



Battle of Hearts

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Trapped together in the snow storm—can they handle the heat building between them?

Captain Sawyer Berkeley is a badass Army Ranger who's used to tackling the toughest missions solo. Tasked with leading Arctic training, she's all about the job—until she meets Lieutenant Mirren Reed, a brilliant Air Force meteorologist who's just as driven. Sparks fly from the get-go, but both are determined to keep things professional.

Then, a brutal Arctic storm hits, trapping them in a remote outpost with no way out. As they fight to survive, the tension between them heats up fast, and they're forced to confront more than just the storm outside.

With danger all around and nowhere to turn, can they survive the storm—and the intense connection building between them?

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SAWYER

The unforgiving Artic storm clung to Captain Sawyer Berkeley like a second skin, the cold biting through her layers, nipping at her exposed face as she trudged through the thick snow. The air was so frigid she felt as though it could crack, and beyond the well-lit exterior of the base, the darkness was vast and endless. A snowstorm from the night before had only just passed, which left the area in a deafening silence broken only by the faint whistling of the wind and the steady, purposeful beat of her boots against the frozen ground.

A sigh escaped her lips in the form of a small frosty cloud as she approached the base, the harsh exterior lights illuminating the steel fences that she pushed through. Warmth brushed her cheeks as she stepped into the corridor, the blast of hot air hitting her like a wave. The sudden heat made her skin prickle and tingle as the ice that clung to her gear and short mocha hair began to melt.

The base was alive with the low hum of generators, mingled with the distant murmur of voices and the occasional clatter of equipment. Sawyer peeled off her gloves and flexed her fingers as sensation returned, her weather-sore limbs beginning to thaw. She extended a nod to the soldiers who saluted in greeting as they passed her, the sight of their shivering surprising her.

While everyone else seemed to struggle under such harsh weather, years of Arctic training had hardened her to such conditions, making her as much a part of this frozen landscape as the snow-covered peaks that stretched across the horizon.

Her boots thudded against the floor as she strode purposefully, the sound bouncing off the walls of the tight corridor as she made her way to the command center. Sawyer was always like this before a mission—focused, determined, and a little on edge. But it wasn't nerves. She didn't get nervous. It was more so an awareness, a sense of preparation for anything that may go wrong. Over the years, she'd quickly learned that out here in the Alaskan wilderness, things could go wrong very quickly and unexpectedly.

Tonight was no different. Sawyer had been appointed the leader of a cold-weather training mission for her team, a feisty group of Army Rangers who were already highly capable yet still needed further hardening in order to survive out in these erratic conditions. The mission was routine enough, merely a week-long excursion deep into the wild with the goals of improving their survival skills and putting their limits to the test against the elements. But Sawyer had learned long ago that there was no such thing as routine in the Arctic. The wilderness had a way of humbling even the most prepared soldiers.

That was why Sawyer had been selected to inspect Icebreaker Station, the outpost where she and her team would be staying before she took them out. Her superiors knew she was well-experienced in the Arctic, on top of the fact she was a hell of a Captain and a natural born leader. They trusted her ability to lead her team and to train them, just as much as they trusted her instincts to make sure the Station was fit for the mission. If something was off, she'd notice it right away.

Of course, even the most calculated, most organized objectives could be dramatically thrown off balance by a sudden storm, even a mere shift in the wind. It was why she had requested the base's Air Force meteorologist to accompany.

Normally, Sawyer preferred to handle this sort of work independently. There was only one person she trusted 100%, and that was herself. But with the threat of a potential upcoming storm, she believed it might be beneficial to put aside her own

judgment for now and get an expert on-site to assess the conditions and provide real-time information.

Sawyer came to a stop in front of the closed door of the command center. The warmth seeped into her bones, and for a moment she stood there and allowed herself to relax after the punishing cold outside.

The meteorologist's name was Lieutenant Mirren Reed, she remembered her superior saying. She'd never met the woman before—in fact, she hadn't really interacted much with members of the Air Force at all. The Army and the Air Force were two very different worlds that didn't often collide, and she couldn't think of a single scenario other than her current one where she'd cross paths with a meteorologist.

Her life was one of action, physical endurance, and survival in many different cruel environments. Meteorologists were numbers, charts, and required no blood, sweat, or tears, and rarely necessitated stepping foot out of a safe building.

But Sawyer lived a life full of the need for constant control, and the weather was one of the few things she couldn't control. So, she'd have to make this one exception. If this Lieutenant Reed woman could help mitigate that risk, she was willing to listen.

With one last relaxing inhale, Sawyer pushed through the door and stepped inside. The hum of computers and low murmur of voices filled her ears, and a few heads turning her way as she walked down concrete aisle. She scanned the room carefully. A few heads turned her way, but she ignored them, her gaze continuing to sweep across the room until she spotted exactly whom she was looking for tucked away in the back corner.

Lieutenant Mirren Reed stood near a bank of monitors, her back to Sawyer. Sawyer took a few seconds to inspect her closely. She was slender, quite a few inches shorter than she was, with her long, dark hair pulled into the neat braid the captain had

recognized from the photo of the woman's file that had been slapped on her desk early this morning shortly after she'd put in the formal request.

Even from this distance, she could feel the way the woman's presence filled the room. She noticed how composed she was, the way she moved her hands as she spoke to those surrounding her radiating intelligence. Mirren shifted slightly, and Sawyer caught a glimpse of her profile—delicate, almost deer-like features framed by the soft blue light of the screen, her eyes glinting with focus.

A flicker of an unfamiliar feeling sparking in her chest prompted Sawyer to hesitate for a brief moment. It was a feeling she quickly recognized as attraction. She couldn't deny it just as much as she couldn't push the feeling away. Mirren was, without a doubt, strikingly beautiful. Even with the cold and exhaustion creasing her expressions, her pretty looks sent tingles of curiosity shooting up Sawyer's arms, mixed with a deeper, more instinctive response.

Sawyer didn't waste any time trying to deduce what these feelings were. It was a distraction, and she didn't like distractions. Pushing her feelings to the side, Sawyer cleared her throat as she stepped forward. "Lieutenant Reed?"

The woman tensed slightly, then turned to fully face her, blue eyes as icy as the wind outside. There was a calmness in her gaze, briefly overcome by a look Sawyer couldn't figure out quickly enough before it disappeared as fast as it came. "You must be Captain Berkeley," Mirren replied in a voice that was soft but steady and paired with a small, respectful smile.

"We're scheduled to leave in fifteen minutes," Sawyer said, ignoring all her feelings entirely as she kept her tone neutral and to the point. "I trust you're ready?"

"Of course," Mirren replied with a nod. "I've already prepared all the necessary equipment. I also took the chance to briefly review the latest data. The weather looks

stable for now, but I'll monitor it closely during our trip."

Sawyer returned a curt nod. Despite the strange thoughts in the back of her mind that beckoned otherwise, there was no need for small talk or pleasantries, not when they were expected to report back on their findings in the morning.

"Good," she said. "We'll take a Humvee to the outpost. Make sure you've layered well. It's a long drive."

Mirren's lips quirked slightly, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I'm aware, Captain. I've been stationed here for a day now."

Sawyer felt a brief flicker of something almost like amusement at the subtle challenge in Mirren's words. She liked that. It showed confidence, an assurance in her own abilities. Maybe this trip wouldn't be as tedious as she'd expected.

She nodded again, more to herself than to Mirren. "Meet me outside when you're ready," she said before turning to leave, already mentally mapping out the route they would take.

As she turned and began to leave the room, Sawyer struggled to shake the image of Mirren's gaze, those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see right through her. It had been a long time since anyone or anything had made her feel...anything, really. She was a soldier first and foremost. A captain. There was no more to her life than her duty, no need for anything else. And if anything else ever did come, it would be secondary.

While she felt conflicted over her alien feelings, her odd pique in interest in a woman she'd barely just met, she shook her thoughts away. It didn't matter.

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The mission came first, and whatever this was, she decided she would deal with it later—if at all.

The Humvee's engine snarled against the endless white terrain, tires crunching over snow-packed roads as they moved deeper into the wilderness. The drive to Icebreaker Station was long and uneventful, the conversation kept short the odd times either of them spoke up. Sawyer kept her eyes focused on the stretch of road in front of her which was well-lit by the bright lights of the vehicle, while Mirren sat quietly beside her, her eyes glued to her tablet as she scrolled through her notes and weather data.

The silence between the pair wasn't necessarily uncomfortable, which each individual focused on their own thing. But it was heavy with the unspoken tension that came from two strangers being forced together by convenience. The unfamiliar feelings brewing in the pit of Sawyer's stomach didn't help at all to ease that tension.

Every so often, when she caught Mirren burying herself deeper into the contents of her screen, Sawyer would steal a glance at her, but only when she was certain the other woman wasn't looking. And those times she did look in her direction, it was as if there was a supernatural force that made it hard for her to look away. There was something about Mirren's presence that was so...magnetizing, borderline hypnotizing, and it frustrated Sawyer to no end that she couldn't figure out what it was. The woman who always had a solution for every one of her problems suddenly had no answers cross her mind when it came to this woman. It was frustrating.

"Anything I should know about the weather?" Sawyer was the first to break the

silence after a while, more so to do exactly that than out of necessity.

Mirren looked up from her tablet, her gaze barely meeting Sawyer's briefly before it returned to the glowing screen. "No significant changes since we left," came her response, spoken in a distracted hum. There was something about the silkiness of her voice that caused a weird feeling to slide down Sawyer's spine. "The temperature is dropping, but it's within expected parameters. The wind is picking up a bit, but nothing too drastic. Nothing concerning that should sideline our work."

Sawyer nodded with satisfaction at the answer. "Good," she said. "I want this inspection done quickly but thoroughly. The sooner we get that done, the sooner we confirm the outpost is secure, the better."

"Agreed." Mirren responded. A brief pause washed over the pair before the younger woman added, "I admire your thoroughness, Captain. Not everyone would go out of their way to take the time to do this."

A weird feeling panged in Sawyer's chest. The captain glanced at her, feeling off guard by the comment. "I don't take chances with my team's safety," she responded in a firm tone, hiding her feelings well. "And I don't trust anyone else to do my job."

Mirren nodded as a faint smile played on her lips. "I can respect that."

For a moment they were silent again with only the steady hum of the engine and the crunch of snow beneath the tires. But the air between them had shifted ever so slightly, perhaps due to the subtle acknowledgement of their mutual respect. It was enough for Sawyer to help the journey feel a little less cold. A part of her urged her to say more, but no ideas came to mind as to how to continue the conversation, so she found peace in the silence instead.

The weather worsened as they neared Icebreaker Station. The road thinned out to a

narrow trail enveloped by deep snowdrifts, with steep inclines and sharp drops that made driving difficult and requiring intense focus to navigate. The wind had picked up, howling through the mountains, while the sky had shifted into a grayish hue, the first hints of the storm to come.

Sawyer slowed the Humvee as they approached the outpost, her eyes scanning the small, sturdy building nestled between two ridges. The ridges helped to protect the outpost from harsher winds, but it didn't make it any less susceptible to heavy snowfall. It looked as it always did, a solid, reliable structure. However, out here, Sawyer knew all too well that the Arctic had a way of wearing things down, of revealing weaknesses that couldn't be seen from the outside.

Killing the engine, Sawyer parked the Humvee, bathing the pair in a sudden silence barely cracked by the lowly, almost haunting howl of the winds outside. "Let's make this quick," she said without sharing a glance with the younger woman in the passenger seat. Sawyer reached behind her to grab her rucksack before stepping out into the biting cold. Mirren followed quickly after her. The wind immediately cut through her layers, but she ignored it, pushing through the heavy snow as she kept her focus on the task at hand. Mirren stayed close behind.

They approached the outpost together, their boots sinking into the deep snow with each step, their footprints disappearing in their wake as fast as they had imprinted. Sawyer reached the door first, testing the handle before pushing it open.

It had been left exactly as Sawyer remembered. The two women were met with a cold, dark interior. Bunk beds lined one wall. Table and chairs sat in the middle of the room with a wood stove tucked in the back room. Besides a few pieces of furniture and shelves stocked with emergency supplies, the outpost was mostly bare and functional, with just enough room for a small team to stay for a few days.

Mirren moved inside right after Sawyer, her eyes adjusting to the dim light as she

took in the space. “Cozy,” she commented.

Sawyer glanced to her right to meet Mirren’s gaze, hints of amusement flashing in the woman’s cerulean orbs. A flicker of warmth ignited in her chest at the sight of her, and she found herself suddenly pinned under the woman’s eyes, unable to move a muscle or make a sound. She was only able to nod in response before she made way for the wood stove. It was their only source of heat, so she made sure she checked it before doing anything else, making sure it was in working order. Luckily, it was.

Mirren, meanwhile, was already at the far end of the room setting up her equipment on the table. Her hands deftly arranged instruments and tapped at her tablet while she hummed a nearly silent tune. Sawyer snuck another glance at her through the corner of her eyes. The way the woman worked, completely absorbed in her task, reminded Sawyer of how she herself approached missions—with a singleminded focus that shut out everything else. She should have been satisfied that every single little thing she picked up about Mirren proved she was reliable. But the unknown feelings that surfaced every time she looked at the woman left her a bit frustrated instead.

Satisfied that the stove was operational, Sawyer turned her attention to the rest of the outpost. She checked everything meticulously from the structural integrity of the walls to the condition of the supplies and then finally the state of the bunkbeds. Everything appeared to be in order, but she’d never been the type of person to let her guard down. Especially out here, where the rough environment had a way of exploiting even the smallest weaknesses. They could be in complete control, yet something could find a way to go wrong.

“How many times have you been here?” Mirren perked up, curiosity and friendliness coloring her tone. Sawyer wasn’t used to such pleasantries, having been surrounded by battle-hardened, focused soldiers like herself for her entire career. She wasn’t particularly an expert at small talk.

“Roughly a dozen or so times, I’d say,” Sawyer responded neutrally. She didn’t know why she answered that way. She knew she’d been here exactly fourteen times now. She was on edge, a little more than she’d expected to be.

“Ah,” Mirren hummed. “You must have been the obvious choice then for leading this mission. Your experience matched with your skillset makes you overly qualified.”

Sawyer didn’t know what to say in response to what felt like a compliment, so she only shrugged. “I suppose so.”

Sawyer returned to her work, though she found herself glancing over at Mirren more often than she meant to. There was something oddly calming about the other woman’s presence, a steadiness that contrasted with the harshness of their surroundings. It was as though the storm brewing outside had no effect on her, as if she were immune to the cold and the isolation.

Sawyer was used to being the one who provided that sense of calm and stability for her team, but here in this moment, she found herself on the receiving end. It was...unexpected. And she wasn’t quite sure how to feel about it.

When she had finished her inspection, Sawyer returned to the table where Mirren worked. “Everything looks good on myend,” she said, her voice cutting through the quiet. “How about you?”

Mirren looked up, her eyes meeting Sawyer’s. “The weather is holding steady for now,” she replied before a grim look flashed across her gaze. “But...it looks as if there’s a significant drop in pressure that suggests the storm is intensifying. We need to be prepared for it to hit sooner rather than later.”

Sawyer frowned, her mind already calculating the implications. “How soon?”

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Mirren hesitated, glancing down at her tablet before answering. “It’s...hard to say for certain, but I’d estimate we have a few hours, maybe three at most, before it reaches full strength.”

Sawyer nodded, her expression grim. “Shit. That doesn’t give us much time.” Her eyes briefly scanned her surroundings. This trip was only meant to be a quick check.

Mirren nodded, as well. “I think it may be best if we stay here for the night.”

Stay the night? Sawyer’s heart skipped a beat at the mere thought of that. Her and Mirren, practically two strangers, trapped in this small, cramped space through the entire night while a storm rabidly raged outside. Those strange feelings from before swiftly returned, this time in the form of a far hungrier fire instead of the earlier tiny flames.

Sawyer swallowed her thoughts and kept her gaze steady. “I expected as much,” was all she could say.

Maybe it wouldn’t be as bad or as uncomfortable as she thought it would be. She was already intrigued by Mirren from the moment they first met, and it seemed as if a large part of her wanted to like her. As well, Mirren had quickly proven herself to be reliable. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so tough after all. Sawyer began to think that staying the night here with the woman might give both of them the chance to better get to know each other. She wasn’t really the kind to warm up to others, but what else was there to do, really?

“I’ve already started gathering data on the storm’s trajectory,” Mirren continued,

looking down to tap at her screen. “We should have enough information to make an informed decision by the time it arrives.”

Sawyer appreciated the pragmatism in Mirren’s approach. It mirrored her own, a focus on facts and logic rather than panic or speculation. She could work with that. “Good. Let’s get the stove going and make sure we’re stocked up on firewood. We’ll need to conserve our energy and stay warm.”

2

MIRREN

Lieutenant Mirren Reed had never believed that she would one day join the Air Force.

She grew up and lived a quiet life in Seattle, excelling in her studies all throughout her youth and developing a fascination with weather and the natural world from a young age. Her parents and her teachers believed it had to have been her calling, some divine purpose instilled into her from a higher power at birth. It eventually led her to pursue a degree in meteorology, where she studied hard, acquired internship after internship, dedicated hours to part-time and volunteer work, and later graduated with honours. She hadn’t yet decided where she wanted to end up when a special letter from the Air Force changed everything.

Her skills in weather prediction quickly made her an asset, and she was one of the strong reasons for the success of many of the missions upon which she’d worked. She’d moved up the ranks exceptionally fast for her young age, earning great respect from all of those who commanded her and worked alongside her. Mirren had quickly grown to love her military career. Over the years, the Air Force quickly became a second home to her.

She glanced up from her weather reports, her mind an aching whirlwind of calculations and predictions. Outside, the sun hung low in the darkening sky, casting long bronze shadows across the tapestry of mountains surrounding Fort Resolute. The relentless cold seemed to seep through the walls, a constant annoying reminder of where they were—on the edge of the world, it felt like.

Two days ago, Mirren had been on a temporary break following the success of a major mission, back home in Seattle having a delicious homemade dinner with her parents. Unexpectedly, she had gotten a call from her superiors, who shared with her that she had received a formal request from a Captain Sawyer Berkeley to use her weather knowledge to help aid training mission. It was last minute, but Mirren couldn't help but accept. Someone had put in a formal request for her? How could she decline? And so, Mirren had found herself here, on the edge of the world.

In the day full of traveled that followed, Mirren had done a bit of research into this woman who'd specifically asked for her aid for the mission. She'd heard stories about the name before, some whispered with awe, others with the kind of respect reserved for those who'd seen too much and had survived to speak about it. The more she investigated it, the more she'd learned that the seasoned Army Ranger had a reputation that preceded her, one of discipline, unbreaking focus, and an intimidating competence. It was surreal that same Captain Berkeley had put in a special request for her, and only her.

The practical part of her brain reminded her that this was simply a mission, a task for which she was trained, but a deeper, more primal part of her couldn't ignore the flicker of excitement. This was a chance to prove her value to someone she instinctively respected—and, if she was being honest with herself, someone she was deeply intrigued by.

She'd been here for almost two days now, working hard to provide the information for which she was sought out. She took a break from her work temporarily to have a

brief dinner in the dining hall, and then washed away the exhaustion of the day with a quick shower before shortly returning to the control room to put in evening hours.

A sigh escaped her lips as her laptop lagged, introducing her to a temporary black screen into which she was forced to look at her reflection: dark hair pulled back into a tight braid, blue eyes sharp with focus, her expression as calm as always. But beneath that practiced composure, there was something else—an anticipation that tugged at the edges of her resolve. She frowned slightly, pushing those thoughts aside. This was a mission, nothing more. She couldn't get ahead of herself here.

A couple of her peers walked to her side and began to inquire about the information she had already gathered, but barely minutes into their conversation, the thudding of boots sounded from behind the women, and the two men at her side paused their speech to look behind her.

Mirren's heart skipped a beat as she turned to address the figure behind her, knowing it was none other than Sawyer herself even before she met the captain's emerald eyes. Her breath caught slightly as the woman approached, the captain's presence as strong as the icy winds whipping around them.

Sawyer looked up, their eyes locking for a brief moment. Mirren felt a jolt of something she couldn't quite name—a strange blend of admiration and something deeper, something she knew she had no right to feel.

“Captain Berkeley,” Mirren straightened and greeted her with a smart salute.. She wanted to say more, wanted to express just how excited she was to be here, and how honoured she was to have been chosen, but instead kept her lips sealed, allowing Sawyer to have full navigation of the conversation.

