Ah." She sorted through them. "We did some very good work today and Clint was going to finish the engines tonight. I think it will be ready for tomorrow at some time."

"Great." They reached Jess's quarters and she scanned in and they walked inside. Jess halted after a few steps and stood still, sweeping her eyes around the room. "Hold it."

Dev stopped and waited.

After a minute, Jess relaxed. "Ah. They just brought the jackets back." She pointed at the chair, where two sets of them were draped. She walked over to them and lifted hers, then handed Dev the other one. "Might as well get out of your monkey suit."

Dev looked at the jacket, then at her.

"Just a saying." Jess tossed her jacket back over the chair back, stepping over to where Dev was standing and reaching out to gently ruffle her hair. "You don't look like a monkey." She said. "Go on and change and then we'll sit down and have a glass of mead together."

She watched Dev smile, then turn and walk over to the door, pausing to let it open and then going through, noting consciously the clean lines of Dev's body and how well proportioned she was. Then she took in a breath and released it, going over to her uniform cabinet and opening it.

She put the jacket away and unsealed the catches on her sleeveless jumpsuit, peeling it off her body and setting it onto its holder. Then she paused and regarded her reflection in the mirror mounted in the back of the cabinet, scowling a little at what she saw.

Then that made her frown, and shake her head, as she grabbed a set of shorts and a tank and put them on. What the hell did she care what she looked like? It mattered only in the field sometimes, and then she had her clothes on and looked all right.

Outsiders didn't see the scars. Hell, most insiders never saw them.

She went to the sanitary unit and ran a brush through her hair, which was almost dry after her swim. She met the somber regard of her own eyes in the smaller mirror, her thoughts going back to the pool.

Going back to that kiss.

Damn she'd enjoyed that. Jess stared at her reflection. She closed her eyes as she felt the sensation again, the faint, surprised reaction from Dev, and then, unmistakably, her response. Hard to say really which one of them was the more freaked out.

Might have been her. Dev seemed surprised and interested, but that was all. Did bio alts kiss up on station? Or anywhere? Jess was a little bemused to find herself very much wondering about that. Did she want to kiss Dev again?

Hm.

Did Dev want to kiss her again? Probably not. She probably was sitting down in her workspace right now and keying it up on her pad to find out what it all was about.

With a sigh, she turned and went back into her main area, just as the inner door opened and Dev came in, holding a box. "What's that?"

"I was kind of hoping you'd tell me." Dev came over and set the box down. She was also in shorts and a tank, and barefoot. "I found it in my space."

Jess examined it thoughtfully. "It's one of the boxes our nav modules come in." She evaluated. "I'm guessing no one sent you a nav module." She gently opened the box, tipping the top back and exposing the contents. She and Dev peered inside, almost bumping their heads together.

For a moment they regarded the contents in mutual silence. Then Jess reached in and picked up a sample, bringing it out and into the light. "Ah."

"What are those?" Dev asked.

"Seashells." Jess responded. She handed over the specimen, an oblong item with a tan and orange pattern on it. "NM-Dev-1, I think you have an admirer." She wasn't sure if she should be amused or pissed off. To have someone send this sort of crap to an ops tech....

"This is interesting." Dev was turning the shell over in her fingers. "What does it mean?"

Well, most techs were men. Jess eyed her new partner. Most of them weren't charming young women. "It means someone likes you, and sent you that because they thought you would like it, and by extension like them." She pronounced. "It's a present."

Dev's brow creased. She tilted her head and looked at Jess, visibly deeply confused.

Jess went to her small cabinet and took the mead and glasses out. She crooked a finger at Dev and then went to the steps up to her relaxation area, climbing up them and entering the quiet space.

Dev followed her, carrying the box.

Jess filled the glasses and put the bottle down on the small, low table, then sat down on the comfortable couch and waited for Dev to join her before she handed over her glass. "Here."

“Thank you.” Dev leaned back and seemed to relax. “Could you explain this present thing?” She indicated the box. “I don’t really understand it.”

Jess took a long swallow of her mead, and let it slide down her throat into her gut first. “Well.” She said. “Um...” She looked sideways at Dev. “What do bio alts do when they like someone?”

Dev had to really think about that, so she took her time and did. What was Jess actually asking her? She cast her mind back over her life in the creche, and tried to imagine just giving something to someone to make them like her. Would she do that? Had she? “What exactly do you mean by like?” She finally asked.

Jess’s lips twitched. “Didn’t you have any friends up there? People you hung out with? That you wanted to do something for, just because?”