“We're scheduled to leave in fifteen minutes. I trust you're ready?” the captain asked. When Mirren had confirmed, daring to add a little touch of humor, she added, “Good.

Meet me outside when you're ready." Mirren hadn't gotten the chance to utter another word before Sawyer had already turned on her heel and disappeared out of the control room, leaving Mirren feeling so winded with awe it was as if she'd been kicked hard in the gut.

Focus, Mirren, she told herself as she struggled to push away the feelings of admiration before she nearly sprang out of the room and prepared to get ready.

Five minutes later, Mirren climbed into the passenger seat of the Humvee, the heavy tires crunching over the frozen ground as they set off toward Icebreaker Station. The vehicle's interior was cramped, the scent of leather and metal filling the air.

Mirren could feel the warmth of Sawyer's body next to her despite the layers of clothing between them. The proximity was distracting, and she had to force herself to focus on the mission ahead, on the snow-covered landscape stretching out before them. She so badly wanted to break the silence, to pick Sawyer's mind and find out everything about her. To learn more about who the woman was, where she came from, what some of her missions were like, if the rumors about her brutal efficiency were all true. Ultimately, however, she kept her mouth shut, only speaking when she was asked about any of the data she had already collected.

The terrain was unforgiving, a desolate expanse of white that seemed to go on forever. Snow drifts and jagged ice formations dotted the landscape, the harsh beauty of the Arctic both captivating and deadly. The vehicle jolted as it hit a patch of rough ground, and Mirren instinctively reached out to steady herself, her hand brushing against Sawyer's arm. The contact was brief, but it sent a surge of warmth through her, a stark contrast to the cold seeping through the vehicle's windows.

Almost hopeful, Mirren snuck a glance over at Sawyer, but it seemed the moment had gone unnoticed to the captain. That, or Sawyer had pretended it didn't happen.

After a long ride mostly in silent, the vehicle came to a halt in front of the outpost, the two women grabbing their gear and heading inside. Mirren stayed close behind Sawyer, watching as the older woman made her way hastily inside and immediately began to check her surroundings, while she headed for the kitchen table in the center of the room and set her instruments up there. She cracked open her laptop and launched her programs, but she couldn't focus on the screen, her icy blue eyes instead spectating Sawyer as she moved around the room, disguising herself by keeping her head low and close to her laptop.

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Sawyer moved with such focus, such grace, that Mirren struggled not to sit back and admire her. She started with the stove, then the walls of the outpost, then checked the supplies, finally ending with the bunk beds. A fleeting thought crossed Mirren's mind of her and Sawyer tucked under those sheets, and she had to physically shake her head to get rid of it.

“How many times have you been here?” Mirren perked up, partially out of curiosity and partially to help rid that thought from her mind completely. Even though Sawyer didn't seem like the kind of person for small talk, she still responded, albeit shortly. In an effort to break the woman out of her shell more, Mirren added, “You must have been the obvious choice then for leading this mission, then. Your experience matched with your skillset makes you overly qualified.”

It must have worked too, even just a little bit, as Mirren watched Sawyer pause slightly before she answered. Mirren tucked her head back in her laptop screen just in time to hide a small smirk.

Around fifteen minutes later, Sawyer broke the silence. “Everything looks good on my end. How about you?”

Everything looks good... Mirren thought as she looked up at Sawyer, then immediately cleared her throat as she fixed her gaze back on her screen. “The weather is holding steady for now,” she replied, before a grim look flashed across her gaze. “But... It looks like there's a significant drop in pressure that suggests the storm is intensifying. We may have to be prepared for it to hit sooner rather than later.”

“How soon?”

“It’s... hard to say for certain,” Mirren continued, “but I’d estimate we have a few hours, maybe three at most, before it reaches full strength.”

“Shit. That doesn’t give us much time.” Sawyer looked around, and Mirren used the woman’s temporarily distraction to scan up and down her frame. Sawyer was tall, muscular, with a few faint scars decorating her collarbone and short brown hair framing a very attractive face.

Mirren looked back down at her data, which showed evidence of a severe oncoming storm. It was supposed to be nothing more than a short trip to the outpost, here and back, but now it seemed that it would be dangerous to try to head back to the base. “I think it might be best if we stay the night,” Mirren finally said. It was their best option, but she couldn’t help but think of the opportunity it would give her to possibly learn more about Sawyer.

Sawyer paused, but eventually voiced her agreement, prompting Mirren to continue. “I’ve already started gathering data on the storm’s trajectory. We should have enough information to make an informed decision by the time it arrives.”

“Good,” Sawyer replied. “Let’s get the stove going and make sure we’re stocked up on firewood. We’ll need to conserve our energy and stay warm.”

Mirren nodded in agreement, and together they set to work. The silence between them was companionable now, a shared understanding that didn’t require words. They worked efficiently, stocking the woodpile, checking the water supply, and setting up a makeshift command center on the table.

Mirren tried her best to remain focused, but Sawyer’s presence in the room was so thick it was borderline intoxicating, and it was hard to keep her eyes averted. No

matter how much she tried to deny it, it wasn't just admiration or respect that drew her to Sawyer, but something visceral and raw. Despite her considerably welcoming exterior, Mirren had never been one to form attachments easily, having been more introverted throughout her entire life. She had never been one to form attachments easily— not that her life in the Air Force really allowed for it—but there was something about Sawyer that made her want to know more, to understand the woman behind the stoic exterior.

But now wasn't the time to dwell on such thoughts. The storm was coming, and they needed to be ready.

Once the fire was going and the room had started to warm, Sawyer walked over to the table, placing her rucksack on the surface and fishing through it. The flickering light cast long shadows across the room, the only movement in the stillness. Mirren cracked her knuckles, her cold fingers finding temporary warmth in her palms, her eyes sneaking peeks to Sawyer across from her. The captain didn't have much space on the table due to her instruments scattered about, so Mirren thought to move some of her belongings out of the way.

“Here, let me—” Mirren began, reaching out to drag some of her wires out of the way just as Sawyer went to do the something, their hands making contact. Everything around them suddenly crackled between them.

The wind howled around them outside, the cold biting into her skin, the warmth of the fire barely beginning to take over, but all Mirren could focus on was the warmth of Sawyer's hand, the connection that had sparked between them in that brief touch. It was as if time had slowed, the storm and the mission fading into the background as something deeper, more primal, took over.

As Mirren lifted her eyes, she noticed that there was a vulnerability in Sawyer's gaze, a crack in the armor she so carefully maintained, and it was enough to make Mirren's

breath catch in her throat. She parted her lips. She wanted to say something, anything at all, but her voice seemed to be suddenly lost.

But just as quickly as it had happened, the moment passed. Sawyer pulled her hand back, the sudden, comforting warmth on Mirren's hand quickly taken away. The captain's expression was unreadable as she resumed checking her gear. Mirren did the same, pulling some of her belongings back and putting away what she didn't need, though her mind was still reeling from what had just occurred. She forced herself to focus, to push aside the thoughts that threatened to distract her, but it was easier said than done. The memory of that touch lingered, and the throbbing of her heart in her chest didn't make it any easier.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Sawyer left the kitchen table to take a seat at the chair in front of the wood oven, palms stretched out to soak up the warmth. The crackling of the fire was the only sound amidst the tension between them. Not an uncomfortable tension, but it was there, so palpable Mirren could taste it.

Finally, it was Mirren who, after clearing her throat, daringly broke the silence. "You're not what I expected, Captain," she said softly, her voice thoughtful. Her heart pattered heavily in her chest as she anxiously awaited her response.

Sawyer glanced at her, one eyebrow raised. "What did you expect?"

Mirren's lips curved into a small smile. "I'm not sure, exactly. I've heard about you, of course—everyone on base knows who you are. But meeting you in person...you're different."

Sawyer tilted her head slightly, and the intrigue written across her features evoked a feeling of excitement in Mirren. "Different how?"

Mirren looked at her, blue eyes sharp and discerning. "More human. More...aware."

I've met a lot of people who are good at their jobs, but they often lose sight of the bigger picture. You don't seem like someone who would make that mistake."

Sawyer considered that for a moment, and Mirren internally lashed herself for her words, fearing that she may've overstepped a very obvious boundary. But Sawyer didn't take it in any negative light. She simply didn't know how to respond. She wasn't used to being seen in that way—most people only saw the uniform, the rank, the responsibilities. She'd become accustomed to it, even embraced it, because it made her job easier. But Mirren's words touched on something deeper, something she rarely let herself acknowledge.

"I do my best," she said finally, her tone even. She had the urge to say more, but no words come to mind.

Mirren nodded, and then smiled again, this time wider and more sweet than amused. "It's a rare quality. And it's why I think we'll get through this just fine."

Sawyer gave a small, almost imperceptible nod in return. The wind outside howled louder, the first real sign that the storm was closing in. The walls of the outpost creaked under the pressure, but the building held firm. The storm was soon to come.

With everything secure, the pair settled in for the long wait. The wood-burning stove provided some warmth, but not enough for the women to peel out of their layers. The air was still cold, their breaths visible in the dim light. While Sawyer kept close to the oven, Mirren remained at the table, letting out a sigh as she watched the charts on her screen light up violently, proof of the worsening weather. For the last almost two hours now that they'd sat in silence, Mirren had been unable to focus. Her mind still raced from her and Sawyer's interactions earlier.

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She lifted her eyes and watched Sawyer moved to the stove, adding a couple of logs to the fire. The flickering light cast shadows across her face, highlighting the strong lines of her jaw, her cheekbones, the intensity of her emerald hues. Once again, Mirren found herself watching her, unable to look away as the captain worked. There was something mesmerizing about the way Sawyer moved, every action precise and purposeful, as if she was always in control, always one step ahead.

The minutes ticked by and the silence between them grew heavier, the unspoken tension almost palpable. Mirren could feel her heart pounding in her chest, her thoughts a chaotic swirl of emotions she couldn't fully understand. She'd never been one to shy away from difficult situations, but this was different. This was personal in a way that nothing else ever had been, and it scared her.

Finally, Sawyer turned to face her, breaking the silence. "We'll be here for a while. Might as well make ourselves comfortable."

Mirren nodded, though she wasn't sure how comfortable she could be in this situation. The tension between them was like a coiled spring ready to snap at any moment, and she wasn't sure what would happen if it did.

Nevertheless, Mirren stood to her feet, letting out a light groan as she lifted her arms into the air and stretched them. She closed her eyes as she did so, missing Sawyer glancing in her direction as her layers lifted and revealed her toned stomach. Mirren walked over a few seconds later, lowering herself in the wooden chair directly across from her captain, their knees almost touching in the cramped space.

They made eye contact, and for a moment they just looked at each other, the air

between them thick with unspoken words. Mirren's pulse quickened, her breath catching in her throat as she waited for Sawyer to speak.

But when the captain finally did, her voice was calm, steady, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. "You did well today, Lieutenant. Your assessment was spot on."

Mirren blinked, surprised by the compliment. She hadn't expected Sawyer to say anything like that, especially not in this situation. "Thank you, Captain," she replied, her voice a little shakier than she'd intended.

Sawyer's gaze softened slightly, and for a moment, Mirren thought she saw a hint of something more in those green eyes—something vulnerable, something that mirrored the turmoil she was feeling inside. But just as quickly it was gone, replaced by the calm, controlled demeanor she had come to expect from the captain.

They lapsed into silence again, the tension between them growing with each passing second. Mirren could feel it, a pull that seemed to draw her closer to Sawyer despite the voice in her head telling her to keep her distance. It was an attraction she couldn't ignore, no matter how hard she tried, and it was growing stronger with every moment they spent together.

Finally, unable to stand the silence any longer, Mirren spoke. "This storm...it's worse than I expected. We may be here for a while."

Sawyer nodded, her expression serious. "It's not ideal, but we'll manage. I've faced worse."

Mirren knew she was right, but it didn't make the situation any easier to deal with. Being trapped in the outpost with Sawyer with no escape from the tension that hung between them was both exhilarating and terrifying.

She had always prided herself on her self-control, on her ability to remain calm and composed in any situation, but this...it was different. This was something she hadn't prepared for, and it was throwing her off balance in a way she'd never before experienced. She didn't know whether to be nervous or excited.

Sawyer seemed to sense her unease, and for a moment, the captain's expression softened. "We'll get through this, Mirren," she said quietly. "You're stronger than you think."

The use of her first name sprouted a new feeling in her stomach that spread out and fluttered all across her body. The use of her name, the gentleness in Sawyer's voice, it all sent heat to Mirren's cheeks that she desperately tried to hide, though she knew she failed. It was a rare glimpse of the woman beneath the soldier, and it made her heart ache with something she couldn't quite define, knowing that she had broken through a layer that many before her had no luck with. She wanted to reach out, to bridge the gap between them, but she knew she couldn't. Not here, not now.

Instead, she nodded, trying to steady her breathing. "I know we will," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

3

SAWYER

Time passed ever so slowly now that everything was in order. There was nothing left for Sawyer to set up or prepare, and there was no information Mirren had to gather about the storm they could feel worsening. They sat gathered around the stove, the warmth slowly beginning to seep into the room with every minute that passed.

It had been close to an hour since either of them had spoke, the only sound being the crackling of the fire and the howling winds outside. Sawyer's eyebrows knit together

as she peered out the window, watching the trees sway viciously, the heavy snowfall pounding against the glass.

She looked back at the flames, reaching forward to tend to it with the stoker, quickly finding herself lost in thought. She had been in situations like this before—isolated, cut off from the rest of the world—but this felt different. The tension between the pair was unmistakable.

Almost another half hour had passed before Mirren finally broke the silence. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Captain.” She spoke in a soft voice.

Sawyer’s gaze shifted to Mirren, the firelight casting shadows across her face. Mirren lifted her head to meet her gaze. “And what have you heard?”

Mirren hesitated, her fingers playing with a loose thread on her sleeve. “That you’re one of the best. That there’s no one better when it comes to these kinds of operations.”

Sawyer felt a flush of pride at the compliment, but she kept her expression neutral. “I have a lot of experience.”

Mirren huffed the tiniest of giggles, nodding. “I can see why. You’re...impressive, Captain.”

Sawyer’s heart skipped a beat at the sincerity in Mirren’s voice, but she quickly tamped down the feeling. This wasn’t the time or place for anything beyond professionalism. “Thank you, Lieutenant. You’ve done good work here, too.”

Mirren’s smile faltered, the sudden switch from Sawyer using her real name back to her title slicing through her like a blade. It frustrated her that something so small had such a great effect. “I’m just doing my job.”

There was another pause, quiet filling the room once again, only barely fractured by the crackling of the flames and the distant roar of the wind. Sawyer wanted to say something, anything to dispel the tension, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, she found herself staring at Mirren, at the way her fingers played with the edges of her sleeve, at the way the firelight danced in her eyes, the way her lips curved into a smile. It was at that moment that Sawyer quickly discovered what the core of her feelings were—attraction.

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Sawyer wasn't really one for any kind of attraction. An introverted person since childhood, she had spent her entire life and career keeping her emotions in check, never allowing herself to get too close to anyone, let alone enough to form any kind of bond or relationship. But here, in this isolated outpost, in the warmth of the fire and Mirren's presence while a vicious storm raged outside, it was becoming harder to ignore and even harder to resist. Mirren lulled her with a strange sense of security, a feeling that was as dangerous as Sawyer's attraction for her.

The lieutenant must have sensed the shift in the air because she stood to her feet all of the sudden and brushed off her hands. "I should check the weather data," she said, her voice a little too quick, a little too forced, matching the look of conflict in her eyes. "Those winds are getting strong. It's beginning to worry me."

Sawyer nodded, grateful for the reprieve. "Good idea. We need to know what we're up against."

She stayed in her seat and watched as Mirren moved to the small table where she had set up her equipment, her back to Sawyer as she busied herself with the weather instruments. Sawyer watched her for a moment, her mind churning. She needed to regain control, to focus on the mission and not on the way Mirren's presence made her heart race.

She stood, moving to the other side of the room to busy herself with the map of the area. The outpost was just a small dot on the vast expanse of the Arctic wilderness, surrounded by mountains and ice fields. The terrain was unforgiving, and the storm that was approaching would only make it more treacherous.

“Looks like the storm’s going to hit sooner than expected,” Mirren said.

Sawyer looked up from the map, meeting Mirren’s gaze. There was a seriousness in her eyes that mirrored her own. “How soon?”

“Within the next few hours. It’s going to be intense—a lot of snow, high winds, and temperatures dropping even further. We’re in for a rough night.”

Sawyer nodded, feeling the weight of the situation settle on her shoulders. “We’ll be ready.”

Mirren smiled, a hint of tension still lingering in the curve of her lips. “We’ll manage. We’re well prepared.”

Sawyer returned the smile, albeit briefly, before turning her attention back to the map. The storm would complicate things, but Mirren was right. They were prepared. They had to be. But as she traced the routes and marked potential hazards, she couldn’t shake the feeling that the real storm was brewing not outside the outpost but within its walls.

Behind her, the fire crackled softly. Outside, the wind howled louder each minute that passed, as if it were a warning of the vicious storm to come. Sawyer let out a sigh and steeled herself. The storm would come, and perhaps it would be severe, but it would pass. She had experienced enough horrific storms out here to know that no matter how bad they got, they always passed. They’d stay here in the safety of the outpost for however long it took before they returned to base and were able to begin the training mission.

But no matter how much she tried to focus on the storm or the training or anything else, her mind always shifted back to Mirren. She shifted back to the image of Mirren sitting in front of the fire’s glow, the way lights danced across her perfect, pretty

features. The way her eyes creased as she smiled and how her mouth moved when she talked. The blush of her cheeks. Her soft lips.

No matter how much Sawyer tried to battle her feelings, they always returned stronger, deadlier, taking over her body and mind entirely to the point where she could no longer deny their existence. Something had shifted between them, something that couldn't be ignored forever.

As the night closed in, the storm began to build in earnest, the winds rattling the walls of the outpost and the snow piling up outside. Inside, the warmth of the fire contrasted sharply with the cold tension that had settled between Sawyer and Mirren. They were both professionals, both dedicated to their duties, but there was no denying that they were also human with all the vulnerabilities and desires that came with that.

Sawyer laid down on one of the bunks, staring up at the ceiling as she listened to the storm outside. She had changed out of her uniform gear and had opted for a thick jacket instead, also adding another long-sleeved shirt to her multiple layers.

She could hear Mirren moving about quietly, her soft steps muffled by the thick carpet of snow outside. Sawyer rolled onto her side, staring into the darkness. The warmth of the fire was a welcome relief, but it did little to quell the freezing temperatures outside, let alone the conundrum of emotions stirring within her.

The storm grew fiercer as the night progressed. The wind battered the walls of the outpost, and the thudding against the door signaled the snow piling up in ever-increasing drifts. Sawyer could hear the occasional creak of the building, and despite the reassurance of the sturdy construction, the noise was unnerving. It was predicted the storm would be quite horrific, but every moment that passed made her realize it was going to be much worse than what they'd originally thought.

Mirren emerged from the small work area and let out a deep sigh as she neared the heat of the stove. She stood there for a few moments to collect as much warmth as possible before she moved to one of the bunks, her gaze falling on Sawyer. “The storm’s getting worse,” she said, her voice barely audible over the wind’s roar. “We should try to get some rest while we can.”

Sawyer nodded, pushing herself up on her elbows. “Agreed. We’ll need to be well-rested for tomorrow. The training will be intense, and we have to be ready for anything.”

Mirren smiled, though it was tinged with a hint of exhaustion. “I’m not so sure we’ll be able to hold training,” she said. “It’s pretty bad out there.”

Sawyer watched her. There was something reassuring about Mirren’s presence, despite the tension that lingered between them. “We’ll see,” Sawyer said firmly. “Maybe it’ll clear up by morning.”

While Mirren looked doubtful, especially with the data she’d recently perused, she didn’t say anything in response. Sawyer watched as she settled into her respective bunk in front of hers, the dimly lit room making it hard to make out the woman’s expressions. Sawyer put her head down on her pillow and tried to return her focus on the tasks ahead and on the mission, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Mirren. The subtle attraction she felt was hard to ignore, especially in the quiet of the night, away from the distractions of their day-to-day lives.

Within minutes, Mirren’s breathing grew steady, a sign that she had fallen asleep. Sawyer laid there, eyes open, staring into the darkness. Again, she tried to push her thoughts aside, to focus on the mission, but it was difficult. Eventually, Sawyer gave up her efforts and instead finally allowed herself to close her eyes, trying to force her mind into a more peaceful state. She could still feel the weight of Mirren’s gaze, the lingering touch of their hands earlier. It was the touch that had sparked something

inside her she couldn't easily dismiss.

Not too long after, Sawyer finally drifted off with a sense of unease, both about the storm outside and the one brewing within her.

The next morning arrived with the harsh light of dawn breaking through the small windows of the outpost. Sawyer woke to find the storm still raging, the wind howling and the snow continuing to fall in heavy, relentless sheets. She rose from her bunk, stretching and trying to shake off the remnants of her restless sleep.

Mirren was already up, working on her weather equipment and taking readings. Her movements were methodical as she switched between pacing across the floor and typing furiously at her laptop. Sawyer admired her dedication, but she couldn't ignore the pang of attraction that still lingered.

"Morning, Lieutenant," Sawyer said, her voice rough from sleep.

Mirren looked up, offering a sleepy but sweet smile. "Good morning, Captain," she replied. "As I thought, the storm hasn't let up much, but the charts show that it should peak soon. We may see a brief pause before it starts up again."

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Sawyer nodded, pulling on her cold-weather gear to prepare for the day's tasks. "Let's make sure everything is set up in case we're able to hold training."

Mirren continued her readings as Sawyer took a seat at the table in front of her. They worked together in silence, preparing for the day's activities and ensuring that everything was in order. The storm outside continued its relentless assault, but within the outpost, they found peace and rhythm within their work.

As they finished their preparations, Sawyer found herself stealing glances at Mirren. The feelings of attraction began to resurface as her eyes traced the curves of every inch of the woman's face. Sawyer, however, mentally cursed herself and forced herself to remain focused, to keep her emotions in check. This was no time for distractions, even though Mirren's presence was making it impossible.

Sawyer was here to lead, to ensure that the mission went smoothly, and she couldn't afford to let anything—or anyone—get in her way. She took a deep breath, trying to push her feelings aside and focus on the tasks at hand.

"I'm going to check over the equipment and see if I can get a signal to reach out to base," Sawyer said, her voice steady and professional.

Mirren nodded, her expression serious. "Sounds good. I'll double check the weather data and make sure we're prepared for any changes."

They worked together, moving with a shared sense of purpose. Despite the challenges outside, there was a sense of camaraderie that had developed between them. Perhaps the two of them being stuck in this outpost together wouldn't be so difficult after all.

The day wore on, with Sawyer spending quite a bit of time outside gathering more firewood and trying to clear up the snow blocking the outpost, while Mirren stayed inside and watched her tablet for any changes. The storm outside showed no signs of letting up, and Sawyer couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. It was almost as if the harsh conditions were testing them, pushing them to their limits, trying to see if the two of them would make it out with each other's help.

When sunset came, it had felt as if the day had gone by all too fast as the two women finished their preparations and took a moment to rest, Sawyer cooking their prepped meals in the wood oven, the fire crackling softly as it heated up their meal of fish and potatoes. The room was warm and inviting, a stark contrast to the harshness of the storm outside. The two women settled in the chairs in front of the fire, hungrily shoveling the hot food into their mouths.

"This is going to be one hell of a training mission," Mirren said, breaking the silence. When Sawyer met her eyes, Mirren let out a small laugh. The likelihood of the training mission proceeding anytime soon seemed highly improbable due to the fact the storm was only getting worse by the minute.

Sawyer couldn't help but smirk just slightly, one of the few instances she dared to let any real emotion show. "Yes, it will be."

Mirren scooped a potato into her mouth, her eyes never leaving Sawyer. "It's a shame," she said, tilting her head as she swallowed her food. "It would have been a hell of a time with you leading."

Sawyer felt a pang in her chest at Mirren's words, one she struggled to push aside. The younger woman hadn't been shy at all in showing admiration and respect for her. It made her experience all sorts of confusing feelings—gratitude, nervousness, and intensifying attraction. Feelings she all forced to the side as she grabbed her plate and stood to her feet, stretching her muscles.

“Let’s get some rest,” Sawyer said, ignoring the feelings bubbling in with her. “If the storm doesn’t ease up by the morning, we may have to return to base.”

Mirren nodded. For a second there seemed to be something akin to defeat glistening in her eyes, probably from Sawyer ignoring her compliment instead of acknowledging it. She yawned as she rose from her seat. “Good idea.”

As they settled down for the night, Sawyer found her mind swirling with different thoughts, her body riddled with different emotions. She lay down on her bunk, the warmth of the fire and the steady rhythm of Mirren’s breathing providing a sense of comfort. There was no telling how much longer they would be there. The storm outside howled violently, heavy snowfall pelting against the windows. But she found solace in the tension easing between she and Mirren. She could even bring herself to admit that she liked the company.

4

MIRREN

The blizzard outside raged with a furious intensity, snowflakes swirling in chaotic patterns as if the sky itself had torn open. Inside the outpost, Sawyer and Mirren struggled against the encroaching cold, the blazing fire and their many layers doing little to battle the cold. Their breaths fogged the air as they stood in front of the fire, desperately trying their hardest to cling onto as much warmth as they could get.

Sawyer had left to try to get a signal outside, but she returned nearly ten minutes later, shivering violently with a grim look on her face. Concerned flashed across Mirren’s narrowed eyes as she asked, “Any luck?”

The captain shook her head as she took a seat at the chair next to Mirren. “I’m not getting any signal. The Humvee’s is still intact, but the weather is getting so bad I’m

not sure when we will get to use it.”

Mirren peered out the small grimy window into the storm. Visibility had been reduced to mere feet, the whiteout consuming the world outside. Her heart raced with a mix of anxiety and urgency as she turned to check the condition of the outpost’s supplies, starting with her rucksack and moving onto the many shelves. They still had tons of supplies, but if they ended up stuck here longer than they’d anticipated, there was no telling how long they would last.

The reality of their situation had become starkly clear—this was no ordinary storm.

“Captain, we have a problem,” Mirren said moments later after she’d shifted from checking the supplies to her tablet, her voice resolute despite the tension coiling in her chest. “The storm is significantly worse than we anticipated. It’s moving in faster and more aggressively.” She looked up from the screen. “We need to return to Fort Resolute immediately.”

Sawyer looked up from the fire, her green eyes narrowing as she took in Mirren’s serious expression. The captain’s usually composed demeanor was strained, a few strands of her brunette hair still damp from the frosty outdoors. “Are you sure about this?” she asked, her voice carrying a hint of concern. She didn’t ask the question with doubt but wanted to ensure that Mirren was certain. It was a long journey back. If they got stuck, they’d be in deep trouble.

Mirren nodded quickly. “I’m certain. We have to take the chance now. If we wait any longer, we may not make it.”

Sawyer didn’t hesitate to jolt up from her seat after those words. The two women immediately got to work, shoving their belongings back into their rucksacks and packing any extra supplies they might need for the journey. Despite the discomfort it brought, Sawyer shoved on another shirt to help layer against the icy winds. “Add an

extra layer if you can,” she said as she turned around and looked at Mirren, who nodded. The captain stepped away to give her privacy, but from the corner of her eye she could still see the woman as she put on another layer, her clothes shifting to expose bits of pale flesh in the meantime. Heat rose to Sawyer’s cheeks, and she immediately averted her gaze.

The storm pelted their faces the second they pushed through the door, the heavy, violent snowfall practically blinding them as they made their way toward the Humvee. The thick layer of snow on the ground made it nearly impossible to navigate, and their steady breaths quickly shifted into exhausted pants as they struggled to push through the snow. It took nearly a few minutes for the pair to finally reach the Humvee, both women thrusting their bodies inside and sighing theatrically out of sheer exhaustion the second their butts hit the seats.

Sawyer attempted to start the engine. It started, then suddenly, to their dismay, it stalled. Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see Mirren’s eyes widen, but she ignored it as she tried the engine again. Once more, the engine stalled.

“Fuck,” Sawyer cursed, gritting her teeth. “It won’t start. The engine’s completely frozen.”

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Mirren groaned in response, then turned to look through the back window of the vehicle. “Even if it had started, I don’t know if we would’ve made it back.”

Sawyer turned around to glance out the back window, dread seeping into her pores at the realization. The snowfall was so heavy and blinding, the snow on the ground so thick, that they couldn’t see more than a couple of yards behind them, let alone see the road they’d taken to get here. Their surroundings seemed to blend together in a perfect, chilling white blur.

Sawyer’s jaw clenched as she faced forward, the gravity of their situation settling over her like the weight of the storm itself. “We’re stuck here, then,” she said, undoing her seatbelt. A few moments of frustrating silence passed before she added, “Let’s go back inside. We’ll have to ride this out and hope for the best.”

The two took a breath before they exited the vehicle moments later, the reality of being stranded at the outpost hitting them both with an unsettling finality. The storm wasn’t just a temporary inconvenience; it was now a powerful force that had severed their connection to safety back at the base.

They couldn’t get in contact with anyone back at the base. They couldn’t drive back. Hiking back wasn’t even an option.

The small, isolated outpost, once a temporary checkpoint, had become their refuge—and their prison.

The wind howled and the snow battered the outpost’s walls with relentless force as Sawyer and Mirren ventured inside once more, shutting the door forcefully behind

them. The door creaked violently, the wind threatening to break through, which inspired Sawyer to throw her belongings to the ground and push one of the dressers in front of the door to keep it in place.

Mirren made her way to the fire they'd just doused while Sawyer quickly unpacked their belongings, shivering violently as she did so. Halfway through, she eventually abandoned all efforts and made her way over to help tend to the fire, aiding it to return to its original strength.

"Come closer," Mirren quivered through shaky breaths, pulling her chair so it sat directly in front of the fire, perhaps a tad too close.

Sawyer didn't say a word as she inched her chair closer to the fire, as well, the old wood whining in protest as she pulled it to a stop directly next to Mirren's, their chairs practically touching. Their breaths mingled in the frigid air, creating small clouds that dissipated quickly. For a long moment their focus remained on the fire before eventually they exchanged looks with one another, each glance between them punctuated by a shared, unspoken understanding of the severity of their situation.

"We have to make sure all the windows are tightly sealed," Sawyer murmured minutes later. "We may have to put something else in front of the door to help reinforce it. We can't afford to lose any heat."

Mirren nodded, peering upward and scanning the windows for any gaps that might let in the cold. "I think I'll tape around the edges just to be safe. And I'll keep an eye on the stove to ensure it stays operational."

The outpost's interior, while a small relief from the storm's intensity, was far from comfortable. The wood stove crackled weakly in front of them, its warmth barely sufficient to fend off the violent chill. The small space felt even more cramped with the addition of their equipment and supplies, forcing them into an intimate proximity

that neither could ignore.

Sawyer glanced to her right to meet Mirren's eyes. The space between them was so cramped that they could practically feel one another's breaths brushing their faces. Through their shared struggle, the tension and connection between the two of them became increasingly palpable.

Sawyer's gaze dropped to Mirren's lips, just barely, before lifting to meet her eyes. The attraction for the younger woman that had once simmered beneath the surface was now more pronounced, fueled by the isolation, their proximity, and now their unintentional closeness to one another. The captain couldn't help but put full focus on admiring the woman's beauty. She was gorgeous, and being this close to her gave her the opportunity to really take a moment to appreciate it. Faint freckles decorated Mirren's nose and cheeks, barely visible against the violent blushing of her cheeks.

"So, what do you think the chances are of the storm letting up soon?" Sawyer asked, trying to keep her tone light despite the undercurrent of tension.

Mirren shook her head, her expression grave. "I-I don't know..." She trailed off, seemingly distracted by their closeness. "The, um, forecasts suggest it could last several days. We may be in for the long haul."

Sawyer clenched her jaw. They were isolated with no way to communicate with the outside world and no immediate prospects for rescue. And they had no clue how long it would be like this.

Silence overtook them as they both faced forward toward the fire. The silence between them was comfortable at first. The pair sat without speaking for a while, before Mirren parted to switch between her instruments in attempt to collect more data before they lost connection. Mirren frustratingly switched between each of her devices, all of them struggling to maintain their connections. About an hour passed

before she watched Sawyer rise from her seat in front of the fire and begin to unpack the rest of their things.

Hours passed before the two women found themselves in front of the fireplace once more, sitting side by side, plates of food in their hands. Tonight's menu consisted of brown rice and pieces of steak and broccoli, which would have been rather enjoyable if it hadn't been for their circumstances.

After their meal, Mirren was the first to break the silence, her voice soft but steady. "You ever been caught in a storm like this before?"

Sawyer glanced up, her green eyes meeting Mirren's. "A few times," she replied. "But nothing quite like this. It's one of those things you can never fully prepare for, no matter how many times you go through it."

Mirren nodded, her gaze dropping to the flickering flames. "I've always loved the weather—studying it, predicting it. But being out here in the middle of something like this...it's different. It's not just data or charts—it's real, and it's terrifying."

Sawyer leaned back in her chair studying Mirren's profile as the firelight played across her features. "You're handling it well, though. I've seen soldiers fall apart in less severe conditions."

Mirren smiled faintly, a hint of gratitude in her eyes. "Thanks. But I think a lot of it has to do with who you're with. I know I'm in good hands." She couldn't help herself, couldn't bite her tongue from sharing her adoration for the woman. She watched Sawyer's eyes carefully after her words, watching as the emerald hues held a flicker of what seemed to be shyness before being replaced by her normal neutral look.

The words hung in the air between them, the simple statement carrying more weight

than either had intended. Sawyer shifted in her seat, the tension that had simmered beneath the surface all day now crackling between them like the fire.

“You’re a good soldier, Mirren,” Sawyer said quietly, moments later, her voice rougher than she intended. “And I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Mirren looked up, her blue eyes locking onto Sawyer’s. Her heart throbbed so violently against her chest she feared it might burst through her ribcage. Was Sawyer... complimenting her? Had the captain herself really just said she was grateful Mirren was there in her?

There was something in the captain’s gaze—something vulnerable, almost hesitant—that sent a shiver down Mirren’s spine, and gathered a pool of heat in her crotch. The distance between them felt like both too much and not enough, the small space of the outpost suddenly feeling even smaller.

Mirren licked her lips, struggling to find her voice. She suddenly stood up, moving closer to the stove under the pretense of checking the fire. “It’s getting colder,” she murmured, more to herself than to Sawyer.

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Sawyer rose as well, stepping beside her, their shoulders almost touching. The heat from the fire radiated against their faces, but it did little to ease the chill that had settled between them.

“You think we’ll be okay here?” Sawyer asked. “You know...will the weather become dangerous?”

Mirren hesitated, her eyes flicking to Sawyer’s lips before she could stop herself. “We’ll manage,” she said, but there was an edge to her voice, a nervousness that hadn’t been there before. The captain’s stare was as intense as her presence, and the woman’s tall, muscular frame was so close to her.

The air between them grew thick. They returned their focus to the fire, but their eyes inevitably met once more. This time, neither of them managed to say a word as they held each others stare. The wind outside howled violently.

Mirren turned to face Sawyer fully, their bodies almost touching now. The firelight cast a warm glow on Sawyer’s features, highlighting the lines of her strong jaw, the intensity in her green eyes. Mirren felt her pulse quicken, the distance between them shrinking by the second. Desire trickled into her bloodstream, and she couldn’t contain it. Her hand burned with the desire to cup Sawyer’s face, to rest her rough fingertips alongside the edges of the older woman’s cheekbones, to trace her lips with her thumb.

“I—” Mirren started to speak, but the words caught in her throat as Sawyer took a step closer, their faces mere inches apart.

For a moment, neither of them moved, the air charged with a tension so thick it was almost suffocating. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire and the relentless howl of the storm outside.

Suddenly, Mirren lost all control of herself. She lifted her hand, her fingers brushing against Sawyer's cheek with a tenderness that took them both by surprise. Sawyer's breath hitched as she leaned into the touch, her own hand rising to rest on Mirren's arm.

And then, without warning, Mirren closed the distance between them entirely as she closed her eyes and pressed her lips against Sawyer's.

5

SAWYER

The kiss had been a mistake.

At least, that's what Sawyer kept telling herself as the storm continued to howl relentlessly outside. The walls of the outpost continued to rattle with an unsettling fury. The cold seeped through the walls further with each passing minute. Soon, the fire would no longer be enough to keep them warm.

Yet despite the gravity of their troubling situation, despite the fact everything only seemed to worsen with each passing second, it wasn't the storm that consumed her thoughts. Sawyer's mind remained distracted with something far more disruptive than the elements—Mirren.

It was almost as if Sawyer could still feel the lingering warmth of the meteorologist's lips against hers. The shock of the kiss had sent waves through her like an unexpected avalanche. It had been brief, barely a second, but it had felt like something

monumental. And in that moment, as their lips parted, Sawyer couldn't deny a large part of her wanted more, was desperate for more.

When it was over, when Sawyer had finally dared to open her eyes and met Mirren's, she could have sworn she'd noticed a certain hunger glistening in the woman's gaze that told Sawyer she felt similarly.

But nothing else happened.

The kiss came quick, and then it was done, just like that. Sawyer couldn't deny how the kiss had made her feel a certain way, a more feral expansion of the emotions that already brewed in the presence of the younger woman since their initial meeting. In a way she didn't yet understand, the kiss was special to her—but it was also irreversible. It hadn't been planned, and it sure as hell hadn't been expected. Despite her growing attraction toward Mirren, Sawyer hadn't even thought about it—until she had. And once it had happened, there was no taking it back.

Now, as she stood by the window watching the snow pile up against the walls of the outpost, she felt the weight of her own actions settling in.

It wasn't just the kiss. It was everything. The immense attraction had been building the moment she'd set foot into that control room and had continued to simmer beneath the surface every moment they'd shared since. Sawyer thought she could keep her emotions in check, that she'd be able to ignore them and prioritize the mission. She'd convinced herself that her professionalism, her discipline, would override whatever feelings she harbored.

But she'd been wrong.

She glanced over her shoulder at Mirren, who was busy arranging their supplies on the small table in the corner of the room. The tension between them was thick,

hanging in the air like the cold that seeped through the cracks in the walls.

The worst part of it all wasn't the fact that they'd kissed. It was that Mirren hadn't said a word about the kiss. She'd barely spoken at all since it had happened, and that silence, more than anything, gnawed at Sawyer's insides.

Sawyer wanted to break the silence, but she was at a loss of what to say, so she said nothing. She clenched her jaw, turning her attention back to the storm.

She had to forget about the kiss. They needed to focus—on survival, on making sure they had enough wood to last through the night. They were stranded here, after all, and there was no room for distractions. Not when the temperatures were plummeting and the storm showed no signs of letting up.

With a deep breath, she pulled away from the window and strode across the room, her boots heavy against the wooden floor. "We need to check our inventory," she said in a sharp and authoritative voice, as if she could drown out the thoughts in her head with sheer command. "Make sure we have enough food, water, and fuel to last through this."

Mirren looked up, her eyes meeting Sawyer's for the briefest of moments before darting away. "Right. I already started going through the supplies. It looks like we have enough for a few days, but it's going to be tight if we go far beyond that."

Sawyer nodded, her gaze flicking to the table where Mirren had neatly laid out their rations—canned food, a few bottles of water, a handful of MRE's. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

"Good. Let's make sure everything's accounted for." Sawyer slid into a chair and methodically counted the supplies while trying to ignore the awkwardness that had settled between them. She was a leader, after all. This was her responsibility, her

mission. She couldn't afford to let one moment of weakness compromise everything.

But it was hard to ignore the silence. The way Mirren moved so carefully around her as if she was afraid of brushing up against Sawyer again. As if the space between them was too dangerous, too charged. Sawyer both hated it and appreciated it.

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She straightened up after a few moments and dusted her hands on her pants. “Once the inventory’s done, we’ll need to figure out how we’re going to stay warm tonight,” she said. Her tone remained neutral, but it seemed as if any talk was a desperate attempt to avoid the obvious subject neither of them wanted to discuss. “Temperatures are going to drop even more, and with this storm, we can’t risk hypothermia.”

Mirren glanced at her with an unreadable expression. “We’ve got the sleeping bags,” she said. “And there’s enough fuel to keep the fire going for a while.”

Sawyer nodded and began to pace back and forth. They were well prepared, but she couldn’t rid herself of the slight worry she felt. There was no telling how bad the storm would get.

But no matter how hard she tried, no matter how much she had tried to think about rations, fuel, and heat, nothing could stop her from thinking about the small cabin and the fact that they were alone together. The storm outside had trapped them in more ways than one, and the very idea of being stranded with Mirren—of sharing this space, this intimacy—gnawed at her.