Dev stared into the glass she was holding between her hands, her eyes a little unfocused. Then she took a sip. “I don’t think I did.” She said, after a long pause. “I had daymeal sometimes with Gigi.” She said. “And we talked about things but I never wanted to do anything for her except maybe hold the disposal door open when she had to put her tray in.”

“That’s really not what I meant.”

“No I didn’t think so.” Dev said. “Oh, wait.” She said. “Is it like... I was in the mess this morning, and when I saw all the people, I thought about how you wouldn’t like it so I thought it would be nice if I brought you something?”

“Well...” Jess made a face. “Sort of.”

“Is it like this?” Dev held up her glass. “You do nice things for me.” She looked up at Jess, with a serious expression. “Do you do that because you like me?”

It was almost a disruptive honesty. Jess bit her tongue as she had the oddest sensation of momentarily losing control over her body and quite possibly her mind at the same time. “I.. um.” She felt warmth come over her and realized she was blushing.

What the hell? “Sure.. I mean, yes.” She regained control over her ability to communicate somewhat. “I think you’re.. um.” Jess found those curious and interested green eyes studying her. “Hey you’re my partner. I’m supposed to do stuff for you.”

Dev studied her glass again, a faint, wistful smile appearing on her face. “Oh.” She murmured. “Well, I’m glad about that.” She said. “But I was sort of hoping maybe you were being nice just because.” She took a sip, holding the snifter between her hands. “That would be an interesting thing to experience.”

Jess was caught flatfooted again. She had no idea what to say to that, or what to do about the sort of forlorn expression on the bio alts face. It made her stop and think again. “I’m.. um.. not really..” She paused. “I w..want to be nice to you.” She stuttered a bit. “I don’t have to be. I don’t want you to think I do things because I..” She let the words trail off, not really sure what she was trying to say.

“Because you want me to like you?” Dev offered, softly. “You don’t have to. I do like you. I like you just because, and it made me feel good to bring you stuff from the mess.” She said. “So I think I get that now.”

“Oh.” Jess felt intense relief. “Good.”

“But it really doesn’t explain this.” Dev put the glass down, and picked up the box of shells. “Why would someone send these to me? I don’t know anyone else here but you.”

“Oh.” Jess set her glass down next to Dev’s and took the box. “I think Clint sent these to you.” She said. “I think he wants to get to know you better.”

“Ah.”

“Back in the day.” Jess was very glad they’d jumped subjects. “When someone was interested in someone else, and wanted to get to know them better, they sent them a nice present. Usually flowers.”

“We had those at the creche.” Dev said. “But no one was allowed to send them to anyone.”

“These are the new flowers.” Jess held up the shell. “So Clint’s saying he’s interested in getting to know you.”

Dev leaned back on the couch and folded her hands in her lap, regarding her companion thoughtfully. “Wouldn’t it be more productive for him just to ask me?”

Jess shrugged. "Do you want him to?"

"No."

"Oh." Jess put the box down.

"I think he's pleasant and funny but I don't want to get to know him any better." Dev clarified. "I enjoy working with him, but I don't think I would enjoy doing this with him." She picked up her glass, and drank from it. "So what do you think I should do about these... um.. " She picked up one of the shells and examined it curiously. "things?"

"I'll take care of it." Jess offered, in a quiet tone. "Don't worry about it, Dev."

"Thanks." The bio alt smiled at her. "That's very nice of you."

Jess found herself smiling back. She picked her glass up and looked at it. "Do you like doing this?" She indicated it.

"I like spending time with you." Dev said. "You make me feel human."

Disruptive honesty. Jess felt her jaw drop a little, as she tried to process that with sufficient intent to come up with a response that was other than a splutter. She looked at her companion, feeling just a little short of breath, feeling her eyes blink repeatedly.

"Are you all right?" Dev asked, after a long moment. "You seem to be in some discomfort. Was that incorrect for me to say?"

"No." Jess put her glass down and reached over to put her hand on Dev's shoulder. "I think it was a huge damn compliment. Probably more than you know." She felt the weird tension she'd been feeling relax and she smiled. "You make me feel human, too."

Dev studied her for a minute, then smiled back.

"So." Jess released her, and leaned back. "Let's find something less weird to talk about."

"Okay. Could you tell me about this mission thing?" Dev amiably went with the subject change. "Where are we going? What's it going to be like?"

Jess picked up a control on the table and pointed it at a screen embedded in the wall. "Lemme show ya." She said. "I don't usually ask people up here to see my etchings, y'know."