“There’s something else,” Sawyer said, her voice steady but quieter now. She stopped pacing and faced Mirren, knowing the next part of her plan would be even more uncomfortable than the silence between them. Part of her didn’t want to mention it, but she wouldn’t let her anxiety stop her from sharing something valuable. “It’s not ideal, but I’ve seen it work in extreme conditions. If the temperatures drop too low, we’re going to need to conserve body heat. The best way to do that is by sharing sleeping space. It’s proven to be more efficient if we zip our sleeping bags

together...and sleep with minimal clothing.”

Mirren’s eyes widened slightly, and for a moment, Sawyer could see the shock mirrored in her gaze. And how could she not be shocked? They had just unexpectedlykissedafter a dayfull of tension, and now here Sawyer was, suggesting they sleep together.

But then Mirren looked away, a small nod following. “I know the science behind it,” she said, her voice soft, almost resigned. “It makes sense.”

Sawyer didn’t expect the woman to put up any sort of fight, but she was still surprised at how easily willing she was. She swallowed the lump in her throat, forcing herself to focus on the logistics of the situation rather than the implications.

This wasn’t about their kiss. It wasn’t about their attraction. This was survival, plain and simple.

“Right,” Sawyer said, her tone brusque as she stepped away. “We’ll do what we have to, to get through the night.”

Nightfall came quickly and, to no surprise, the storm outside continued to rage with an even greater intensity as the wind howled through the cracks in the outpost. The temperature had dropped significantly, and despite the fire burning steadily in the stove, the cold was unrelenting to the point it seemed to seep into their bones.

Sawyer had zipped their sleeping bags together as planned. She kept her movements mechanical, keeping her mind focusing on the task at hand rather than the fact that in a few moments, she’d be lying beside Mirren skin to skin. She brought a few extra blankets from their compartments and tossed them onto the makeshift bag, an extra

insurance they'd be as insulated as possible. Once she was done, she turned back to Mirren.

"It's late. We should lie down before it gets any colder," Sawyer said. When Mirren nodded, Sawyer carefully began to slide out of her gear. She shed her boots first, then her jackets, until she was left in nothing but her thermal underwear, her skin prickling against the cool air of the room.

Mirren hesitated for a moment, then quickly ducked her head, but Sawyer had noticed the heat rush to her cheeks before she had the chance to fully conceal it. She watched the woman's hands as they fumbled with the zipper of her jacket as she shrugged it off. When she finished removing the rest of her gear, she peered up at Sawyer, the tension between them palpable, before she, too, stripped down to her thermals. Tension thickened the air, and the two women both tried their hardest to ignore it.

Sawyer climbed into the sleeping bag first, trying to ignore the rush of heat that surged through her as Mirren slid in beside her. The sleeping bag was small, their bodies pressed close together, and the intimacy of the moment was almost overwhelming. Sawyer could feel the warmth of Mirren's skin against hers, the steady rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, and it took everything in her not to focus on the way Mirren's leg brushed against hers.

This is just survival, Sawyer reminded herself, her jaw clenching as she tried to keep her breathing steady. But it was hard—impossible, really—not to notice the way her body responded to Mirren's proximity. The way her pulse quickened, her skin tingling with awareness of the woman beside her. The heated sensation that rushed to her crotch when Mirren's ass brushed against her thigh.

Mirren shifted slightly, her shoulder pressing against Sawyer's arm. "You okay?" Mirren asked softly, her voice barely a whisper in the dark.

Sawyer swallowed hard, nodding even though the answer was far more complicated than that. “Yeah,” she said, her voice hoarse. “I’m fine. Just...cold.” It couldn’t have been more of a lie. Sawyer was losing her mind. She couldn’t focus, couldn’t move.

Mirren let out a soft laugh, the sound so unexpected that it sent a shiver down Sawyer’s spine. “Me, too.”

For a moment, the tension between them seemed to ease, the sound of Mirren’s laugh breaking through the awkwardness. But then the silence settled again, and it was almost as if the weight of their earlier kiss crept back in as the air suddenly thickened around them.

Sawyer closed her eyes, willing herself to focus on the practicalities of the situation. This was about staying warm, about surviving the night. Nothing more. She steadied her breathing and readied herself for sleep, even though she knew, deep down, that any attempt of doing so would be entirely hopeless.

But as Mirren shifted beside her, her body brushing against Sawyer’s once again, it became clear that ignoring the attraction was far easier said than done.

The room was dark now, the fire reduced to embers in the stove, but the heat between them was unmistakable. Not just the warmth of their bodies pressed together. No, Sawyer could feel it—the pull, the magnetic force that seemed to draw her closer to Mirren, despite every logical reason to stay distant. With every second that passed, it was more and more impossible to resist.

Mirren turned slightly, her face now inches from Sawyer’s. “Sawyer,” she whispered, her breath warm against Sawyer’s cheek.

Sawyer’s eyes snapped open, her heart pounding in her chest as she found herself staring into Mirren’s blue eyes. So close. So intense. “Yeah?” she whispered back,

her voice tight.

Mirren hesitated for a moment, her gaze flicking to Sawyer's lips before returning to her eyes. "About earlier..."

Sawyer's breath caught in her throat, the memory of their kiss flashing in her mind like a bolt of lightning. She didn't know what to say—didn't know if she even could say anything that would make sense in this moment.

But before she could find the words, Mirren closed the distance between them, her lips brushing against Sawyer's once again.

This time, the kiss wasn't born of desperation or surprise. It was deliberate, slow, a gentle exploration of the feelings that had been simmering between them since they'd met. It took Sawyer by complete shock, unable to move as their lips connected, eyes wide as she looked down at Mirren. It took her a few seconds for everything to sink in before she closed her eyes as well, then ducked her head to relax into the kiss. It was slow, sweet?—

And then it grew desperatefast.

Mirren lifted a hand to cuff the back of Sawyer's neck, and Sawyer responded by latching her hands onto Mirren's waist and pulling her against her, which deepened the kiss. Mirren's lips parted, allowing easy access to push her tongue through and explore the younger woman's mouth. Sawyer pulled Mirren closer until they were chest to chest, then used the opportunity to separate her thighs with her knee, trailing her own thigh up the inside of the woman's leg until it rested tight against her underwear. The contact elicited a reaction from Mirren, who moaned against Sawyer's mouth before hungry hands pulled at the woman's shirt to pull it over her head.

It was Sawyer's turn to moan as Mirren trailed kisses down her throat. She trembled as Mirren's fingers slid under the band of her sports bra but didn't make contact with her breasts just yet. Mirren's lips parted from her throat, and she traced Sawyer's collarbone with her tongue to the center of her chest, where she resumed planting kisses slowly, carefully, until she reached the space between her breasts. Mirren finally pushed Sawyer's bra up and over her head, her fingers brushing against Sawyer's nipple, causing the older woman to tense with desire.

Mirren's desperation was too strong, not allowing her time to admire the older woman's plump breasts before her mouth latched onto one of her nipples. Sawyer gasped loudly as Miren's tongue swirled around the hard peak, then lifted her fingers to pinch her opposite nipple, rolling it between her fingers. Sawyer's moans grew louder, her desperation greater, all while the heat pooling between her legs grew into a rabid fire.

Mirren moved to the other nipple, giving it the same attention she gave the other one while her finger played with the other, now wet bud. Her fingers squeezed Sawyer's breasts firmly but gently, and she smiled against her nipple, taking pleasure in the way Sawyer squirmed beneath her touch.

A minute later, Mirren pulled away, trailing more wet kisses against Sawyer's body. Sawyer shivered, her body trembling with anticipation, knowing where this was headed and unable to wait. She lifted her hips as Mirren's fingers hooked into the waistband of her underwear, assisting her in pulling them down her legs and discarding them in her sleeping bag.

For a second, Mirren paused, her face dangerously close to Sawyer's crotch. She peered up at Sawyer with a heated look in her eyes, almost as if asking for permission. Sawyer couldn't help but nod. Mirren's lips curved upward in response, then her mouth moved lower in the sleeping bag to find Sawyer's wanting pussy.

Sawyer opened her legs further, desperate for the touch of Mirren's tongue. And when it arrived, it was sweeter and more erotic than anything Sawyer could have imagined.

Her tongue slid between Sawyer's hot wet folds hungrily lapping at her wetness. Sawyer gasped with shock and pleasure as Mirren's tongue landed on her clit, swirling her tongue in circles on the sensitive bud of nerves.

"Fuck," Sawyer sputtered, her back arching to push herself further against Mirren's mouth. She tangled her fingers in Mirren's hair, who in response locked her arms around Sawyer's thighs to fully press into her. Like a hungry dog, Mirren alternated between sucking and lapping at Sawyer's pussy and clit, the sensation bringing Sawyer such brutal waves of pleasure that she squirmed relentlessly. She had never felt anything like this before. It was euphoria like no other.

The way Mirren's tongue danced on her clit brought her closer and closer to orgasm. She could feel her orgasm coming, her thighs instinctively trying to clamp together but unable to due to Mirren's iron grip. She couldn't believe this was happening, but she didn't want it to stop. She never wanted it to stop. And the closer she got to the edge, the hungrier she was to return the favor to Mirren.

"Fuck, I'm gonna come," Sawyer said, her breathing hitching when Mirren began to move her tongue in circles even quicker at her words. "This... you... feel so fucking good..." Sawyer tried to bite her lip but failed, beginning to moan uncontrollably at Mirren's tongue before her hips bucked involuntarily when Mirren latched her lips around her clit and sucked hard.

Sawyer's moans picked up. She winced as she tangled her fingers further in Mirren's hair, pushing her pussy harder against the woman's mouth and grinding into her face. Her legs began to shake, and she cursed out loud as she threw her head back. She came hard, her body shaking with the force of her orgasm.

Mirren pulled away finally, emerging up from the sleeping bag and looking up at Sawyer with a smile as she licked her lips. Her eyes glistened with pride. The sight turned on Sawyer so much she couldn't help but grab Mirren's face and clash their lips together once again, the kiss this time sloppier, hungrier. She could taste her own orgasm in Mirren's mouth. Excitement brewed inside of Sawyer—it was her turn to play.

Sawyer broke from the kiss and wasted no time in tearing off Mirren's thermal shirt and then her bra. She latched onto one of her nipples, sucking hard and biting gently, just enough to send shockwaves of pleasure shooting through Mirren's body and cause her to moan breathily. Sawyer turned to give attention to the other nipple. Meanwhile, her right hand, which once rested on Mirren's waist, began to slide down her toned stomach until it reached the edge of her underwear. Sawyer's fingers tucked under the waistband, but then slid back out. Her lips curled into a smile as Mirren

whimpered in protest.

Sawyer reached down once more, but instead of entering her panties, she began to rub circles on top of Mirren's clit through the increasingly damp fabric. Mirren immediately moaned, spreading her legs to increase the pleasure and Sawyer's access. Sawyer applied more pressure as she rubbed Mirren's clit and continued to play with her nipples with her tongue.

"Please," Mirren whimpered in Sawyer's ear, her hands clenching the older woman's back and squeezing.

"Please what, baby?"

Mirren whimpered again, her lips tight against Sawyer's ear as she whispered breathily, "Please fuck me... please..."

The begging and the filthy words from Mirren's beautiful lips did things to Sawyer. She felt supercharged sexually suddenly.

Sawyer pulled away from her nipple and crashed their lips together once again, before she finally pushed her fingers roughly into Mirren's panties and slid two fingers inside of her soaking wet and wanting pussy. Mirren immediately gasped with pleasure, which Sawyer stifled by deepening their kiss, her tongue probing Mirren's mouth as she curled her fingers up to Mirren's G spot and began to fuck her.

As Mirren's moans increased, Sawyer increased the speed of the fucking and Mirren shivered violently. Mirren tried to kiss Sawyer back, but quickly the pleasure became too much to bear, and she broke away to let out a series of whiny moans.

For a second, Sawyer pulled out her fingers and began to rub Mirren's clit with them once more, Mirren bucking with pleasure from the sensation. But Sawyer's

desperation grew fast. She was itching to taste Mirren. With one swift movement, Sawyer moved her head down at the same time she tugged off Mirren's panties, and her mouth found Mirren's soaked pussy with a rabid hunger.

Mirren gasped loudly as Sawyer began to suck on her clit and Sawyer enjoyed feeling it swell in her mouth.

"Please.." Mirren's voice was barely a whisper. "Fuck me with your fingers again. Hard."

Dirty words spilling from Mirren's mouth turned Sawyer on like nothing on earth.

She released Mirren's clit for a second and smiled up at her.

"Oh, I do like so much hearing you ask for what you want."

Sawyer lazily trailed the fingers of her right hand up and down through Mirren's wetness.

"You want me to fuck you again?" She pushed her fingers hard inside of Mirren, 3 fingers this time, eliciting a deep moan.

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“Yes,” Mirren gasped as Sawyer’s fingers probed her G spot.

“Harder this time?”

“Please,” Mirren yelped as Sawyer’s fingers thrust out and back in roughly.

“You like this?” Sawyer asked, her gaze never leaving Mirren’s. She enjoyed watching Mirren’s pupils dilate in pleasure as she added another finger and thrust hard into Mirren again.

“Oh fuck, yes.” Mirren’s head tipped back and her legs parted further and Sawyer began to fuck her deep and hard, feeling her body open to accommodate the majority of Sawyer’s hand.

“Oh, fuck,” Mirren screamed, arching her back in response to the overload of pleasure. Sawyer smiled against Mirren’s clit, reaching her tongue to draw circles around it, then going back to sucking, all while her fingers pumped roughly in and out of Mirren, slowly at first, then faster, the tips of her fingers curling against her g-spot over and over.

“Oh my god, Sawyer,” Mirren yelped, tangling her fingers in Sawyer’s hair and pulling, perhaps a little too hard, but Sawyer didn’t care. Mirren clearly couldn’t control the moans that constantly erupted from her mouth and Sawyer had never seen or heard anything so sexy as she continued to fuck her. She was weak, completely at the mercy of Sawyer’s touch. She bucked her hips as Sawyer switched to sucking on her clit again, the most beautiful fucking taste in the world.

Sawyer's fingers picked up their pace, pounding Mirren's g-spot over and over. Mirren's muscles tightened against her. Sawyer continued her assault on her clit with her tongue, pumping her fingers so fast that she knew Mirren was close. Suddenly Mirren slammed her thighs shut, trapping Sawyer's hand between them.

"Oh, god, I'm gonna come," Mirren whimpered. "Fuck, I'm gonna come so hard."

Her moans and breaths got louder and heavier when suddenly she threw her head back and let out a sharp scream as she came hard pulsing and gushing against Sawyer's right hand and in her mouth.

The orgasm felt like it flowed through them both over and over.

It wasn't until Mirren's body relaxed and the shaking stopped did Sawyer finally pull out of her. With a few gentle licks of the wetness around her labia, Sawyer cleaned her up, before gently moving up her body.

The two women collapsed side by side in a heap of sweaty, shaky bodies. Mirren struggled to catch her breath, while Sawyer watched her with a mixture of nervousness and satisfaction.

"That was..." Sawyer began, then said, "Unexpected," the same time Mirren said, "Amazing."

The two women made eye contact, and Mirren laughed. Silence took over at that, with both women holding each other's gaze but unsure of what to say. The fire crackled in the background, but getting warm was no longer an issue for them.

Sawyer had spent the entire day thinking about their kiss the previous night and how unexpected it had been, and now they'd just had sex.

And it had been amazing. It was more than that. It was otherworldly.

But now, as they got close to drifting off to sleep, Sawyer couldn't help but wonder—where did that leave them?

6

MIRREN

The fire crackled softly in the background, its light casting long, flickering shadows across the room. The storm outside had only intensified, wind howling like a beast in the night. It was a stark contrast to the strange quiet that took residence inside the outpost.

Mirren lay still, her back to the floor, hands intertwined across her breasts. Her eyes were glued to the ceiling as she carefully watched strips of reddish orange light dance across the room. The blanket was pulled loosely over her bare skin. Her pulse still raced, but not from the storm. Her mind spun, not from the remnants of sleep, but from the events that had unfolded in the small hours of the night.

It was from her.

It was as if the heat of Sawyer's body had branded itself into her memory, the softness of her skin lingering on Mirren's fingertips, the feeling of her hands and tongue leaving sparks slithering across her body.

Mirren stared at the ceiling, at those small flickers of warm light. She still felt the weight of what had happened, even hours later as she lay awake unable to sleep. She wanted to roll over, to look at Sawyer. Maybe even hold her in her arms, or at least press up against her warmth. Instead, she felt rooted in place.

A torrent of thoughts surged through her, mixing with emotions she didn't have time to sort out. The mission, the storm, survival—everything she had been trained to focus on—had somehow slipped away. What had replaced it was Sawyer.Sawyer.

She hadn't meant for it to happen, hadn't expected to feel so out of control, but it was as if something had snapped, pulling her into a moment she could never take back.

Beside her, she could hear the subtle shift of blankets, the slow inhale of Sawyer waking up. A nervous energy ran through Mirren, stiffening her shoulders. She thought about pretending to sleep, to see if Sawyer would say or do something, but she couldn't make up her mind. She still didn't move, though. She couldn't bring herself to break the quiet, to say the things hanging unspoken in the air.

Sawyer turned, facing Mirren, her eyes widening ever so slightly when she realized she was awake. Mirren froze under her gaze. A long, pause stretched between them, and Mirren's mind raced, trying to grasp for some semblance of normalcy.

What now? Was she supposed to speak? Should she even acknowledge what had happened? Part of her, the stubborn part, wanted to brush it off, shove it aside as a fleeting, impulsive moment. But there was another part of her—one that terrified her—that wanted to embrace it, to linger in it. To recognize what happened as being as special as it felt.

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“Hey,” Mirren whispered, daring to break the silence first. Her words arrived in a voice that was soft, hesitant. She immediately mentally scolded herself for not saying more, as if there was more to say, let alone something that would wipe away the awkwardness.

Sawyer didn’t say anything for a moment. There was a faint blush on her cheeks, a sign that she, too, was feeling the weight of the moment.

“Hey,” Sawyer finally managed to respond a minute later, her voice rougher than she intended. She sat up, the blanket slipping off her shoulders as she reached for her discarded thermal shirt. The cold air bit into her exposed skin, bringing a stark contrast to the heat that had consumed them just several hours before. She needed the shirt—needed something to ground herself.

Mirren sat up too, pulling the sleeping bag around her shoulders. She averted eye contact as she and Sawyer both got dressed, as if she hadn’t explored every inch of Sawyer’s exposed skin with her tongue the previous night. Her hair was a tousled mess, falling in loose waves down her back, and she noticed Sawyer’s gaze fixed on it.

Inevitably, Mirren couldn’t help but sneak a peek at Sawyer as she dressed, turning her head just barely as Sawyer tugged her muscular leg through her pants and began to walk over toward the fire. It was strange, seeing Sawyer in this light—so raw, so unguarded. A far cry from the collected, sharp-witted woman she’d first met. The tension between them now felt...different. More fragile.

“So...” Mirren began, but then she paused, her lips pressing together as if she wasn’t

sure how to finish the sentence. So... What? Where did they go from here? Sawyer shifted awkwardly, pulling the shirt over her head and running a hand through her short, dark hair. She could feel the awkwardness settling between them, thick and tangible. She hated it—hated that something so... intense, something that had felt so right in the moment, could now feel so uncertain.

“Look,” Sawyer started, her voice gruff as she struggled to find the right words. “About last night...”

Mirren glanced down, biting her lip. “Yeah... about that.” She exhaled deeply, her breath visible in the frigid air. “I didn’t... I didn’t mean to complicate things. I mean, we were just?—”

“It’s not your fault,” Sawyer interrupted, her voice a little sharper than she meant. She rubbed the back of her neck, her nerves getting the best of her. “I’m the one who... I mean, I should’ve known better.”

Mirren’s gaze shot back to her, blue eyes widening in surprise. “Known better? What’s that supposed to mean?” There was a tinge of hurt in her voice, and Sawyer inwardly cursed herself.

“I just...” Sawyer struggled, feeling like she was digging herself into a hole. “You’re under my command. We’re out here on a mission, and this—what happened—it shouldn’t have.”

Mirren’s face softened, but there was still a guardedness in her eyes. “So, you regret it?” she couldn’t help but ask. She wanted to not be hurt by that possibility, but the way her heart throbbed as she awaited an answer was an undeniable tell. It may have been impulsive, stupid... but the sex meant something, right? It had to be more than just sex, more than the irresponsible mistake that Sawyer’s words suggested it was.