"Oh. Well, thanks." Dev slid a little closer, as the screen lit. "That's very nice of you."

"When you see how bad I etch, you'll change your mind."

**

Dev hadn't changed her mind. She had completely enjoyed seeing Jess's sketches of the places they would be going, and even more, she'd enjoyed hearing Jess talk about them.

Now she was in her bed, curled up under the covers and in a state of almost profound bemusement. She felt strange, and warm, and like she wanted to giggle and she really didn't know why, except that she was having a hard time thinking of anything except for Jess.

Well, she supposed that was natural. A lot of things had happened to them today, from their rough and ready meal in the morning, to the ceremony, to the party, to swimming to... well, the whole kissing thing, and then the mead and all that.

Tomorrow night they would finally go on their mission. Jess had told her they would spend several days on it, and might even have to sleep in the carrier while it was going on.

She found that thought very interesting.

Jess had also told her they would pass through at least one of the big strongholds where many people lived, and get a chance to see what that was like, and then go to a very remote place where she would meet with the fishermen she wanted to travel to the bad guys with.

It all sounded good. The mission itself, and the danger she thought Jess was trying to make small still worried her a lot, but the parts around it were getting her excited, and she had to admit she was looking forward to getting in the carrier and going off to do it.

It would take a lot of really hard work to get the carrier ready in time, but she was confident they could do it.

That made her think about Clint. She wondered about that box of shells. It was hard to decide if that was a good thing he'd done or not a good thing, though she thought maybe he thought it was good. He seemed like a nice person, and she didn't think he was trying to get something from her, but Jess seemed to think maybe he was.

She wasn't sure what the something was. Jess had gotten all flustered again when she'd asked, there at the end after they'd found themselves talking about it again so she'd just dropped the subject.

She thought it was really cute when Jess got like that. There was something really sweet and nice about it, since usually Jess was so strong and self possessed. It would be excellent of course, if she knew why simple straightforward questions seemed to evoke that, but she supposed eventually she'd figure it out.

Dev curled her arms around her pillow and exhaled in contentment. It had been such a good day. She was trying really to decide which had been the best part of it - Jess saying they were partners, or that kissing thing.

She was so proud about being a partner. She'd looked the word up when she'd finally left Jess's quarters and found the description to be very good. It said Jess wanted to continue working with her, and maybe, it meant Jess was starting to trust her in a way she hadn't really expected since she didn't actually think she'd done much to earn that trust yet.

So that was excellent.

But, now, that kissing thing.

That was pretty interesting too. Dev had, of course, had her basic biology class and she knew all about that. They'd studied the science of reproduction - though it wasn't anything any of them would ever expect to know in person since they did things to them to make them not have babies. So there was no point in the rest of it, according to the lessons.

She remembered talking after class, and everyone wondering what the big deal was and why the natural born were so fixated about it.

What she hadn't known was what it would be like, and how interesting it made her body feel. She hadn't felt like that during the class, nor after, but if she closed her eyes and thought about it now, about that touch on her lips, she felt that feeling again, and she really liked it.

She had wanted to ask Jess if they could try that again, but it had gotten really late, and she could see Jess was tired. So she saved that for another day, and she figured maybe they could talk about it on the flight.

Jess had said there would be a market in the stronghold they'd visit. Dev closed her eyes and smiled. That would be interesting and she was looking forward to it.

Maybe she'd be able to find Jess a present.

**

It turned out, the next morning, that Dev ended up handling the Clint issue herself anyway. After a very early breakfast she'd gone to the carrier bay, and got to work right off helping get her vehicle ready. She was inside the carrier, lying on the floor with her head inside a console when she heard steps on the ladder and peeked out to see Clint enter.

He came right over and sat down on the floor next to her, crossing his legs and resting his elbows on his knees. "Hi."

"Hello." Dev shifted so her head was in view. "Good morning."

"Listen, I have something to explain to you." Clint said. "I did something but I didn't really think it through, so I wanted to apologize."

Ah. Interesting. "Do you mean the box?" Dev inquired.

Clint nodded, blushing a little. "I just thought it would be something you'd like." He said. "I didn't think about how new you were, or that.. um.... I mean maybe it wasn't something you were used to."

"Because I'm a bio alt?"

"Uh.. something like that."

Dev considered. "I'm not. I had no idea what that was. Jess had to explain it to me." She admitted, watching his face tense into a grimace at her partner's name.

Her partner's name. That threw Dev right off her intent and she had to wrestle her attention back with a surprising amount of effort. "I thought the shells were really interesting. I would like to know more about them, but you don't have to send me things to prompt me to talk to you."

Clint blushed a deeper shade of red.

"I'm not really comfortable with all that yet." Dev explained in a serious tone. "I got a lot of programming about tech and this." She pointed at the console. "But not very much about how to deal with natural born people."

"Ah." Clint cleared his throat. "Well, sure. That makes a lot of sense." He said. "Was Jess pissed off?"

Pissed off. Pissed off. "Was she angry?" Dev hazarded. "No, I don't think so." She shook her head. "She didn't sound angry. She said she would talk to you about it."

Clint went a little pale now. "Okay, well, I guess I should get back to work. Anyway.. ah.. thanks for understanding. Maybe we can just talk sometimes."

"Clint?" Dev edged a little further out. "May I ask you a question?"

"Uh. Sure."

"Why are you so afraid of Jess?"

Clint stared at her for a long, long moment "Yeah I guess they didn't tell you that much about things, huh?" He said. "Just don't get on her bad side. That's all I'll say." He got up and dusted his coveralls off. "Maybe you should get your ..uh.. whatever those people are to fill you in a little. "

"I think that's a good idea."

Clint froze, then whirled, as a figure entered the carrier. "Hey! Who the hell are you coming in here?" He put himself between the figure and Dev.

"Doctor Dan!" Dev crawled out from her position and sat up. "It's okay, Clint. This is Doctor Dan. He brought me here from the creche."

"Sorry." Clint edged around the newly installed gunner's couch and got to the door. "Talk to you later, Dev." He scrambled down the steps, leaving them quickly behind.

Dev started to get up, but then sat back down when Doctor Dan waved her back, coming over to sit down on the deck next to her. "Good morning, Dev. Did you like the party last night?"

"It was okay." Dev said. "It was a little strange for me. But it was all right."

"It's a lot to get used to." Doctor Dan agreed. He was dressed in a plain, dark jumpsuit, with no markings or insignia at all. It contrasted with his pale hair and he seemed comfortable in it. "There were a lot of things going on last night. I wanted to know if you needed me to explain anything to you."

"I think it was okay." Dev said. "But I would like you to explain to me about kissing."

Doctor Dan blinked, his eyes going a little wider. "About what?" He asked, in a very startled tone.

"Kissing." Dev repeated. "I know what we got in school, but I think they left out some details."

The scientist laughed gently, lifting one hand to cover his eyes. "I'm sorry, Dev." He said. "I never anticipated having to discuss this particular subject with one of you." He looked at her. "In fact, a very dear friend of mine would be laughing so hard we couldn't hear ourselves think if he'd been here for it."

"I'm sorry." Dev said. "Was it incorrect to ask?"

"No." Doctor Dan leaned against the console, extending his legs across the carrier deck. "It's never wrong to ask questions, Dev. Even if it's uncomfortable for someone to answer them." He folded his hands together. "Are you asking me this because you want to try it, or because you have?"

"I have." Dev said. "I mean, I did. One time." She clarified.

"And you want to do it again." This wasn't quite a question, and Doctor Dan was giving her one of his sweet, gentle smiles.

"Yes." Dev smiled back at him. "I really liked it."

Doctor Dan sighed. "Where do I start." He muttered to himself. "I think we need to talk more than once about this, Dev, and I know you have a mission you're going on this afternoon." He said. "So let me ask you this first, was it that gentlemen who just left that you.. ah.. kissed?"

"No." Dev said in a mild tone. "It was Jess."

Doctor Dan studied her for a long moment in utter silence. "I see." He finally said, slowly. "Did she ask you to do this, Dev?"

Dev shook her head. "No, I asked her." She replied. "I wondered what it would be like, and said that, and she said okay and kissed me. I liked it." She wasn't really sure how Doctor Dan felt about it all, he was acting a little funny, and now, something else must have happened because he was trying hard not to laugh. "Was it incorrect?"

Doctor Dan rubbed his face. "No." He said. "It's not incorrect... well, not in that sense, Dev." He said. "There are rules... oh, well, not really rules more customs .." he said. "That natural born people here know they are not supposed to make biological alternatives do things like that when they don't want to."

"I wanted to."

"Yes, I understand." Doctor Dan's eyes were now gravely twinkling. "You asked her to do that."

"Yes." Dev said, in a positive tone.

Her mentor was quiet for a little bit. "It's not unknown, in this service, for people who are working very closely together to want to do things like that." He said. "The most important thing is, that it be something that both people want to do, and not feel like they have to do. You understand me, Dev?"