For a few minutes, Sawyer seemed to struggle to find the right words. The longer she waited, the more the silence drove Mirren crazy. At this point, she was about to tell Sawyer not to answer at all, that the silence was telling enough, before Sawyer finally broke it.

“I don’t regret it,” Sawyer said, her voice quieter now. “I just...I don’t know what this means. For us.” Sawyer’s eyes searched hers, finding a mixture of relief and something else—something vulnerable.

“Me neither,” Mirren admitted, pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders. It felt as if she was saying she had lost the load on her shoulders. “But I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen. I can’t.”

Silence settled over them again, but this time it wasn’t quite as heavy. Mirren let out a small, nervous laugh, her breath misting in the cold. “This is really awkward, isn’t it?”

A smirk tugged at the corner of Sawyer’s mouth. “Yeah, just a bit.”

Mirren relaxed slightly, her shoulders lowering as the tension began to ease. “Well, I guess awkward is better than ignoring it completely.”

Sawyer grunted in agreement. She stood up, adjusting her thermal pants and glancing toward the small window. The storm was still relentless, the snow coming down in thick, blinding sheets. They were still trapped—isolated—and now, the tension between them had shifted to something far more complicated.

“We should check the supplies,” Sawyer said, her voice reverting to its usual matter-of-fact tone. Mirren knew it was easier to focus on the practical, on the mission at hand, even though scenes of last night kept flickering to the front of her thoughts. “The storm doesn’t look like it’s letting up any time soon.”

Mirren nodded, pushing herself up and wrapping the blanket tighter around her before reluctantly letting it go. She dressed quickly, though her fingers were still shaking slightly from the chill—and from the lingering emotions that still hung between them.

As they worked in silence, inventorying the supplies and checking the structural integrity of the outpost, Mirren continued to sneak glances at Sawyer. She couldn't help it. Every small movement, every quick flicker of her eyes, tugged at something inside her. She tried to push it down, but it was no use. The barrier had been broken. What happened last night had changed their professional relationship, and whether it was for better or worse, it was hard to decide just yet.

Sawyer seemed to sense her gaze, but instead of pulling away, she met Mirren's eyes with a small, tentative smile. It was as if they were both testing the waters, trying to find a new equilibrium.

By the time they finished checking the last of the storage crates, the tension between them had shifted again—this time to something softer, more familiar. The awkwardness had given way to something almost comfortable, though neither of them acknowledged it out loud.

“We've got enough food for a few more days, but the stove's gonna need more fuel if this storm doesn't let up soon,” Sawyer said, closing the supply crate with a solid thud. “I'll get more firewood from the shed.”

Mirren frowned, her brow furrowing. “I'll come with you.”

Sawyer shook her head. “No need. I'll be quick.”

“I'm not letting you go out there alone,” Mirren insisted, crossing her arms over her chest. “We've already been through enough. I'm not taking any chances.”

Sawyer blinked, caught off guard by the firmness in Mirren's voice. There was a determination in her eyes that left no room for argument, and for a moment, Sawyer felt a surge of admiration. Mirren wasn't just the calm, analytical meteorologist she'd first met. She was fierce, stubborn, and undeniably strong.

"All right," Sawyer said, grabbing her coat and pulling it over her shoulders. "Let's go, then."

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The second the pair stepped out into the freezing, wind-whipped night, the cold hit them like a wall.

Mirren felt anxious the second the chill began to nip at her skin. She had already begun to shiver five minutes into their walk. She tried to fight the cold, but her thoughts were too consumed by the woman walking beside her, the one who'd somehow managed to break through all the walls she'd built around her.

And as they trudged through the snow, side by side, Mirren couldn't help but wonder where they would go from here.

The weather was horrific. Already their hair was starting to clump together and cover with frost. Sawyer kept her head down, her breath coming in short bursts, misting in the air as she trudged through the deep snow. Mirren followed closely behind, her footsteps crunching softly. The wind howled, whipping snowflakes into their faces and making it nearly impossible to see, but they pressed on toward the small storage shed near the edge of the outpost.

As they reached the shed, Sawyer stopped to unlock the door, fumbling with the key in her gloved hands. Mirren stood beside her, silent but watchful, her gaze occasionally flitting toward Sawyer as though she was about to speak but then thought better of it. The awkwardness from earlier had eased, but there was still an unspoken weight between them—a tension neither could quite define.

Sawyer swung open the shed door, revealing stacks of firewood neatly piled along the back wall. She stepped inside, the cramped space offering temporary relief from the wind. She coughed a few times, and began gathering logs into her arms.

“So,” Mirren’s voice broke the silence, tentative but clear, “I’ve been thinking...”

Sawyer glanced up, raising an eyebrow. “About what?”

Mirren shifted her weight, her hands tugging at the edges of her coat. She didn’t know what had compelled her to start speaking, but it was almost as if she was out of her control. “About last night. And about us.”

There it was. The thing neither of them had really wanted to fully address, and yet, it had been hanging over them all morning.

“Mirren, look, I?—”

“No, wait.” Mirren held up a hand, stopping Sawyer mid sentence. Her heart battered furiously against her ribcage. “Let me finish.”

Sawyer closed her mouth, nodding for her to continue.

“I don’t regret what happened,” Mirren said, her voice steady but soft. She felt her throat threaten to close up, but she pushed through it. “Not even for a second. I’ve been thinking about it, and I know it’s complicated. We’re stuck out here, we’re on a mission, and there are a million reasons why this could get messy. But...” She trailed off, her gaze falling to the ground for a moment before meeting Sawyer’s eyes again. “But I don’t want to pretend it didn’t mean something. At least, not to me.”

Sawyer’s throat tightened. Her mind raced. The same thoughts had been plaguing her all morning, the same push and pull between her duty as a soldier and the undeniable connection she felt toward Mirren. Part of her wanted to shut it down, to keep things professional, to stay in control. But another part of her—one that was growing louder by the second—didn’t want to lose what they’d unexpectedly found in each other.

“I don’t want to pretend either,” Sawyer finally said, her voice low but firm. “I just...I don’t know what this means for us. For the mission.”

Mirren took a step closer, her breath misting in the cold air between them. “We’ll figure it out. Together. We’ve already made it through worse, haven’t we?”

Sawyer’s lips twitched into a small smile.

“Yeah,” Sawyer agreed, her voice softening. “We have.”

For a moment, they just stood there, the cold air swirling around them, but Mirren didn’t feel the chill anymore. All she felt was the warmth in Sawyer’s eyes, the unspoken promise between them. It was a strange, fragile thing—this connection they had—but it was real.

And despite her instincts to protect herself, to keep her guard up, to focus on nothing other than her work, Mirren realized she didn’t want to let it go.

“Come on,” Sawyer said, breaking the moment with a gentle nudge. “Let’s get this firewood inside before we freeze out here.”

Mirren smiled, her cheeks flushed pink from both their conversation and the cold. “Good idea.”

They gathered the rest of the logs in silence, working together in the small, cramped shed. The awkwardness from earlier had faded completely now, replaced by something quieter, more comfortable. Mirren had to resist the urge to grin widely, pleased with the conversation going better than she thought, going perfectly.

They made it back to the cabin, their boots tracking snow across the floor as they stacked the firewood near the stove. Sawyer busied herself with lighting the fire while

Mirren lingered in the quiet, blowing hot air into her cold hands.

When the fire finally crackled to life, casting a warm glow across the room, Sawyer stood up and turned to face her. Mirren was standing near the window, staring out at the snow-covered wilderness, her arms wrapped around herself.

“You okay?” Sawyer asked, her voice softer now.

Mirren turned, offering a small smile. “Yeah. Just...thinking.”

Sawyer crossed the room and stood beside her, following her gaze out the window. The storm was relentless, the wind whipping snow in all directions, but inside the cabin, it was quiet. Safe.

“What are you thinking about?” Sawyer asked, keeping her voice low.

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Mirren hesitated for a moment, then shrugged, her chest tight. “About how different everything feels now. How different we feel.”

“It doesn’t have to change everything,” Sawyer said, her tone measured, though she wasn’t sure if she believed her own words. “We can keep things?—”

“No,” Mirren interrupted, her voice firmer than before. “I don’t want to keep things like they were. I don’t want to go back to pretending like I don’t care about you. Because I do. And I think you care about me, too.”

Sawyer looked surprised and it took her a moment to reply. Mirren understood. Neither of them could imagine having such strong feelings for another person that they’d only met the day before.

“I do care about you,” Sawyer said, her voice quiet but steady. “More than I should.”

Mirren stepped closer, her hand brushing lightly against Sawyer’s as her mind whirled with all the reasons this was dangerous. “Then let’s stop pretending.”

But then she looked into Sawyer’s eyes—those striking emerald eyes—and all of those reasons seemed to fall away.

“Okay,” Sawyer breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. She neared her hand closer to Mirren’s, then dared to finally hold it.

Mirren peered down at their conjoined hands, then looked back up to lock their gazes. She smiled softly, before she leaned forward and pressed her lips against Sawyer’s.

The kiss was unlike their first time, surprising and unexpected, or the second time, desperate and hungry. As their lips joined together, the kiss was slow, tender, passionate. Mirren's hands raised to gently latch onto Sawyer's cheeks, which prompted the older woman to wrap her arms around her waist and pull her close until Mirren was on top of her.

Mirren closed the distance between them entirely as she pressed her body against Sawyer's, then moved her thighs so that she straddled her waist, feeling the heat grow in her middle with every passing second. She craned her neck downward, deepening their kiss, parting her lips to allow entry for Sawyer's tongue to dance with hers.

For the first time since the storm had hit, everything felt calm. The tension, the awkwardness—it was all gone, replaced by something real, something solid. They weren't out of the storm yet, but they had each other.

This time, Sawyer took the lead. Her fingers slid under the edges of Mirren's shirt, pulling it off with ease. Her hands, which lay on Mirren's hips, swam up her body to grip her breasts. Mirren moans against Sawyer's mouth in response before the older woman pulled away, pressing kisses alongside her jaw and down the column of her throat while her fingers begin to play with her sensitive nipples. It wasn't long before Sawyer trailed her kisses down Mirren's chest and her mouth met one of her nipples.

"Sawyer..." Mirren moaned, squirming under the sensation of Sawyer's tongue lapping at her sensitive nibs. She let out a tiny, breathy laugh in pleasure as the older woman gently grazed her nipple with her teeth, then grabbed Sawyer's face to bring it back up to hers. "I want you... Please, I need you." The anticipation was working her up.

Sawyer smiled, then pressed her lips against Mirren's once more. This time, the kiss was hungrier than before. One of Sawyer's hands gently held onto Mirren's throat, while the other crept down her stomach and slid past her waistband, into her panties,

and began to rub circles on Mirren's clit, slipping around in her wetness. Mirren moaned loudly, breaking from the kiss. Her arms wrapped around Sawyer's body, pressing their bodies to one another as Sawyer increased the pace.

"Please..." Mirren whimpered, but she didn't know what she was pleading for. All she knew was that she wanted more of Sawyer. She wanted to feel her, taste her, be fucked by her... hard.

It was all Sawyer needed to hear. She lifted Mirren into the air and placed her on top of the sleeping bags. She planted kisses on her stomach, trailing them farther and farther down in synchrony with her removing Mirren's pants until she was able to shake them off her ankles. After the pants and underwear were discarded, Sawyer wasted no time, her mouth finding Mirren's clit with a feral need.

Mirren moaned even louder as Sawyer quickly picked up the pace, licking back and forth against her clit with a pressure that felt completely right. Sawyer's fingers separated Mirren's folds, soaking up her juices before her fingers lingered at her opening, teasing her.

"Please," Mirren pleaded fully this time, too desperate to wait any longer. Sawyer responded by shoving three fingers inside of her all at once, and Mirren immediately arched her back and cried out in pure bliss. Sawyer began to push her fingers in and out with a rapid pace, all while she alternated between sucking hard and drawing wet circles on Mirren's clit.

Sawyer's free hand crawled up Mirren's stomach to pinch her nipple, while she pressed her mouth harder against Mirren's pussy, adding even more delicious pressure. Her eyes raised to watch Mirren's face closely as she sucked on her clit, smiling against her slick folds as she watched the way her expression changed when she switched to licking it.

“You’re so beautiful,” Sawyer purred as she came up for air, the tip of her tongue lightly pressing on Mirren’s clit as she watched her. “So...perfect.”

Sawyer picked up her pace, added what felt like most of her hand and began to pound into Mirren relentlessly, brushing up against her g-spot over and over. Mirren couldn’t stay still to where Sawyer held her down, using her arms and elbows to keep her in place with her legs spread wide apart.

“Oh my god,” Mirren winced, her fingers pulling on Sawyer’s hair. “You’re so good at this.”

Mirren felt entirely taken apart by her, as though the need to be fucked like this was everything she had needed all her life.

She felt wide open for Sawyer’s hand and she lost herself in the sensations flooding her body, enjoying how her whole body jolted every time Sawyer thrust into her.

Finally, it became too much, and Mirren couldn’t help but cry out as the pressure became too much. She was pushed over the edge, her entire body nearly convulsing as she rode out an intense orgasm, even more heavenly than the night before.

Sawyer pulled away from Mirren’s middle, wiping her mouth and then placing tender kisses on the inside of the woman’s thigh as she watched her catch her breath. “How was that?” Sawyer asked, more so to tease her than to genuinely ask.

Mirren huffed a tiny, tired laugh. “Perfect,” she purred, leaning over to press her lips against Sawyer’s, tasting herself on the woman’s tongue. “My turn.”

Sawyer grinned, then leaned back on the sleeping bag, allowing Mirren to take the lead. Mirren giggled as she lifted Sawyer’s shirt over her head, wasting no time latching her tongue onto one of her nipples. Sawyer let out a soft breath, closing her

eyes and relishing in the sensation of Mirren's wet tongue on her sensitive nipples, lifting a hand to hold the back of Mirren's head as she worked.

Mirren's hands slid down her sides, pulling Sawyer close against her by her hipbones until their bodies touched, then made quick work of removing her pants and underwear. She parted her lips from Sawyer's nipple, trailing kisses up the crook of her neck before connecting their lips once again. One of her hands wrapped around the back of Sawyer's neck, while the other slid down her body and toward her pussy.

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Sawyer let out a soft moan as Mirren's fingers put pressure on her clit, rubbing it back and forth. She pushed further into Mirren's hand, who picked up the pace with no warning.

Mirren's fingers left Sawyer's clit just momentarily, spreading apart her slick folds to insert a finger inside of her. Sawyer moaned aloud as Mirren entered her. Mirren started with a steady pace, in and out, while she moved her thumb to massage her clit with small, fast circles that got progressively harder and faster.

Sawyer put her hands on the floor to steady herself, pushing her body deeper into Mirren, closing her eyes from the pleasure.

Mirren picked up the pace, and the noises Sawyer made drove her crazy. Mirren stroked her finger in and out, increasing her pace by the second before inserting her middle finger and ring finger as far in as they would go, eliciting a cry from Sawyer. She slid in and out, faster and faster, until she was going as fast as she could go, the speed and tempo in synchrony with rubbing her clit.

"Oh, ah, I-I'm right there," Sawyer said breathlessly. "I'm getting close..."

Sawyer's back arched toward her as she let out a series of moans, and Mirren could feel her walls tighten around her fingers. She didn't slow her pace, putting immense pressure on Sawyer's g-spot every time she entered.

"Fuck!" Sawyer cursed, her breath drawing in dramatically as her whole body exploded in orgasm. Every part of her tensed and relaxed around Mirren's fingers in waves. Her body quivered and tingled from her head to her toes in pure pleasure.

Sawyer panted heavily, then pushed herself forward to collide her lips with Mirren's in a wet, sloppy kiss. Mirren's fingers didn't quickly leave Sawyer's pussy, as she instead slowed her pace down gradually, helping Sawyer to ride out her intense orgasm before her fingers finally left.

"How was that?" Mirren asked with a smirk as she temporarily broke from the kiss.

"Perfect," Sawyer said.

7

SAWYER

Morning light filtered through the frosted windows of the cabin, casting a soft glow across the room. Sawyer blinked awake, her mouth parting to let out a long, tired yawn. She shifted in her sleeping bag, a smile making its way to her face as she felt the familiar warmth of Mirren beside her.

Sawyer peered down at the woman sleeping soundly at her side, her smile growing as she took in Mirren's peaceful state. She adored the small breaths that escaped her mouth, the way her chest gently rose and fell to match them. The events of the previous night danced at the edges of her memory. The connection between her and Mirren was wonderful but unexpected, and what had happened was the last thing she'd expected could possibly have happened on this mission. But she didn't regret one second of it, especially now that she knew Mirren felt similarly.

Sawyer turned slightly to study Mirren. She traced a finger along the outline of Mirren's arm. Every inch of her body felt alive, invigorated by the closeness they'd shared. The way Mirren had looked at her, the way their bodies had moved together—it had all felt so natural, as if they were always meant to find their way to this moment.

With a gentle tug, Sawyer pulled the sleeping bag down, revealing their intertwined limbs. Mirren stirred slightly, her eyes fluttering open. A sleepy smile spread across her face as she met Sawyer's gaze.

"Good morning," Mirren murmured, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Good morning," Sawyer replied, her heart swelling at the sight of Mirren's morning glow. "How did you sleep?"

Mirren stretched, a contented sigh escaping her lips. "Better than I have in a long time. You?"

"Same," Sawyer admitted, her smile growing. The weight of the storm outside felt like a distant memory now, overshadowed by the warmth between them.

"I can't believe we..." Mirren hesitated, a hint of shyness creeping into her expression.

"Yeah," Sawyer said, her voice steady. "It was something, wasn't it?"

A blush crept onto Mirren's cheeks as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It was. I didn't expect it to feel so...right."

Sawyer's heart raced at Mirren's words, knowing she felt the same way. The fear that had lingered just beneath the surface—the fear of complicating their relationship, of crossing a line that would change everything—began to dissipate. Instead, there was only a sense of belonging, a feeling of being exactly where they were meant to be.

"I think we've crossed that line," Sawyer said, her tone teasing but sincere. "And I'm glad we did."

Mirren met her gaze, and for a moment, they simply held each other's eyes, neither of them saying a word. There was a comfort in that silence, a mutual understanding that they were no longer just two military women on a mission but two people exploring the depths of their emotions together.

"Are you okay?" Mirren asked, her voice softening. "I mean...with everything?"

Sawyer took a deep breath, weighing her thoughts. "Yeah, I am. I've never felt this way about anyone before, Mirren." She shook her head. "It scares me...but it also feels exhilarating."

Mirren nodded, her expression earnest. "I feel the same. We're in a weird situation, and we both know it. But I want to see where this goes, if you do."

Sawyer felt a rush of warmth at Mirren's words. "I do. I really want to."

With that affirmation hanging in the air, Mirren's smile grew before she leaned closer, her lips brushing against Sawyer's. The kiss was soft and sweet. It ignited that familiar spark between them, sending warmth coursing through Sawyer's body.

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As they pulled apart, a playful smile danced on Mirren's lips. "We should probably get moving soon. The storm won't last forever."

"Right," Sawyer said, though she felt a pang of reluctance at the thought of leaving their cozy cocoon. "But first?—."

Before she had the chance to finish her sentence, a loud crash sounded out that shook the outpost so violently it shocked Sawyer to her core.

The wind howled outside the outpost, a banshee's scream that tore through the walls as though seeking to break them down from the inside. Snow pelted the windows, swirling in a chaotic dance of white, while the old wood and metal groaned in protest. Everything around them creaked and rattled under the pressure.

Sawyer had always known the Arctic could turn cruel at any moment. But knowing something in theory and living it were worlds apart, which she experienced on several of her missions. However, this mission...the weather was unlike anything she had ever experienced before.

"We should get moving," Sawyer breathed, concern edging her tone. As badly as she wanted to lay there with Mirren and soak up her warmth for an unreasonable amount of time, they had to get moving.

The outpost was holding up—for now.

Both women didn't hesitate to throw on their clothes and get to work. Sawyer sat hunched by the stove, staring at the flickering embers that barely offered warmth

anymore. They were in dire need of firewood, what little that remained doing little to make the fire greater. Mirren was across the room, pacing, her normally calm exterior beginning to fray at the edges. The situation had grown far worse than either of them could have anticipated. It wasn't just cold anymore—it was deadly.

“Anything?” Sawyer asked, her voice rough with exhaustion as she looked toward Mirren, who had been fiddling with the shortwave radio for the past hour.

Mirren shook her head, her expression tight. “The storm's completely blocking the signal. It's no use.”