Dev nodded. "I do." She said. "I remember what happened with TeeJay in the creche."

Doctor Dan's lips compressed, and he nodded. "That is what I mean. I don't want you to get into a situation where something bad happens and you are unhappy."

"Okay." Dev said. "It was only a kiss."

"Yes." Doctor Dan smiled at her again. "But the way it works, Dev, is that you start by kissing, and then that feels good, so you want to do other things."

"What other things?"

"Things like touching, and giving pleasure." Doctor Dan said. "It feels so good you don't want to stop and it can be very attention consuming and emotional."

"Oh." Dev said. "That's very interesting." She paused thoughtfully. "Does Jess know about all of this? She seemed to know about kissing."

"I'm sure she does." Her mentor said dryly. "But I think you should wait to talk to her about it until after your mission. I know you'll both be very busy." He glanced up as loud noises started outside the carrier. "And I think there's some work needing to be done here."

"Yes." Dev said. "We have to get the hull sealed." She explained. "Thank you for explaining that, Doctor Dan. But.. She hesitated. "It's a correct thing, isn't it?"

Doctor Dan looked at that young, innocent face, now smudged a little with silicon grease, and smiled. "To be honest, Dev, if you were in one of the regular bio alt positions, or in the creche, it would be incorrect." He said, straightforwardly. "Mostly to protect you."

She nodded.

"But you're not." He said, quietly. "You're in a role that makes you the equal of all the natural born humans around you. I think you know that."

She nodded again.

"So, along with the responsibility of performing that role with excellence, you also have to take on the burden of relating to them as though you were one of them." Doctor Dan said. "That's a difficult thing, because they don't all see it that way."

"No."

“But Jesslyn Drake does.” He said. “So no, Dev, it’s not incorrect for you in this case, but please be careful. I would hate to see you become unhappy because of all of this.”

Dev wasn’t sure how kissing could make her unhappy, but she accepted Doctor Dan’s words at face value. “I will be careful.” She said. “Especially on the mission. Kissing seems to make Jess very distracted. I wouldn’t want to do that and end up with less than excellent results.”

Doctor Dan started laughing again. “Oh Dev.” He shook his head, still chuckling. “Ah, to be young and facing life for the first time again.”

Dev chuckled herself, a little, more because her mentor was than because she understood the joke. “This is such an excellent position. I’m so glad you picked me for it, Doctor Dan.”

Kurok let his chuckles wind down, and then he patted her leg. “Go and do well. We can talk more about this when you get back. Okay?”

“Okay.” Dev watched him stand up. “Thanks again Doctor Dan.”

He winked at her and then went to the carrier door, giving it an affectionate slap before he disappeared down the stairs leaving Dev alone inside.

Whew. That was a lot to think about. Dev squirmed back under the console and picked up her adjustment tool. But in the meantime, there was a lot of work to do, and she decided to set aside the thoughts and get down to it.

**

Jess assembled her mission information package and sat down at her workspace to go over it. Met had finally cleared them, and she spread out the maps, laying out the routes she wanted to take and reviewing the contacts.

A small folder was set to one side that had their false credentials in it. Jess paused a moment and opened it, sorting through the scan cards and traveling passports with her and Dev’s holos in them.

She studied Dev’s. They’d assigned her a fake name of Devlin Marks, using the standard theory that one’s own first name should be used whenever possible since it reduced the amount of gotchas in any situation. Her own this time was Jessie Arnula.

Not really one she favored, but what the hell. Jess set the creds aside and poured over the latest intelligence, checking her chrono then reaching over to tap the comms. “Hey Dev?”

After a second and a short crackling noise, her pilot answered. “Hello!”

“How’s it going?”

“Very well.” Dev said. “The interior systems are complete. They are putting the outer skin on presently.”

“Great.” Jess smiled. “Good job.”

Dev’s smile could clearly be heard over the com. “Thank you.” She said. “I will be asking for the comp synch soon.” She said. “And run engine tests.”

“Great.” Jess repeated. “Keep me looped.”

“Um. Okay.” Dev said, and signed off.

Jess chuckled and shook her head, going back to studying her metrics. It was a relatively straightforward plan. They’d pull in to Cape Quebec and pick up outsider supplies, then stop at Interforce’s North Station and get the latest met as well as any last minute intel.

Then a hop to the outlands. Dev would need to park the bus likely in an ice cave, and they would have to hike in to the fishing village. “Supply?” Jess pressed a com button. “Drake.” She said, when it answered. “Leaving plus four I need two arctic kits in my bus.”