Sawyer sighed, the frustration gnawing at her. She wasn't used to feeling this helpless. Every bone in her body screamed at her to do something, to fix the situation, but this was a force of nature far beyond her control. She could navigate a blizzard. She could endure the biting cold. But she couldn't fight the inevitable.

Sawyer glanced around the outpost. Their supplies were dwindling. What little food they had left would barely last them another day, and the fuel for the stove was nearly depleted. Worse, the temperature inside the outpost was dropping by the hour. It was only a matter of time before they'd be forced to face the reality that they couldn't stay here. Not like this.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, another deafening crack rent the air.

“Mirren—get down!” Sawyer shouted, lunging forward as part of the roof above them gave way, snow and debris crashing into the outpost like a tidal wave. She barely had time to pull Mirren into her arms, dragging her beneath the makeshift table as the ceiling collapsed in chunks of ice and timber. For a few heart-pounding seconds, the world seemed to implode around them.

When the noise finally subsided, Sawyer slowly lifted her head, her muscles aching

from the impact. Above them, a gaping hole in the roof let in the furious wind and snow, the icy air immediately biting at her exposed skin.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her voice rough, eyes locking on Mirren’s.

Mirren nodded, her face pale but otherwise unhurt. “Yeah. I’m okay. You?”

“Fine.” Sawyer’s breath came out in shallow puffs, her heart still racing. They were both unharmed, but that hardly mattered now. The roof—what little protection they’d had left—was gone, and with it, their chances of surviving the storm had dropped even further.

Mirren crawled out from beneath the table, brushing snow off her clothes, her movements sharp with frustration. “We have to fix this. There’s no way we can stay here with the roof like that.”

Sawyer wanted to agree, to tell her they could patch it up and wait out the rest of the storm. But the truth hung heavy between them. “Mirren... we can’t.”

The words came out more quietly than she intended, but the weight behind them was undeniable. Mirren stilled, her blue eyes snapping to Sawyer, waiting for her to explain.

Sawyer stood slowly, her limbs aching from the cold, and gestured toward the stove. “The stove’s barely working as it is. And with the roof compromised, it’s only going to get worse. We don’t have enough fuel to keep the heat going, and the temperature’s dropping faster than we can handle. Even if we manage to cover the hole, we won’t be able to stay warm.”

“So, what do we do?” Mirren asked, her voice sharp, laced with the panic she was clearly trying hard to suppress. “We can’t just sit here and freeze to death.”

Sawyer crossed the room, standing by the broken stove, her hands tightening into fists at her sides. She'd been trained to survive in the harshest of environments, but this...this was different. They were trapped, and their options were slipping away with every passing minute.

"We need to leave," Sawyer said, her voice steady but grim. "We can't stay here. If we don't find a way out, we won't make it through the night."

Mirren's expression shifted, the full weight of their situation sinking in. Her hands clenched at her sides, but she nodded, her face set with determination. "How far is the nearest station?"

"Too far to make it in this storm," Sawyer admitted, the truth heavy in her chest. "But we don't have a choice. We need to find shelter. There's a secondary outpost a few miles south. If we can make it there, we might stand a chance."

Mirren stared at her for a moment, as though weighing their limited options, and finally nodded. "Okay. Let's do it."

Sawyer moved quickly, gathering what little gear they had left and handing Mirren a thermal blanket to wrap around herself. They didn't have time for more preparation—every second they stayed here was another second closer to freezing.

The wind outside howled with brutal ferocity, and as they stepped out into the storm, it hit them like a wall of ice, cutting through their layers of clothing with ease. The sky was so dark it was impossible to tell what time of the day it was. Trees enveloped both sides of what used to be a clear-cut path swayed and groaned violently, threatening to tear from their roots and impale them with their narrow branches at any given moment.

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Sawyer led the way, her body bent against the wind, each step feeling like it took an eternity. The snow was knee-deep, and every movement drained more of their already waning strength. She prayed that the storm would let up, and that, if there were any animals lurking nearby, the ferocity of the storm would hold them back.

Behind her, she could hear Mirren's labored breathing, the cold clawing at both of them. They'd barely made it a quarter of a mile when Sawyer felt the first pang of doubt creep in.

The storm was getting worse, not better. The outpost felt like a distant memory now, swallowed by the relentless blizzard.

"How much farther?" Mirren called out, her voice barely audible over the roar of the wind.

Sawyer glanced at her GPS, squinting against the swirling snow. "Three miles." She answered, but that doubt never left her body. What if the GPS was wrong? Broken? What if the storm was leading her away from the location she remembered? She tried to shake the thoughts away, but they plagued the back of her mind like an unrelenting parasite.

"Three miles," Mirren repeated, her voice shaky but determined, nearly muted in the howling winds of the storm. "We can do that."

Sawyer nodded, but inside, she wasn't so sure. The temperature was dropping fast, and the cold was seeping into her bones, making her movements sluggish, her thoughts slower. Her body screamed at her to stop, to rest, but she pushed forward,

one step at a time, knowing that stopping meant certain death.

They walked in silence for what felt like hours. Every step was a battle, every breath a painful reminder of how fragile they were in the face of nature's fury. The weight of their situation pressed down on Sawyer, her mind racing with grim possibilities.

Suddenly, Mirren stumbled behind her, her body collapsing into the snow.

"Mirren!" Sawyer turned, her heart leaping into her throat as she rushed to her side. "Mirren, get up. Come on. We can't stop here."

Mirren looked up at her, her face pale and lips blue from the cold. "I'm trying," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "I'm just...so tired."

Fear gripped Sawyer's heart as she knelt beside Mirren, shaking her gently. "No. No, no, you can't give up. We're almost there. Mirren. We're so close. We're so close."

But as Sawyer looked out into the endless white expanse of the storm, she realized the awful truth—they were still miles away from safety, and the storm showed no sign of letting up.

For the first time, a cold dread settled deep in her chest.

They might not make it.

8

MIRREM

The cold had settled into Mirren's bones, so deep she wondered if it would ever leave. Her fingers were so numb they barely seemed like hers anymore, trembling

uncontrollably even though she was wrapped tightly in multiple layers and the remaining thermal blankets. The blizzard screamed outside, battering their fragile shelter, and despite all her training, all her expertise in extreme weather, this was beyond anything for which she had ever before prepared.

She blinked hard, trying to clear her vision, but everything was blurred by exhaustion and the frost building in the corners of her eyes.

Next to her, Sawyer was hunched over, her breaths coming in slow, controlled bursts. Mirren could feel the tension radiating from her, could see the rigid line of her jaw in the dim light filtering through their makeshift tarp. Even in this state, Sawyer was the picture of calm under pressure, but Mirren knew the truth. She knew the cracks were forming, that beneath the tough exterior, Sawyer was just as close to the edge as she was.

Sawyer had helped Mirren to their feet, and the woman resumed trudging through the mounds of snow that grew larger by the second. But exhaustion was wearing her down fast, and the small voice in the back of her head whispered she wouldn't make it was growing louder by the second.

"Sawyer," Mirren called out, her voice barely audible over the howling wind. She had to repeat herself, louder this time, until Sawyer turned, her face shadowed by the hood of her jacket.

"What?" Sawyer shouted back, her brows furrowed in concern as she slowed down. "Are you okay?"

Mirren nodded but stepped closer, fighting the wind to close the gap between them. Her chest tightened and her throat constricted, but she wasn't sure if it was due to the cold or the words she needed to say. It felt so wrong, so selfish to bring this up now, but they could die in the next few hours. Mirren could feel it in her bones—the

fragility of life hanging between them like a thin thread.

“I need to tell you something,” she said, her voice trembling.

Sawyer’s green eyes were locked onto hers, sharp and attentive despite their dire situation. “What is it?” she asked, her breath misting in the frigid air.

Mirren hesitated, feeling the weight of the moment crash into her all at once. What if this was it? What if this was their last conversation, the last time she’d ever get to look into Sawyer’s eyes? She couldn’t hold back anymore.

“I—” Mirren’s voice cracked. She took a shaky breath, trying to find the words, but they stuck in her throat. Everything inside her screamed to hold it in, to wait until the storm passed, but what if there was no after? What if this was their last moment together?

“I care about you, Sawyer. More than just...this mission. More than just survival.” The words tumbled out before she could stop them, raw and desperate. She clenched her fists at her sides, her heart pounding. “I can’t—I won’t get through this if I don’t tell you.”

Sawyer stared at her, confusion flickering in her eyes. “Mirren, what are you saying?”

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“I’m saying I have feelings for you, Sawyer,” Mirren continued, louder now, the adrenaline and fear pushing her forward. Tears threatened to well in her eyes. “And I’ve been terrified to admit it, because...I didn’t know what you’d think. But we’re here now, and I don’t know if we’re going to make it, and I can’t...I can’t die without you knowing that.”

For a moment, Sawyer didn’t respond. She stood there, still and silent, her breath coming in slow, visible clouds in the icy air. The wind whipped around them, harsh and relentless, but in that moment, all Mirren could focus on was the intensity in Sawyer’s gaze.

The silence between them stretched thin, and Mirren’s heart raced, panic surging up her throat. Maybe she had misread everything. Maybe Sawyer didn’t feel the same way, and now she’d ruined whatever chance they had at even just surviving”

“You think I haven’t felt it, too?” Sawyer’s voice was low, the roughness in it softening. “I just didn’t know how to handle it. Not here, not like this.”

Mirren’s breath caught in her chest. “You...you feel the same?”

Sawyer nodded, her expression still guarded but her eyes softened. “I do, Mirren. I’ve felt it for a while now, but I was afraid it would mess everything up. I didn’t want to...complicate things.”

Mirren let out a shaky breath, the tension in her chest loosening, even as the cold continued to press down on them. “We’re already in the middle of a mess, Sawyer. But I’d rather have things complicated with you than face whatever happens next

without you knowing how I feel.”

Sawyer’s lips curved into a faint smile—small, but real, even in the face of all their uncertainty. She reached out, wrapping her arms around Mirren in a protective, almost possessive embrace. “We’re going to get through this,” she said softly, her voice a low rumble against Mirren’s ear. “Together.”

Mirren nodded, pressing her forehead against Sawyer’s shoulder. The warmth of Sawyer’s body was a small comfort in the freezing storm, but more than that, it was the emotional connection between them that made her feel safe, even now.

Even with the storm raging on, the world collapsing around them, this moment felt like a fragile victory.

But it wasn’t enough. They still had to survive. And even with their feelings out in the open, the reality of their situation remained—a fight for survival against a raging, merciless storm.

Sawyer’s grip on her tightened, and she pulled away just enough to meet Mirren’s eyes again. “Let’s keep moving. We’re almost there.”

Mirren nodded, swallowing hard as they pulled away from each other. Their confessions hung heavy between them, but there was no time to dwell on it—not when every minute counted. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to focus on the outpost ahead, barely visible through the blizzard’s fury.

They moved again, step by painstaking step, battling the wind and snow with every ounce of strength they had left. But even as the storm battered them, Mirren felt a renewed sense of determination—a fire inside her that hadn’t been there before. It wasn’t just about survival anymore. It was for something more. For Sawyer.

The storm wouldn't take that away from her.

"We don't have much time," Sawyer finally said, her voice tight. "We have to keep moving, Mirren. Are you okay? Can you run?"

"Yes," Mirren replied, swallowing the lump in her throat. She felt weak, pathetic for stopping them, but she pushed those feelings away and replaced them with the newfound determination.

Sawyer met her gaze, and for a second, Mirren saw the vulnerability beneath the strength, the doubt that mirrored her own. But then Sawyer nodded, her expression hardening with resolve.

"Okay," she said quietly. "Let's go. We move fast. Stay close. Don't lose sight of me, no matter what."

Mirren's heart pounded in her chest, both from fear and a strange surge of relief.

They moved quickly, knowing they had no time to waste. Sawyer continued to lead the way, moving steadily through the deep drifts of snow, her posture rigid with focus. Mirren followed, her feet dragging through the ice. It was disorienting—the world around them reduced to shades of white and gray, with no landmarks, no sign of direction. Just endless snow as far as the eye could see.

But Mirren kept going. She had to. For Sawyer, for herself, for the chance of survival that still lingered, even in this hellish storm.

Her mind drifted as they walked, slipping into the quiet, desperate place that exhaustion creates. She thought about Sawyer—how strong she was, how she always seemed to know what to do. Even now, when everything appeared so hopeless, Sawyer was still fighting. Still leading them forward.

But Mirren had seen the look in her eyes last night, and just now when she'd confessed her feelings. She had seen the fear there, the vulnerability that Sawyer rarely let show. And for the first time, Mirren realized that Sawyer was just as afraid as she was. Afraid of losing. Afraid of not being enough.

The thought sent a pang through her chest, but she pushed it aside. Now wasn't the time to dwell on emotions. They had to survive first. Everything else could come later—if there was a later.

The wind screamed around them, and Mirren felt her legs beginning to weaken, the cold sapping her energy faster than she could recover. Her body ached, muscles trembling with every step. She wasn't sure how much longer she could keep going, but she didn't stop. She couldn't. Stopping meant death.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, Sawyer stumbled ahead of her, dropping to one knee in the snow. Mirren's heart lurched, and she hurried forward, reaching out to steady her.

"Sawyer!" she shouted, but her voice was lost in the roar of the storm.

Sawyer waved her off, struggling to get back to her feet. "I'm fine," she muttered, though her voice lacked its usual strength.

Mirren wasn't convinced, but she didn't argue. She knew the kind of stubbornness Sawyer had, the kind that would keep her moving even when her body was failing. And right now, that stubbornness might be their only hope.

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They pressed on, the storm showing no signs of letting up. Mirren's bones ached worse and worse by the second. Frost coated every inch of their gear, clinging to their hats and thick scarfs and slipping through the cracks of their jackets.

The secondary outpost was still way ahead, but it may as well have been on another planet for how unreachable it felt. Mirren's limbs were shaking violently now, her vision blurring as the cold worked its way deeper into her body. She stumbled again, her feet catching on something buried beneath the snow, and for a second, she thought she might not get back up.

But then Sawyer was there, grabbing her arm, pulling her to her feet with more strength than she should have had left. "Stay with me," she said, her voice low but commanding. "We're almost there."

Mirren nodded, though she had no idea if it was true. The storm seemed eternal, the cold endless. But she trusted Sawyer. She had to.

As they continued forward, the landscape shifted slightly—a dark shape looming ahead, barely visible through the swirling snow.

Mirren's heart skipped a beat.

The outpost.

It had to be.

SAWYER

The cold seeped deep into Sawyer's bones, curling its icy fingers around every last reserve of strength she had left. Mirren had fallen and now struggled to follow close behind her. Then Sawyer had fallen not too long afterward, pushing herself back up to her feet, determined to move on. The storm had been relentless for what felt like days, and now here they were in the thick of it, moving on from the only shelter they had in hopes of finding another shelter that may not even be there. Sawyer knew the region like the back of her hand, but in this blinding snowstorm, it was impossible to tell which direction they were headed, let alone if they were headed toward the right one.

She shot a sideways glance to Mirren, concern etching lines in her forehead as she saw the younger woman struggle. Her movements were slow and lethargic, just like Sawyer's, her face red with a mixture of cold and pain. Just like Mirren, Sawyer's limbs were heavy, weighed down by the cold and exhaustion, making it impossible to trek through the thick snow that only seemed to reach higher and higher up their legs by the minute.

Every perceptive nerve fired on all cylinders. Her body yearned—no, begged—for Sawyer to stop. To crumble into the mounds of snow and let the cold bite away at her body until she could feel nothing, not the ache of her muscles nor the frostbite dancing on her flesh.

But she couldn't stop. She wouldn't. Not when their survival depended on every breath, every step.

Not when Mirren depended on her.

Sawyer's breaths quickly became so strained that it was hard to breathe. Every intake of air was cold and unforgiving, drying her mouth and throat and making it

impossible to catch her breath. She could hear Mirren's breaths as well, loud and panting, soon to give out.

A sense of impending doom washed over Sawyer—this was it. It had to be it. Decades of training, missions, and yet nothing could prepare them for the brutality of this storm. A nasty concoction of anger and despair took over her shivering body at the realization that they might not make it. She wanted to think of her years, of her career, of her family, friends, and colleagues, but all she could do was think of Mirren.

Part of her was angry that she would likely die out here with Mirren, leaving whatever life they could have lived together remaining a mystery. The other part of her was almost glad that, if it were anyone out here with whom she would be stuck, it was Mirren.

Just when all hope felt lost, a small, breathy cry sounded out from behind her.

“Look!”

Instinctively, fear gripped Sawyer's heart, and she jerked her head in Mirren's direction to see if the woman was in danger. Instead, she was surprised to see hope written across her reddened face. It wasn't until she noticed Mirren looking at something behind her and turned to find the faint outline of a structure in the distance did she, too, begin to feel that hope.

The second outpost...

“Oh my god,” Sawyer whispered under her breath, a newfound determination starting a small fire in the pit of her stomach that quickly grew into a raging flame. Sawyer turned to Mirren with no hesitation as she tucked her arm under the woman's smaller one, latching onto her firmly but carefully and pulling her along. “Come on,” She

urged, raising her voice over the whirl of the wind. “It’s right there. Let’s go!”

Together, Sawyer and Mirren picked up their pace as a fresh resolve took over. Their muscles and bones, weak and weary from what felt like hours of travel through the rough terrain, strengthened as they used the remaining drops of energy they had left to push themselves, push as hard as they could, as fast as they could. As the wind howled around them, and the shower of snow obstructed their vision, they continued on with a determination to prevail like never before.

“We’re almost there!” Sawyer shouted, and it wasn’t long before they crashed through the wooden doors of the second outpost. A wave of warmth, not quite heat, washed over them as they barreled inside and shut the door behind them. Sawyer, though weakened by their hard travels, didn’t hesitate to run over to the dresser to their right and push it in front of the door, just in case this outpost might give up like the last.

For a moment, neither of the women said anything as they collapsed to the ground in a series of raspy breaths. Mirren sat across from Sawyer, her face pale and gaunt beneath layers of frost-dusted clothing. Her eyes, though, remained sharp as ever, a beacon of calm amid the chaos.

For days, those eyes had been Sawyer’s anchor—focused, determined. It was because of her that they were still alive, that Sawyer had been able to push and remained resilient like never before.

“I can’t believe we made it,” Mirren said as she shut her eyes tightly, while Sawyer glanced over and watched her carefully brushing frozen strands of hair from her face.

Sawyer tried to speak, but she was still too winded. She looked about the room, which was almost an exact replica of the previous outpost. She spotted a small measly pile of firewood in the corner next to the stove, and she didn’t hesitate to

stand to her feet and get a fire going.

As the fire began to cackle, and Mirren and Sawyer both crawled closer, Sawyer glanced outside the small, frosted window. The storm was starting to break, which nearly angered her with it's almost unfair timing.

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About an hour or so passed before the subsiding of the storm became more visible. The swirling mass of white seemed less impenetrable, the wind no longer howling with such ferocity. It was a quiet shift, as if the storm was finally releasing them from its merciless grip.

“We need a signal,” Sawyer said, her voice hoarse from days of shouting above the wind. There hadn’t been much talking between the two of them, given they were both overwhelmed with exhaustion, having been on the verge of death just hours before. She looked down at Mirren, who slowly spooned canned beans into her mouth with still frozen fingers. “If the storm’s easing, they’ll be looking for us.”

Mirren nodded. “I can rig something,” she said. Her voice was noticeably weaker, but she still had those flecks of calm determination that Sawyer couldn’t help but admire. “Let me get my stuff,” she added a minute later, slowly moving to her feet and accepting Sawyer’s hand when she reached out an arm to help.

She moved quickly despite her fatigue, gathering what little materials they had left. By some miracle, Mirren’s laptop and other devices hadn’t frozen in the raging storm, perhaps due to the isolation the rest of the items in their bags provided.

Sawyer watched the woman as she sat down in front of the burning oven and began to spread out her belongings, opening her laptop and typing away as if doing so were a second nature to her. It was impossible not to admire her. Even after everything—the bitter cold, the constant danger—Mirren still carried that steady resolve. A fierce protectiveness rose in Sawyer at the sight, mingled with something warmer, deeper.

Mirren handled trying to get help, while Sawyer continued to tend to the fire. As they

worked side by side, Sawyer found herself constantly stealing glances at her. She couldn't help it. Her hands were numb, fumbling with the supplies, but every time her fingers brushed against hers, the brief contact sent a jolt of warmth through her.

The cold had finally receded, but it was replaced by something far more dangerous—the awareness that Sawyer didn't want to lose her.

Not just to this storm—but ever.

Minutes later, Mirren suddenly gasped. Sawyer's eyes jerked in the woman's direction, trying to garner her attention, but Mirren ignored her as she pounded at her keyboard with her fingers, bringing her tablet to her face as well to switch back and forth between the two.

"I've got a signal!" Mirren exclaimed, eyes bright with excitement as she momentarily met Sawyer's gaze, then returned her focus to her work. When she offered no further details, Sawyer couldn't help but crawl toward her.

"Are you able to send a message?" Sawyer asked, desperate for more information. She looked to the laptop screen for clues, but the jumble of data mixed with numbers and messages she couldn't comprehend offered no further hints.

"I'm doing it right now..." Mirren said, dragging her last word before she pressed her enter key. She inhaled a deep breath, then grinned widely as she looked back at Sawyer. "Sent. It should be only a matter of time before I get a response, and they send someone for us."

Mirren lifted her gaze to meet Sawyer's, the two women unable to say a word for what felt like minutes. They only held each other's stares, eyes once filled with pain and exhaustion now glistening with hope and joy.

“We did it, Sawyer,” Mirren finally said, words coming out barely above a whisper. Her smile curled into a wide grin, followed by a short giggle that fogged the air. “We made it.”

“We made it,” Sawyer repeated, and felt taken aback when Mirren move forward to hug her. Sawyer, however, couldn’t help but immediately wrap her arms around the smaller woman. Even though the outpost barely warmed them, Sawyer still felt warmth with Mirren in her arms, something that burned brighter and hotter than the fire inches away.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” Mirren said as she pulled away, a speck of sadness hinting in her eyes.

Immediately, Sawyer shook her head. “Don’t?—”

“I wouldn’t have made it,” Mirren cut in. “Seriously. I...I can’t thank you enough.”

Sawyer lifted her hands to gently cup Mirren’s face, ducking her head and holding firm eye contact. “We did it together,” she said, firmly but gently. “I wouldn’t have been able to monitor the weather the way you did. I wouldn’t have been able to make contact for help. This is something we both did. We made ittogether, Mirren. You and I.”

A sweet look washed across Mirren’s face, giving her cheeks a light blush. “You and I...” She repeated, softly, as if she weretasting the words in her mouth. Tasting the idea of the two of them together being a more permanent thing, something that extended past this mission.

Within half an hour, the distant sound of rotor blades cut through the silence. Sawyer turned to Mirren, catching the glint of relief in her blue eyes.

“They’re coming,” she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper.

For a brief, stolen moment, they were still. The gravity of what they’d endured hung heavy in the air between them. Sawyer wanted to say something—to tell her everything she’d been holding back, but words felt inadequate. So instead, she reached for her hand. Her fingers were cold, trembling slightly, but when she gripped hers, there was a strength that steadied them both.

The rescue team arrived in a flurry of activity—voices shouting orders, hands pulling them toward the helicopter, blankets draped over their shoulders. It all passed in a blur of noise and movement. The biting cold, the unforgiving wind, faded into the background as they were lifted into the air, soaring above the snow-covered wilderness.

Mirren slumped against Sawyer, her head resting on her shoulder, her exhaustion finally overtaking her. Sawyer smiled as she held her close, the rhythmic thrum of the helicopter blades a distant hum compared to the pounding of her heart.

The harsh lines between them—those of rank, duty, professionalism—seemed to blur, melting away like the snow beneath the afternoon sun.

For so long, Sawyer had fought to keep those lines intact. Her life had been one of discipline, of rigid control. It was all she’d ever known.

But now, as she held Mirren in her arms, it all felt futile. The storm hadn’t just torn through the landscape. It had torn through her, leaving nothing but the raw, undeniable truth.

Sawyer didn’t want to be without her.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:17 pm

Sawyer woke to the sterile scent of antiseptic and the soft beeping of machines. The room was quiet save for the rhythmic pulse of the monitors. Her gaze immediately landed on the bed, where Mirren lay, still and pale under the harsh, fluorescent light.

Mirren looked so much smaller there, vulnerable in a way that felt wrong. Sawyer knew better. Mirren was anything but fragile.

Sawyer moved closer, pulling a chair beside the bed. She sat down, folding her hands in her lap, her eyes never leaving Mirren's face. She hated the helplessness that gnawed at her. After everything they'd been through—the storm, the outpost, the freezing cold—it had come down to this. They had survived, but it felt as if the battle wasn't over.

A faint stir came from the bed. Mirren's eyes fluttered open, her gaze unfocused at first. When she shifted slightly, wincing from the soreness that still lingered, her eyes finally found Sawyer.

A small, tired smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "You're here."

Sawyer's heart squeezed at the sound of her voice, raspy and weak. "Of course, I am." She leaned forward, her voice gentle but firm. "How do you feel?"

Mirren's throat worked, but her voice barely came out. "Water," she whispered.

Sawyer quickly poured her a cup from the bedside table, handing it to her carefully. Their fingers brushed as she passed it over, the warmth of Mirren's touch sending a familiar surge through her chest. She watched as Mirren drank slowly, her

movements deliberate, as if she was trying to piece together everything that had happened. The storm. The endless cold. The days of survival. And now, the quiet safety of the recovery room.

When Mirren set the cup down, her gaze found Sawyer's, something unspoken flickering between them.

"Mirren—" Sawyer began, but her name was all she needed to say. The rest didn't require words.

Mirren's eyes softened, the guarded demeanor she always carried slipping away. "We could've died out there," she whispered, her voice tight with the weight of what they'd faced. "We almost did."

Sawyer reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. "But we didn't."

The space between them filled with everything unsaid, the quiet now charged with emotions they could no longer push away. There was no storm now to hide behind, no cold wind to mask the reality of what had been building between them from the start.

Mirren's hand trembled in Sawyer's. "What happens now?"

Sawyer held her gaze, her voice steady but soft. "I don't know," she admitted, feeling the vulnerability in her own words. "But I don't want to face it without you."

The honesty hung between them, raw and exposed. For once, Sawyer didn't feel the need to hide behind duty or responsibility. She needed Mirren to know—to understand that whatever came next, whether it was new missions, new dangers, or something completely unknown, she wanted her by her side.

Mirren's breath hitched, her lips parting slightly. Then, without hesitation, she leaned forward, pressing her forehead to Sawyer's. The warmth of the contact melted the cold that had gripped Sawyer's heart for so long.

"We'll figure it out," Mirren whispered, her voice steadier now.

Sawyer tilted her head, brushing her lips against Mirren's in a gentle kiss. It wasn't the frantic, desperate kind they'd shared in the outpost driven by fear and uncertainty. This was different—softer, full of promise. The kind of kiss that said they had time. Time to heal, to grow, to figure out the future together.

When they pulled away, Mirren smiled, the warmth in her eyes making Sawyer's chest ache in the best way possible.

"Together," Mirren said softly.

Sawyer nodded, squeezing her hand. "Together."

10

MIRREN

The snow had finally given way to the familiar hum of the base. The thick layer of frost that had caked the windows was now just a thin veil, the light from the early evening stars spilling through, casting a silver hue on the surrounding wilderness.

Inside the base, Mirren leaned against the doorframe of her quarters, her gaze momentarily fixated on the sight of the last remnants of the storm fading into the distance. She watched the snow that once brutally blinded them now fall more delicately. It felt surreal to be back, to feel warmth seeping into her bones after what felt like days of nothing but cold, dread, and the sharp pull of survival. How odd, she

couldn't help but think, that merely the day before she'd been on the verge of death, fearful she'd lose her life out in the raging storm, and now here she was having survived those horrors.

All thanks to her. No matter how much Sawyer tried to argue, Mirren knew, deep down, she couldn't have done it without her.

She let out a breath, watching it curl in front of her lips before she turned to the hallway, spotting Sawyer down the corridor. The captain stood tall, as always, though there was a visible weariness in her posture now, her once disciplined, rigid stance softened by exhaustion and relief.

Their eyes met for a brief moment, and despite the warmth of the base, Mirren felt her chest tighten, her pulse quicken. They had survived.

Together.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:17 pm

Mirren pushed off the doorframe and walked toward Sawyer, her boots making quiet thuds against the floor. "You look as if you could use some real food," Mirren said, trying to hide the flood of emotions that came rushing to her whenever she was near Sawyer. The woman had become a constant in her thoughts, an anchor, especially in the storm's darkest moments. It felt strange now to stand side by side without the snow biting at their skin or the terror of not making it out alive hanging over them.

Sawyer chuckled softly, her lips pulling into a half-smile. "I could eat." There was a gentleness in her voice now, a soft cadence that Mirren hadn't heard before. "I think we both deserve a proper meal after...everything." They had spent the evening prior in the hospital regaining their energy. Now they were both ready to stuff their faces.

Mirren nodded, grateful that the air between them had lightened, even if only slightly. "Dining hall?"

"Dining hall," Sawyer agreed.

The walk to the dining hall was quiet, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. It felt more like a shared moment of peace, a time to gather their thoughts after everything that had happened. As they ducked into corridor after corridor, they received glances from the many men and women who they passed. Not glances of judgement, however, but respect. Pure, unwavering respect. Word had spread fast in this base, and it was clear to the women that people had rather quickly found out about the horrors they'd survived.

When they finally reached the mess hall, it was nearly empty save for a few stragglers finishing their dinners who couldn't help but look their way for a couple of seconds

before returning to what remained of their meals. The low hum of chatter filled the room, along with the clinking of cutlery and the smell of warm food. In the corner, the workers behind the counter packed up the leftovers for the night.

Mirren grabbed a tray and filled it with whatever was left — roasted vegetables, mashed potatoes, and what looked like some kind of stew. It wasn't gourmet by any means, but after surviving on rations and adrenaline, it felt like a feast. Sawyer grabbed a tray, as well, her movements slower than usual, fatigue evident in her every step. They sat across from each other at one of the long tables near the back of the hall away from prying eyes.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. They simply ate, savoring the warmth of the food and the simplicity of the moment.

"It still feels strange," Mirren finally said, breaking the silence. She looked up at Sawyer, her fork hovering over her plate. "Being back here. It's almost as if the storm was a dream...or a nightmare, more like."

Sawyer's green eyes met hers, and she nodded slowly. "Yeah. It doesn't feel real, does it? One moment we were out there, thinking we might not make it...and now, we're just here eating dinner." She stabbed a piece of vegetable with her fork but didn't bring it to her mouth, her gaze distant. "But we did make it."

Mirren set her fork down, her heart pounding slightly. "We did." Her voice softened, and she leaned in slightly. "Because of you, Sawyer. If it hadn't been for your quick thinking...I don't know if we would've made it."

Sawyer shook her head, brushing off the compliment like she always did. "Stop saying that. It was both of us, Mirren. You kept me going. I don't think I would've had the strength to keep pushing if you hadn't been there."

Mirren wanted to argue, wanted to insist it was purely the captain, but she instead bit her tongue. She smiled at that, her heart swelling with warmth. "Well, then...I guess we make a good team."

Sawyer's lips twitched into a smile, and for the first time since the storm, there was a lightness in her expression. "Yeah," she murmured, "we do."

They fell into a comfortable silence again, their conversation trailing off into the gentle rhythm of the dining hall. The weight of their ordeal still lingered, but it felt distant now, like a shadow that could no longer reach them. Mirren glanced at Sawyer's hand resting on the table, her fingers slightly curled around her spoon.

There had been moments during the storm when she wasn't sure she'd ever get to see Sawyer again, let alone sit across from her like this in the safety of the base.

But now, here she was. Alive, with Sawyer. The potential of a future together lingering the air.

After a few minutes, Mirren cleared her throat, her thoughts drifting back to their mission. "What do you think the debrief will look like?" she asked, trying to steer the conversation to something practical, though the last thing she wanted to think about was more military protocol.

Sawyer raised an eyebrow, then chuckled, finishing the last of her stew. "Probably lengthy. Command will want to know every detail from the moment we left to the second we got back. They'll probably grill us about why we didn't turn back sooner."

Mirren sighed, nodding. "They'll probably want to dissect everything. I'm not looking forward to explaining how we got caught in the storm."

"You did everything right, Mirren," Sawyer said firmly, her voice dropping an

octave. "The storm was unpredictable. No one could've seen it coming on that fast. We did the best we could under the circumstances." She forked her food once more. "Believe me, it wouldn't be the first time I've been caught in a storm I'd predicted to be light. It happens. And you played your role exceptionally well."

Mirren felt a swell of gratitude at Sawyer's words. "Thanks," she whispered.

The mess hall had started to empty out, the clattering of trays and utensils growing quieter. Mirren took a deep breath and glanced out one of the small windows, where the night sky was clear, the stars twinkling faintly against the inky darkness. She knew they had more to talk about — not just the mission, but everything that had happened between them during the storm. But for now, it was enough just to be here, to be together.

Sawyer's voice broke through her thoughts. "You ready to head back?"

Mirren nodded, though her heart picked up speed. She wasn't sure what would come next, but the prospect of going back to Sawyer's quarters felt like a natural progression. They had been through so much together, and now, it was as if the storm had left them with something unspoken, something that hung in the air between them waiting to be acknowledged.

"Yeah," Mirren said, standing up and grabbing her tray. "Let's go."

Mirren followed Sawyer down the long corridor, her heart beating faster with every step they took toward Sawyer's quarters. The base was eerily quiet at this hour, with most of the soldiers either asleep or keeping to themselves after the day's events. The heavy atmosphere of the storm had dissipated, but something else lingered in the air — a different kind of tension, one that made Mirren hyper-aware of every movement, of every breath she took.

They reached Sawyer's door, and for a moment neither of them moved. Sawyer's hand rested on the doorknob, her posture rigid but not in the way it usually was. There was something raw about the way she stood there, like she was holding herself together by sheer willpower. Mirren felt the same crackling energy building between them, an undercurrent of emotion that had been buried for too long.

Sawyer opened the door, and Mirren stepped inside, feeling the warmth of the room wrap around her. The familiar scent of Sawyer—a mix of leather, pine, and something uniquely her—filled her senses. It grounded her, but only just. Her pulse was still racing, her thoughts tangled in the memory of all they had been through together, all the things left unsaid.

Sawyer shut the door behind them, and the soft click echoed in the small space. They were alone now, truly alone, without the storm or the threat of death to distract them from what was happening between them.

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Mirren turned to face Sawyer, her chest tight with anticipation. "Sawyer..." Her voice was barely a whisper, thick with the weight of her unsaid feelings.

Sawyer's green eyes darkened as they met hers, the intensity in them nearly overwhelming. "I know." Her voice was rough, low, but there was a vulnerability there too, something Mirren had never seen before. "I've been trying to hold it back... but I can't anymore."

The tension in the room was palpable now, like the air itself had thickened with the unspoken desire between them. Mirren stepped closer, her breath catching in her throat. "You don't have to hold back with me," she whispered, her hand coming up to rest on Sawyer's chest. She could feel the rapid beat of Sawyer's heart beneath her palm, mirroring her own racing pulse.

Sawyer's hand came up to cover Mirren's, her touch warm and steady despite the storm of emotions swirling between them. "You know, I once thought I could keep this professional, keep my distance. But after everything that's happened..." Her voice broke slightly, and she took a step closer, her gaze locking onto Mirren's. "I don't want to lose you. I don't want to pretend like this doesn't mean something...incredible. Unlike anything I've ever experienced before."

Mirren's breath hitched at the raw honesty in Sawyer's words. This was the woman who'd led them through the storm, who had been a beacon of strength and control in the worst possible circumstances.

And now, she was standing in front of Mirren, vulnerable and exposed in a way she had never been before. It made Mirren's heart ache and burn with the intensity of her

own feelings.

"You won't lose me," Mirren said softly, her hand sliding up to cup Sawyer's jaw, her thumb brushing over the sharp edge of her cheekbone. "I'm right here. I've always been here."

Sawyer's eyes flickered with something dark and consuming, and in the next breath, she closed the distance between them, her lips crashing against Mirren's in a kiss that was anything but gentle. It was fierce, desperate, as if Sawyer was pouring everything she had into that one moment, into that one kiss.

Mirren responded in kind, her hands tangling in Sawyer's short hair, pulling her closer, deepening the kiss. It was like a dam had broken, all the restraint they had held onto for so long shattering in an instant.

There was no more room for uncertainty or hesitation.

This was real. This was them.

Sawyer's hands found their way to Mirren's waist, pulling her flush against her body as the kiss grew more heated, more urgent. Their breaths mingled, and the room seemed to shrink around them as the intensity of the moment consumed everything else. Mirren's head spun, her body alive with sensation as Sawyer's lips moved against hers, hot and demanding.

With a low growl, Sawyer broke the kiss, her lips trailing down to Mirren's jaw, then her throat. Mirren gasped, her head falling back as Sawyer's mouth found the sensitive skin of her neck, kissing and biting softly, sending shivers down her spine. "Sawyer..." Mirren's voice was breathless, barely a whisper, but it was enough to spur Sawyer on.

Sawyer's hands were everywhere now, sliding under Mirren's shirt, her fingers tracing the curve of her waist, the dip of her spine. The heat of her touch was almost unbearable, setting Mirren's skin alight with every brush of her fingers. Mirren's own hands roamed over Sawyer's back, feeling the taut muscles beneath her uniform, the strength that had carried them both through the storm.

They stumbled toward the bed, their movements clumsy with urgency, and Mirren's back hit the edge of the mattress. Sawyer paused for a brief moment, her breathing ragged as she looked down at Mirren, her eyes dark with desire but also something deeper, something tender. "I want you," Sawyer whispered, her voice rough with emotion. "I need you."

Mirren's heart skipped a beat. It was clear to her now that all of Sawyer's barriers had officially been taken down, all of her walls had crumbled, and the once hardened, stoic captain was now ready to be completely and totally vulnerable with her.

Mirren's passion grew stronger as she nodded, unable to form words, her body already trembling with anticipation. She pulled Sawyer back down, capturing her lips in another fierce kiss, her hands moving to unbutton Sawyer's shirt, needing to feel more of her, to be closer.

Sawyer helped her, quickly shrugging off the fabric, and then her hands were on Mirren's shirt, tugging it over her head with a sense of purpose that made Mirren's pulse race even faster. The cool air of the room hit her bare skin for a brief moment before Sawyer's warm hands were on her, sliding up her sides, cupping her breasts through the thin fabric of her bra.

Mirren let out a soft moan as Sawyer's lips found her throat again, kissing a trail down to her collarbone, then lower. "You're so beautiful," Sawyer murmured against her skin, her voice husky with desire.

Mirren's breath came in short, ragged bursts as Sawyer's hands and lips worked in tandem, sending waves of heat crashing through her body. Every touch, every kiss was electric, and it was all too much, yet not enough at the same time. She wanted more, needed more, and from the way Sawyer's hands were moving, it was clear she felt the same. Sawyer's mouth traveled lower, planting heated kisses down Mirren's throat, then across her chest, while her hands slid up to cup Mirren's breasts, her thumbs brushing over the sensitive peaks. Mirren's back arched, her body straining toward Sawyer's touch, a soft gasp escaping her lips.

"I love you," Mirren gasped, then immediately her face went red. Sawyer immediately froze, and as she watched her, Mirren suddenly felt anxious, vulnerable, thinking perhaps she'd made the wrong decision to say what she'd just said.

For a moment, a pause that was too long, Sawyer held Mirren's stare as she pulled away. Then carefully, Sawyer's lips curled into a smile as she pressed her lips against Mirren's.

"I love you, too," Sawyer whispered, then pressed their lips together once more.

This time when Sawyer fucked her, it felt different. Like the raw desperation with which she had received Sawyer was gone and replaced by a feeling of safety and electric satisfaction when Sawyer was inside of her.

"You want more, baby?" Sawyer was on top of her, her weight pinning Mirren down deliciously so. Her fingers were deep inside Mirren and they were looking into each other's eyes.

Mirren nodded. "I want to take all of you," she said huskily.

Sawyer nodded. They were on the same page.

“I want to see and feel you take all of me,” Sawyer said, not breaking eye contact for a second.

This time she watched as Sawyer coated the outside of her hand in Mirren’s slick wetness before pressing again at her opening. Mirren tried to relax and open her legs further to allow the ultimate penetration and seconds later she felt Sawyer’s whole hand push slowly inside of her and she held Sawyer’s gaze as Sawyer’s hand opened her wider than ever before.

It hurt, a little, and Mirren yelped.