“Got it.” A voice responded, and clicked off.

Jess whistled under her breath, then paused, wondering why she was so damned happy. Hadn’t she been the one who’d been finding any excuse not to leave just two days ago? Now she felt nothing but anticipation and confidence, and she was human and self knowing enough to stop and wonder why.

Maybe the induction the previous night had helped. Even the grudging acceptance of her new position was bracing, and she'd gone from feeling like something of a failure to being in a place where she was ready to envision success.

It felt good. Jess studied her hands. She felt good today. She picked up the communications folder and studied the inside of it, seeing the brief acknowledgement from North Station, and the latest overhead sat map of the ice flows.

It would be a cold mission. Jess made a note to get them both some warm undergarments in Cape Quebec, more than the light synth ones they issued here.

A light knock at her door made her look up. "Come."

The door opened, and Alex Bain entered. Jess was caught by surprise, and she half stood as he sauntered over and sat down in one of the chairs across from her desk. "Sir."

"Sit, Drake." He waved at her. "This is an informal meeting."

Jess sat. To have Bain call you in, that they'd come to understand was normal. Even to have him call you to ops command? Normal, though creepy. To get a visit in your quarters? "What can I do for you?"

Bain studied her intently. "I have some information I wanted to pass along to you before you depart." He said. "Where is your charming new colleague?"

"Fixing the bus." Jess said. "At this point it wouldn't surprise me if she could knit one from scratch."

A smile crossed Bain's long, craggy face. "You have developed a.. hm.. strong appreciation.. for this bio alt."

Jess hesitated, then she nodded. "I like her."

Bain nodded back. "We have just received confirmation that we still have a leak inside." He said. "That is the main reason I am here, in your bedroom, telling you and not in the operations center."

"Damn."

"Hm." Bain nodded again. "That is what was behind the attack on Dr. Kurok. Word had gotten to the other side of his .. hm.. success with your new pilot."

"Partner." Jess corrected him quiet.

"Indeed?" Bain's eyes twinkled. "That would dismay our friends all the more, I believe. But it surprises me, hmm? You were so adamantly against it."

Jess looked at her hands, folded together on the table. "It surprises me too." She admitted. "I never got to say it, but thanks." She looked up at him. "Glad I bumped into you on the top of that rampway."

A completely different smile appeared on his face. "It was my great pleasure."

They were both silent for a few moments. "We have to find this person." Bain finally said. "I've had security go over every single record a half dozen times. They have found, ah, nothing."

"We have to trap them." Jess said. "You won't find anything, and the fact that what they sent over was broadly known information should tell you something. Our last run, when no one really knew what the plan was, didn't get leaked."

Bain nodded thoughtfully. "That ah, had occurred to me."

"So." Jess said. "There are two major bits of information I let slide for this mission. One, that I was stopping at Quebec, and two, that I would report in at North before I went on. The rest of the gig.. the only person I told that to was Dev."

"I see."

Jess picked up a bit of plasfilm and handed it to him. "That's who I told what." She said. "So let's see what happens when I get to both places."

Bain slowly smiled at her.

"Now, they can do one of two things." Jess said. "They can try to stop me before I get there, or they can wait until I get there, and trap me. They tried option 2 already once. Didn't work out so well for them."

"No it didn't." Bain agreed.

“Letting me get close last time didn’t work out so well either.” Jess said. “So I’m hoping they think I’m dangerous enough to want them to stop me ahead of time, and if they do, then maybe we’ll know who it is.”

“Hm.” The old man grunted. “But you will be careful, won’t you, Drake? I would hate for anything permanent to happen to you, or to that charming young lady.”

Jess smiled. “Dev is safe with me.”

“Hm. And on the mission as well.” Bain stood up. “Very well. Keep me advised.” He offered his hand. “Good luck, Drake. Glad you rose to the challenge.”

Jess shook his hand, and then he was gone, the door sliding shut behind him. She leaned back in her chair and nodded to herself. She figured if she pulled this off, there was a decent chance Bain would kick Stephen into Brickers job, and her into Stephens.

She had almost two sleeves. She’d busted her ass. She had more brains than anyone else in the bunch here, and damn it, she’d earned the chance.

Damn right she had. Jess gathered her documentation together, and packed it up into her flight kit. Then she got up and headed for the door, figuring maybe they could use another set of hands on the carrier to get it flight ready.

She grinned wryly. Or at least, Dev could.

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[Continued in Part 9](#)