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She felt Sawyer's penetration pause for a second. "It's ok, baby, I've got you. It will ease, I promise." Sawyer's free hand stroked her face tenderly as Mirren felt the pressure pushing into her again and with one last push, the pressure released. She reached her hand down between her own legs to feel Sawyer's wrist.

"Oh my god. Your whole hand is in me." Mirren felt a rush of heat flooding through her body from deep inside of her where Sawyer's hand was stimulating. She felt waves and waves of pleasure and heard herself moan.

Sawyer smiled at her. "Feels good now?" she asked and Mirren nodded ferociously.

"Yes, so good," Mirren purred.

"Ok, I want you to keep looking into my eyes as I fuck you with my fist."

Mirren felt herself flooding with arousal and her cheeks beginning to heat up.

She nodded. She couldn't find any words.

She felt Sawyer's hand moving deep inside of her, pushing against her G spot. She felt more waves of pleasure building.

"You look so fucking sexy taking all of me, Mirren." Sawyer stroked her face again, her green eyes hungry yet tender all at the same time.

Mirren felt Sawyer's hand pulling out slightly and pushing back in, only her body had adjusted this time and the feeling of her pushing back inside was delicious.

“I want you to touch your clit for me, Mirren and come on my hand, looking into my eyes, as I fuck you.”

Mirren felt another bold rush of desire between her legs. She was so utterly turned on, she knew it wouldn't take much to tip her over the edge.

She could hear her own moans deeper and louder as she felt Sawyer's fucking increasing in pace. Her body was accepting it easily- no, better than that, her body was loving it.

She kept her gaze fixed on Sawyer's, her moans were out of control with every thrust and she slid her right hand tentatively down to her clitoris.

The intense pleasure nearly blinded her as she pressed her fingers against her clitoris with beautiful pressure.

Her orgasm began to crash uncontrollably and unstoppably through her entire body over and over again as though it would never stop.

When it finally subsided, Sawyer was still buried deep inside her, her hand still.

“I love you,” Sawyer said.

“I love you, too,” she heard herself gasp, hoarsely.

She felt Sawyer's hand begin to move as though she might remove herself, but Mirren reached down and gripped her wrist.

“Stay inside me. Please. Just a little longer. I don't want to feel empty without you, yet.”

Sawyer nodded and Mirren relaxed into the beautiful feeling of fullness created by Sawyer's hand in her and the lovely weight of Sawyer's body pressing on top of her.

Afterwards, they lay together in the quiet aftermath of their shared intimacy, the room filled with nothing but the sound of their steady breathing and the soft rustling of blankets. Mirren's head rested on Sawyer's chest, the warmth between them in stark contrast to the freezing wilderness just outside.

Neither of them said a word to the other for several minutes, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable—it felt grounding, like a necessary moment to absorb everything that had just passed between them. They enjoyed each other's presence, the feeling of their tangled bodies, their soft breaths.

Mirren shifted slightly, turning her face toward Sawyer, her voice soft as she said, "Do you think anyone heard us?"

Sawyer let out a low chuckle, running her hand gently down Mirren's back. "I don't care," she said simply, her tone unbothered, carrying with it the confidence and self-assurance Mirren had always admired. But there was a playfulness there, too, a side of Sawyer she hadn't seen before. "Let them."

Mirren smirked, her cheeks still flushed from great sex. "I'm sure we're already the talk of the base," she murmured. "Two women trapped in a blizzard for days, one a stoic Army Ranger, the other an Air Force meteorologist...it's a story that practically writes itself."

Sawyer smiled at that, but there was a softness in her eyes when she met Mirren's gaze. "It's not the kind of story I ever imagined for myself," she admitted. "But I wouldn't change it."

There was a depth to Sawyer's words, a weight that made Mirren's heart ache in the

best way. She reached up to brush a strand of hair away from Sawyer's face, her fingers lingering on her jaw. "Neither would I."

For a moment, they lay there simply basking in the warmth of each other's presence, the unspoken connection between them growing stronger with every second. But eventually, Sawyer shifted, breaking the comfortable silence.

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“Come on,” she said, her voice low but firm. “Let’s go outside.”

Mirren blinked, slightly surprised by the suggestion. “Now? I know the storm has died down, but it’s still freezing out there.”

Sawyer’s grin was mischievous as she rolls out of bed, already reaching for her heavy coat. “Exactly. It’s beautiful. And besides.” She raised her brows. “It’s not as if we’re strangers to this kind of weather, right?”

Mirren watched her for a second, bemused, before sighing and following her lead. “You’re impossible,” she said with a shake of her head, though her smile betrayed her affection. “All right. Let’s go. I can’t say I won’t get a bit of PTSD from this, though,” she teased.

As she pulled on her own coat and boots, she realized part of her was excited by the idea. The thought of stepping out into the cold, crisp night air with Sawyer by her side felt right—like a perfect way to seal the moment they’d just shared.

Once they’d both bundled up, they quietly slipped out of Sawyer’s quarters and made their way to the roof of the base. The stars stretched endlessly above them, brighter and clearer than they’d ever been, framed by the snowy landscape that stretched as far as the eye could see. The chill in the air was biting, but there was something exhilarating about it, too—about being out in the open after everything they’d been through.

Mirren shivered slightly as they stepped onto the roof, but it wasn’t from the cold. The beauty of the night took her breath away. “Wow,” she murmured, staring up at

the sky in awe. “It’s...incredible.”

Sawyer stood beside her, looking up at the stars with a quiet sense of reverence. “It’s why I love this place,” she said softly. “The wilderness. The cold. It makes you feel...small, but in a good way. Like you’re part of something bigger.”

Mirren turned her gaze to Sawyer, studying her profile in the dim light. There was something about the way Sawyer spoke—about the way she looked at the world—that was so different from anyone else Mirren had ever known. It’s what had drawn her to Sawyer in the first place, she realized. The strength, the resilience, the quiet intensity that lay beneath the surface.

“Do you think you’ll stay here?” Mirren asked after a moment, her voice barely above a whisper. “In Alaska, I mean. After all this?”

Sawyer was silent for a long time, her gaze still fixed on the stars. “I don’t know,” she admitted eventually. “I used to think this was it. The wilderness, the missions—it felt like my whole world. But now...”

She glanced at Mirren, and there was something vulnerable in her expression, something raw and real that Mirren hadn’t expected to see. “Now, I think maybe there’s more out there for me. More than just the next mission.”

Mirren’s breath caught in her throat. Her heart pumped fiercely in her chest, blood rushing through her veins. She took a small step closer to Sawyer, her hand finding its way to hers. “You’re not alone anymore,” she said softly. “We can figure it out together. Whatever that looks like.”

Sawyer’s grip tightened on her hand, and for a moment, neither of them spoke. The only sound was the gentle rustling of the wind through the snow and the steady rhythm of their breathing.

“Together,” Sawyer echoed after a beat, as if the word felt unfamiliar on her tongue but not unwelcome. She turned to face Mirren fully, her green eyes bright in the starlight. “I like the sound of that.”

Mirren smiled, her heart swelling with warmth despite the cold surrounding them. “Good. Because I’m not going anywhere.”

They stood there for a while longer, hand in hand, staring up at the stars and the vast expanse of the wilderness around them. It felt like a moment out of time—a pause, a brief respite from the chaos of their lives, where the future appeared wide open and full of possibilities.

Eventually, Sawyer broke the silence, her voice low but steady. “What do you want, Mirren? For the future.”

Mirren blinked, taken aback by the question. “What do I want?”

Sawyer nodded, her gaze steady. “Yeah. What are your dreams?”

Mirren let out a soft laugh, glancing back up at the sky. “I guess I never really thought about it before. I’ve always been so focused on my work, on getting through the next storm, the next forecast. But now...I don’t know. Maybe I want a little more than that.”

Sawyer raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

Mirren paused, considering her words carefully. “I want a life,” she said slowly. “A real one. With you. Really...that’s all I want. All I care about right now.”

Sawyer’s expression softened, and she stepped closer, her hand gently cupping Mirren’s cheek. “You have no idea how much I want that, too,” she whispered.

For a moment, they just looked at each other, the weight of everything unspoken hanging in the air between them. And then, without another word, Sawyer leaned down and kissed Mirren softly, the cold forgotten as their lips met in a tender, lingering embrace.

The night stretched on around them, vast and full of stars, but for now, all that mattered was the warmth they'd found in each other.

"I love you, Mirren," Sawyer said as she peered deep into Mirren's gaze, causing the younger woman to smile widely.

"I love you too, Sawyer," Mirren said softly in response.

EPILOGUE

5 YEARS LATER

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It had been five years since Sawyer and Mirren had met each other in the control room on the Arctic base, since they had been assigned partners to prepare for a training mission, since they found themselves stranded in the horrific storm that had nearly brought them to death's doorsteps. It had been five years since what happened had started it all, and now the women were living the lives they had promised they'd live together.

They now lived in a small, remote research station in northern Canada. The cabin was a cozy haven nestled among towering pines, with large windows that offered breathtaking views of the expansive icy landscape. They had switched into new jobs that both emotionally and financially benefited them, not just as individuals but their relationship, as well, living a happy life with their beloved Siberian husky Kodiak.

It had been an incredibly long day of training and research for Sawyer as she pulled her truck into the driveway of their cabin, eager to forget the exhaustion of the day with food and the comfortable presence of her wife. Sawyer entered home, her cheeks flushed from the cold and her heart warm with thoughts of the life they had built together. She pushed open the door, the familiar creak greeting her like an old friend. The scent of something savory wafted through the air, and her stomach growled in anticipation.

"Mirren?" Sawyer called out, kicking off her heavy boots and shaking off the snow that clung to her parka.

"In the kitchen!" Mirren's voice rang back, bright and cheerful, echoing through the cabin.

Sawyer made her way to the kitchen, where Mirren was expertly plating a feast. The countertop was adorned with roasted beef and chicken, creamy garlic mashed potatoes, and an assortment of glazed vegetables. A tray of macaroni and cheese sat simmering on the stove. The entire kitchen and house were soaked in a comforting air.

Mirren turned to Sawyer, her eyes sparkling with affection. “You’re home just in time! I’ve been working on dinner all day.”

Sawyer smiled, her heart swelling as she watched Mirren move about the kitchen with practiced grace. “It looks amazing. I can’t believe you spent all day cooking. I mean...what’s the occasion?” she asked, reaching out to wrap her arms around Mirren’s waist. She inhaled the rich scents, feeling a sense of warmth spread through her before she pressed their lips together.

“I wanted to make something special for you,” Mirren replied once they pulled away, her cheeks pinkening under the warmth of Sawyer’s embrace. “How was your day?”

“Exhausting but rewarding,” Sawyer said, stepping back to admire the spread. “We finished the cold-weather survival training today, and everyone did remarkably well. I’m proud of my team. We even had a couple of unexpected challenges—like when one of the trainees fell into a snowdrift while demonstrating how to navigate through the terrain.”

Mirren chuckled, her laughter light and melodic. “Was he okay?”

“Just a bit embarrassed, I think,” Sawyer replied, a smirk tugging at her lips. “But it was a good reminder to stay alert, you know? You can never underestimate the snow, especially with how it was piling up today.”

“Believe me.” A teasing look washed across Mirren’s face. “I know all about the

consequences of underestimating bad weather.” At this, Sawyer smiled.

As Sawyer leaned against the counter, she observed Mirren as she expertly maneuvered the dishes onto the dining table. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow through the windows, illuminating the warm space they’d created together.

Mirren placed the last of the dishes on the table and turned to Sawyer with a proud smile. “Dinner is served. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” Sawyer called out from across the room, where she added more wood to the burning fireplace, bathing the home in warmth. As she approached the table, her mouth watered at the sight before her. They sat down together, the table adorned with a hearty meal that reflected the love and effort Mirren had poured into it.

“So, what’s next for you? Any big plans for tomorrow?” Mirren asked as they filled their plates, the clattering of utensils a familiar melody in the cozy cabin.

“I have a meeting with the research team to discuss the upcoming fieldwork,” Sawyer explained. “We’ll be heading to a new location for the next phase of our conservation project. It’s exciting stuff, and I’m eager to see what we can accomplish together.”

“Sounds thrilling,” Mirren replied, her interest piqued. “Do you know where you’ll be going yet?”

Sawyer nodded. Anticipation bubbled within her. She was always ready and excited for new adventures. “Yes, we’ll be visiting some remote glacial areas. I hope to document some environmental changes and help our team assess the impact of climate change.”

Mirren listened intently, nodding along. “It’s incredible how much you’ve

accomplished. I'm always amazed by your dedication to your team and the environment." She tilted her head as she lovingly gazed at her wife. "You never fail to impress me, Sawyer."

"Thanks," Sawyer replied, a warm flush creeping into her cheeks. "It means a lot coming from you. You're the one out there uncovering all the fascinating details about the geology of the area."

Mirren smiled, her pride evident. Ever since moving to the area, she'd made it her personal goal to read up more on geology and learn more about the nature among which they lived. "It's been a rewarding journey, especially since I've been able to explore the impacts of climate on the landscape. I can't wait to show you some of my findings when we head to the park next."

The two women settled into their meal. Sawyer relished the rich flavors of Mirren's cooking, which filled her with love and warmth. She'd always cooked for herself, but now that she and Mirren lived together, she got to enjoy the most amazing, borderline professional homecooked meals almost every single day. Sawyer often joked with her wife by saying she might have pursued the wrong profession, while also encouraging Mirren's stray thoughts of perhaps opening up a small café later on, closer to retirement.

In the back, Kodiak snoozed softly on a fluffy rug, his black and white belly rising up and down to match his leisurely breaths.

"Okay, your turn," Sawyer said, leaning back in her chair with a satisfied sigh, her plate half-empty. "What did you get up to today?"

Mirren's eyes sparkled as she picked up her fork, eager to share. "Well, I finished that book on the geology of the Arctic. It's fascinating how much the landscape changes over time due to glacial movements."

Sawyer leaned in closer, her interest piqued. “What did you discover?”

“I learned about some unique rock formations in the area. There’s a specific type of schist that’s incredibly old and holds clues about the Earth’s history,” Mirren explained, her voice animated. “I thought I might be able to take you to the site during our next trip to the park. I’d love to show you the formations in person.”

“That sounds amazing,” Sawyer said, her heart swelling with love and intrigue for Mirren. The woman was so incredibly intelligent, and every single day Sawyer found herself more and more impressed with her. “I can’t wait to see it.”

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Mirren beamed, taking a sip of her water before continuing. “And while I was walking Kodiak earlier, I had the funniest thing happen. I was in a nearby neighborhood, just enjoying the afternoon sun, when a mailman slipped on some ice and went down like a sack of potatoes.”

Sawyer laughed. “Oh no! Was he okay?”

“Yeah, thankfully,” Mirren replied, her eyes shining with amusement. “He got back up, brushed himself off, and joked about needing to get some ice cleats. It reminded me to salt our porch. I’ve been putting it off longer than I should have.”

Once they had finished their meal, Sawyer pushed her plate away and glanced out the window, noticing the darkness settling outside, punctuated by the twinkling stars that began to emerge in the crisp night sky.

Sawyer knelt before the fireplace, which had begun to die down, her hands deftly arranging the logs before striking a match. The flame flickered back to life, casting dancing shadows on the walls, and she felt a rush of satisfaction as the fire crackled and roared. The warmth spread through the room, making it feel even more inviting.

“Now this is perfect,” Sawyer said, glancing back at Mirren, who had joined her by the fire. “And the meal was incredible. Thank you for that.”

“Of course, darling,” Mirren replied, a soft blush coloring her cheeks. “I just wanted to make sure you had a proper home-cooked meal after your long day.”

Sawyer couldn’t help but smile at Mirren’s thoughtfulness. “You know, it’s moments

like this that remind me how lucky I am. To have you, to have this home, Kodiak...to share this...this beautiful life."

Mirren nodded, her gaze warm and unwavering. Her lips curled into a soft smile. "I feel the same. Every day is a new adventure with you."

After the fire had settled into a steady glow, the two women found their way back to the table, where they continued to discuss their day over vanilla ice cream Mirren had picked up from the supermarket earlier that day.

"So, what's on your agenda for tomorrow?" Sawyer asked, her eyes focused on Mirren, genuinely interested in her response.

"I've got some data analysis to wrap up for our climate report. But I'm hoping to take a break and maybe catch up on my reading," Mirren said, a hopeful smile gracing her lips. "I've found a couple of books that look interesting, and I can't wait to dive into them."

"That sounds like a good plan," Sawyer replied, leaning back in her chair. "And once you finish the report, we should definitely plan a weekend trip to explore those geological sites you mentioned."

Mirren's expression brightened at the suggestion. "Yes, I'd love that. I've been wanting to show you all the places I've discovered."

With the dinner plates cleared and the remnants of their meal put away, Sawyer stood up and stretched, letting out a content sigh as she walked over to the fireplace. She knelt down, adjusting the logs and poking the fire to ensure it burned brightly. The flickering flames danced in the hearth, casting a warm glow across the room.

"Okay, let's make this evening perfect," Sawyer said, looking back at Mirren with a

grin. “I can’t believe how delicious that was. You really outdid yourself tonight,” she said again.

Mirren grinned in appreciation at Sawyer’s compliment. “Thank you. I just wanted to make something special after your long day.” She joined Sawyer near the fireplace, leaning against the mantel and watching the flames flicker.

As the fire crackled and crackled, Sawyer glanced at the clock on the wall and yawned. “We should probably start getting ready for bed soon. We’ve both got an early start in the morning.”

“Yeah,” Mirren agreed, glancing out the window where the night sky was deepening into a rich navy, speckled with stars. “But first we have to walk Kodiak. He’s been cooped up for too long. I was so busy today and only had time for one short walk.”

“Right.” Sawyer chuckled, pushing herself off the wall. She walked over to the husky, kneeling down to pet him sweetly. The puppy wagged his tail in response. “Can’t have our little guy getting antsy, can we?”

With that, they bundled up, pulling on their big coats and wrapping scarves around their necks. Mirren felt a thrill of excitement at the thought of stepping outside into the crisp Arctic air, especially knowing that the Northern Lights might be making another appearance that evening.

Once they were dressed for the weather, Sawyer clipped Kodiak’s leash onto his collar. The husky’s tail wagged vigorously, a blur of fur as he bounced excitedly at the door.

“All right, buddy, let’s go see the night sky,” Sawyer said, opening the door to let the cold air rush in, invigorating and bracing.

They stepped outside into the chilly air, boots crunching against the thick layer of snow coating the ground. Together, they walked down a narrow path leading away from their cabin and research station, the faint sounds of their laughter mingling with the soft whispers of the wind. Kodiak bounded ahead, his breath visible in the cold, jumping up and down with each stride to enjoy the mounds of snow.

The trio reached a small clearing, and they paused, taking a moment to absorb the beauty around them. The night sky erupted into a breathtaking display of color—greens, purples, and blues dancing above, illuminating the entire forest area in a soft glow.

“Wow,” Mirren breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s even more stunning than usual.”

Sawyer stood close beside her, their arms brushing against one another. “You say that every time.” She chuckled.

“I know,” Mirren giggled as well, shaking her head. “I just... You can never get used to this sort of thing. You know?”

Sawyer smiled, nodding, then snuck a glance at the woman beside her, admiring every inch of her beauty, the way the soft blue lights danced across her face.

They both gazed up at the sky, the brilliance of the Northern Lights enveloping them in a soft glow. The scene felt surreal, like something out of a dream, and for a moment, time stood still.

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“Can you believe it’s been five years since we first met?” Sawyer asked, breaking the silence. “I never would have thought we’d end up here, together, living this life. If only I’d known that the woman I met that one Wednesday in the control room would be the one with whom I’d spend the rest of my life...”

Mirren smiled, her heart swelling with affection. “I can’t either. It feels like a lifetime ago. But it’s the best kind of lifetime. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Me neither,” Sawyer replied, her voice low and sincere. “We’ve built something incredible. Every moment, every laugh, every challenge—it’s all been worth it.”

Mirren turned to look at Sawyer, her gaze filled with warmth and sincerity. “I love what we’ve created together. You’re my partner in every sense.”

Sawyer’s heart raced at the tenderness in Mirren’s eyes. “And you’re mine,” she said softly. “I’m so grateful for you. For everything.”

As the Northern Lights swirled above them, Mirren stepped closer, wrapping her arms around Sawyer’s waist, pulling her in for a kiss. Their lips met under the shimmering sky, the cold air surrounding them contrasting sharply with the warmth of their embrace.

“I love you,” Sawyer murmured against Mirren’s lips, feeling the weight of the moment settle between them.

“And I love you,” Mirren replied.